THE GOLDEN AGE OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume VI
Halcyon Classics Series

THE GOLDEN AGE OF SCIENCE FICTION VOLUME VI:
AN ANTHOLOGY OF 50 SHORT STORIES

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Sometimes the queerly shaped Venusian trees seemed to talk to him, but their voices were soft. They were loyal people.

There were four men in the lifeboat that came down from the space-cruiser. Three of them were still in the uniform of the Galactic Guards.

The fourth sat in the prow of the small craft looking down at their goal, hunched and silent, bundled up in a greatcoat against the coolness of space—a greatcoat which he would never need again after this morning. The brim of his hat was pulled down far over his forehead, and he studied the nearing shore through dark-lensed glasses. Bandages, as though for a broken jaw, covered most of the lower part of his face.
He realized suddenly that the dark glasses, now that they had left the cruiser, were unnecessary. He slipped them off. After the cinematographic grays his eyes had seen through these lenses for so long, the brilliance of the color below him was almost like a blow. He blinked, and looked again.

They were rapidly settling toward a shoreline, a beach. The sand was a dazzling, unbelievable white such as had never been on his home planet. Blue the sky and water, and green the edge of the fantastic jungle. There was a flash of red in the green, as they came still closer, and he realized suddenly that it must be a marigee, the semi-intelligent Venusian parrot once so popular as pets throughout the solar system.

Throughout the system blood and steel had fallen from the sky and ravished the planets, but now it fell no more.

And now this. Here in this forgotten portion of an almost completely destroyed world it had not fallen at all. One thing like this, alone, was safety—improvement or, more likely, death. There was danger, even here. Three of the crew of the space-cruiser knew. Perhaps, someday, one of them would talk. Then they would come for him, even here.

But that was a chance he could not avoid. Nor were the odds bad, for three people out of a whole solar system knew where he was. And those three were loyal fools.

The lifeboat came gently to rest. The hatch swung open and he stepped out and walked a few paces up the beach. He turned and waited while the two spacemen who had guided the craft brought his chest out and carried it across the beach and to the corrugated-tin shack just at the edge of the trees. That shack had once been a space-cruiser relay station. Now the equipment it had held was long gone, the antenna mast taken down. But the shack still stood. It would be his home for a while. A long while. The two men returned to the lifeboat preparatory to leaving.

And the captain stood facing him, and the captain's face was a rigid mask. It seemed with an effort that the captain's right arm remained at his side, but that effort had been ordered. No salute.

The captain's voice, too, was rigid with unemotion. "Number One ..."

"Nothing. Go now."

"I am no longer Number One. You must continue to think of me as Mister Smith, your cousin, whom you brought here for the reasons you explained to the under-officers, before you surrender your ship. If you think of me so, you will be less likely to slip in your speech."

"Nothing further I can do—Mister Smith?"

"Nothing. Go now."

"I am ordered to surrender the—"

"There are orders. The war is over, lost. I would suggest thought as to what spaceship you put into. In some you may receive humane treatment. In others—"

"The captain nodded. "In others, there is great hatred. Yes, there is all?"

"That is all. And, Captain, your running of the blockade, your securing of fuel en route, have constituted a deed of high valor. All I can give you in reward is my thanks. But now go. Goodbye."

"Not goodbye," the captain blurted impulsively, "but hasta la vista, auf Wiedersehen, until the day ... you will permit me, for the last time to address you and salute?"

"That is all. And, Captain, your running of the blockade, your securing of fuel en route, have constituted a deed of high valor. All I can give you in reward is my thanks. But now go. Goodbye."

The man in the greatcoat shrugged. "As you will."

"Click of heels and a salute that once greeted the Caesars, and later the pseudo-Aryan of the 20th Century, and, but yesterday, he who was now known as the last of the dictators—"" Farewell, Number One!"

"Farewell," he answered emotionlessly.

Mr. Smith, a black dot on the dazzling white sand, watched the lifeboat disappear up into the blue, finally into the haze of the upper atmosphere of Venus. That eternal haze that would always be there to mock his failure and his bitter solitude.

The slow days snarled by, and the sun shone dimly, and the marigees screamed in the early dawn and all day and at sunset, and sometimes there were the six-legged baroons, monkey-like in the trees, that gibbered at him. And the rains came and went away again.

At nights there were drums in the distance. Not the martial roll of marching, not yet a threatening note of savage hate. Just drums, many miles away, throbbing rhythm for native dances or exercising, perhaps, the forest-night demons. He assumed these Venusians had their superstitions, all other races had. There was no threat, for him, in that throbbing that was like the beating of the jungle's heart.

He realized suddenly that the dark glasses, now that they had left the cruiser, were unnecessary. He slipped them off. After the cinematographic grays his eyes had seen through these lenses for so long, the brilliance of the color below him was almost like a blow. He blinked, and looked again.

Nothing, except the bitterness. The bitterness of regret, but of defeat. Defeat at the hands of the defeated. The damned Martians who came back after he had driven them halfway across their damned arid planet. The Jupiter Satellite Confederation landing endlessly on the home planet, sending their vast armadas of spacecraft daily and nightly to turn his mighty cities into dust. In spite of everything; in spite of his score of ultra-vicious secret weapons and the last desperate efforts of his weakened armies, most of whose men were under twenty or over forty. The treachery even in his own army, among his own generals and admirals. The turn of Luna, that had been the end.

His people would rise again. But not, now after Armageddon, in his lifetime. Not under him, nor another like him. The last of the dictators.

The long days, and the marigees' screams, the slithering swish of the surf, the ghost-quiet movements of the baroons in the trees and the raucousness of their shrill voices.

Drums.

Those sounds, and those alone. But perhaps silence would have been worse.

For the times of silence were louder. Times like this, when he paced the beach at night and overhead would be the roar of jets and rockets, the ships that had roared over New Albuquerque, his capital, in those last days before he had fled. The crump of bombs and the screams and the blood, and the flat voices of his folding generals.

The treachery even in his own army, among his own generals and admirals. The turn of Luna, that had been the end.

Hated by a solar system, and hating it.

It would have been intolerable, save that he was alone. He had foreseen that—the need for solitude. Alone, he was still Number One. The presence of others would have forced recognition of his miserably changed status. Alone, his pride was undamaged. His ego was intact.

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But always there were as many left. Never did their number seem to diminish in the slightest. Like the Martians—but unlike the Martians, they did not fight back.

Theirs was the passive resistance of a vast productivity that bred kifs ceaselessly, overwhelmingly, billions to replace millions. Individual kifs could be killed, and he took savage satisfaction in their killing, but he knew his methods were useless save for the pleasure and the purpose they gave him. Sometimes the pleasure would pall in the shadow of its futility, and he would dream of mechanized means of killing them.

He knew that essentially what little material there was in his tiny library about the kif. They were astonishingly like the ants of Terra. So much that there had been speculation about their relationship—that didn't interest him. How could they be killed, en masse? Once a year, for a brief period, they took on the characteristics of the army ants of Terra. They came from their holes in endless numbers and swept everything before them in their devouring march. He wet his lips when he read that. Perhaps the opportunity would come then to destroy, to destroy, and destroy.

Almost, Mr. Smith forgot people and the solar system and what had been. Here in this new world, there was only he and the kifs. The baroons and the marigees didn't count.

They had no order and no system. The kifs—

In the intensity of his hatred there slowly filtered through a grudging admiration. The kifs were true totalitarians. They practiced what he had preached to a mightier race, practiced it with a thoroughness beyond the kind of man to comprehend.

Theirs was the passive resistance of the individual to the state, theirs the complete ruthlessness of the true conqueror, the perfect selfless bravery of the true soldier.

But they got into his bed, into his clothes, into his food.

He crawled with intolerable tickling feet.

They had tossed the beach, and that night was one of the noisiest. There were high-flying, high-whining jet-craft up there in the moonlight sky and their shadows dappled the black water of the sea. The planes, the rockets, the jet-craft, they were what had ravaged his cities, had turned his railroads into twisted steel, had dropped their H-Bombs on his mobs again, to look about to get his bearings.

Voices crying, "Number One, hail! Number One, hail!"—A sea of hysterical voices. "Number One, hail! Number One,—"—A voice, and louder, higher, more frenetic than any of the others. His memory of his own voice, calculated but inspired, as he'd heard it on play-backs of his own speeches. The voices of children chanting, "To thee, O Number One—" He couldn't remember the rest of the words, but they had been beautiful words. That had been at the public school meet in the New Los Angeles. How strange that he should remember, here and now, the very tone of his voice and inflection, the shining wonder in their children's eyes.

But for days and nights he lay without moving and without speaking or opening his eyes, and they did not know whether he would live or die.

Then, at last, he opened his eyes. And he talked, although they could make out nothing of the things he said.

And then came Alwa, the aged chieftain, and Nrana, his son. Alwa gave quick, excited orders. Two of the men carried Mr. Smith into the chief's hut, and the wives of the chief and the chief's son took over the Earthling's care, and rubbed him with a soothing and healing salve.

But stark fear and the memory of unendurable pain drove him on. His knees raw now, he could no longer run, he crawled. Naked, now, and with only a few kifs still clinging to him. And the blind tangent of his flight had taken him well out of the path of the advancing army.

He could see one edge of the column, and it was a neat, orderly edge. And there was discipline, for the ones on the outside were larger than those in the center.

He stumbled and fell, was up and running again, until he was in the dimming moonlight that filtered through the branches overhead. Stirrings there, in the branches. Stirrings and voices in the night.

And now his eyes could see in the dimness. Red noises, an almost tangible din that he could nearly feel as well as he could see and hear it. And after a while his breath came gaspingly, and there was a tumbling sound that was the beating of his heart and the beating of the night.

And then, he could run no longer, and he clutched a tree to keep from falling, his arms trembling about it, and his face pressed against the impersonal roughness of the bark.

Falling, rising, falling again. His throat raw from the screaming invective of his hate. Bushes and the rough bark of trees tore his flesh.

Then, as abruptly as light goes on when a switch is thrown, the noise vanished. Uter silence, and at last he was strong enough to let go his grip on the tree and stand erect again, to look about to get his bearings.

He read carefully what little material there was in his tiny library about the kif. They were astonishingly like the ants of Terra. So much that there had been speculation about their relationship—that didn't interest him. How could they be killed, en masse? Once a year, for a brief period, they took on the characteristics of the army ants of Terra. They came from their holes in endless numbers and swept everything before them in their devouring march. He wet his lips when he read that. Perhaps the opportunity would come then to destroy, to destroy, and destroy.

But deplorable was the Earthling a raving maniac, and Nrana made a very common error, an error more civilized beings than he have often made. He thought the paranoia was an incursion the wider madness. He talked on, hoping the Earthling would talk too, and he did not recognize the danger of his silence.

"We welcome you, Earthling," he said, "and hope that you will live among us, as did the Father-of-Us, Mr. Gerhardt. He taught us to worship the true gods of the high heavens.
Jehovah, and Jesus and their prophets the men from the skies. He taught us to pray and to love our enemies."

And Nanza shook his head sadly. "But many of our tribe have gone back to the older gods, the cruel gods. They say there has been great strife among the outsiders, and no more remain upon all of Venus. My father, Alwa, and I am glad another one has come. You will be able to help those of us who have gone back. You can teach us love and kindness."

The eyes of the dictator closed. Nanza did not know whether or not he slept, but Nanza stood up quietly to leave the hut. In the doorway, he turned and said, "We pray for you."

And then, joyously, he ran out of the village to seek the others, who were gathering bael-berries for the feast of the fourth event.

When, with several of them, he returned to the village, the Earthling was gone. The hut was empty.

Outside the compound they found, at last, the trail of his passing. And it led to a stream and along the stream until they came to the tabu of the green pool, and could go no farther.

"He went downstream," said Alwa gravely. "He sought the sea and the beach. He was well then, in his mind, for he knew that all streams go to the sea."

"Perhaps he had a ship-of-the-sky there at the beach," Nanza said worriedly. "All Earthlings come from the sky. The Father-of-Uls told us that."

"Perhaps he will come back to us," said Alwa. His old eyes misted.

Mr. Smith was coming back all right, and soonest, as he had enough to fear as to have dared to hope. As soon as in fact, as he could make the trip to the shack and return. He came back dressed in clothing very different from the garb the other white man had worn. Shining leather boots and the uniform of the Galactic Guard, and a wide leather belt with a holster for his needle gun.

But the gun was in his hand when, at dusk, he strode into the compound.

He said, "I am Number One, the Lord of all the Solar System, and your ruler. Who was chief among you?"

And then, in his hut, but he heard the words and came out. He understood the words, but not their meaning. He said, "Earthling, we welcome you back. I am the chief."

"You were the chief. You will serve me. I am the chief."

Alwa's old eyes were bewildered at the strangeness of this. He said, "I will serve you, yes. All of us. But it is not fitting that an Earthling should be chief among—"

The whisper of the needle gun. Alwa's wrinkled hands went to his scrawny neck where, just off the center, was a sudden tiny pin prick of a hole. A faint trickle of red coursed over the dark blue of his skin. The old man's knees gave way under him as the rage of the poisoned needle dart struck him, and he fell. Others started toward him.

"Back," said Mr. Smith. "Let him die slowly that you may all see what happens to—"

But one of the chief's wives, one who did not understand the speech of Earth, was already lifting Alwa's head. The needle gun whispered again, and she fell forward across him.

"I am Number One," said Mr. Smith, "and Lord of all the planets. All who oppose me, die by—"

And then, suddenly all of them were running toward him. His finger pressed the trigger and four of them died before the avalanche of their bodies bore him down and overwhelmed him. Nanza had been first in that rush, and Nrania died.

The others tied the Earthling up and threw him into one of the huts. And then, while the women began wailing for the dead, the men made council.

They elected Kallana chief and he stood before them and said, "The Father-of-Uls, the Mister Gerhardt, deceived us. There was fear and worry in his voice and apprehension on his blue face. "If this be indeed the Lord of whom they told us—"

"He is not a god," said another. "He is an Earthling, but there have been such before on Venus, many many of them who came long and long ago from the skies. Now they are all dead, killed in strife among themselves. It is well. This last one is one of them, but he is mad."

And they talked long and the dusk grew into night while they talked of what they must do. The gleam of firelight upon their bodies, and the waiting drummer.

The problem was difficult. To harm one who was mad was tabu. If he was really a god, it would be worse. Thunder and lightning from the sky would destroy the village. Yet they dared not release him. Even if they took the evil weapon—that-whispered-its-death and buried it, he might find other ways to harm them. He might have another where he had gone for the first.

Yes, it was a difficult problem for them, but the eldest and wisest of them, one MG'Anne, gave them at last the answer.

"O Kallana," he said, "Let us give him to the kifs. If they harm him— and old MG'Anne grinned a toothless, mindless grin—"it would be their doing and not ours."

Kallana shuddered. "It is the most horrible of all deaths. And if he is a god—"

"If he is a god, they will not harm him. If he is mad and not a god, we will not have harmed him. It harms not a man to tie him to a tree." Kallana considered well, for the safety of his people was at stake. Considering, he remembered how Alwa and Nrania had died.

He said, "It is right."

The waiting drummer began the rhythm of the council-end, and those of the men who were young and fleet lighted torches in the fire and went out into the forest to seek the kifs, who were still in their season of marching.

And then, before dawn, having found what they sought, they returned.

They took the Earthling out with them, then, and tied him to a tree. They left him there, and they left the gag over his lips because they did not wish to hear his screams when the kifs came.

The cloth of the gag would be eaten, too, but by that time, there would be no flesh under it from which a scream might come.

They left him, and went back to the compound, and the drums took up the rhythm of propitiation to the gods for what they had done. For they had, they knew, cut very close to the corner of a tabu—but the provocation had been great and they hoped they would not be punished.

All night the drums would throb.

The man tied to the tree struggled with his bonds, but they were strong and his wirishments made the knots but tighten.

His eyes became accustomed to the darkness. He tried to shout, "I am Number One, Lord of—"

And then, because he could not shout and because he could not loosen himself, there came a rift in his madness. He remembered who he was, and all the old hatreds and bitterness welled up in him.

He remembered, too, what had happened in the compound, and wondered why the Venuvian natives had not killed him. Why, instead, they had tied him here alone in the darkness of the jungle.

Afar, he heard the thrumming of the drums, and they were like the beating of the heart of night, and there was a louder, nearer sound that was the pulse of blood in his ears as the fear came to him.

The fear that he knew why they had tied him here. The horrible, glistening fear that, for the last time, an army marched against him.

He had time to savor that fear to the uttermost, to have it become a creeping certainty that crawled into the black corners of his soul as would the soldiers of the coming army crawl into his ears and nostrils while others would eat away his eyelids to get at the eyes behind them.

And then, and only then, did he hear the sound that was like the rustle of dry leaves, in a dank, black jungle where there were no dry leaves to rustle nor breeze to rustle them. Horribly, Number One, the last of the dictators, did not go mad again; not exactly, but he laughed, and laughed and laughed....

Half an hour before, while she had been engrossed in the current soap opera and Harry Junior was screaming in his crib, Melinda would naturally have slammed the front door on the little man's face. However, when the bell rang, she was wearing her new Chinese red housecoat, had just lustered her nails to a blinding scarlet, and Harry Junior was sleeping like an angel.

"Yawnning, Melinda answered the door and the little man said, beaming, "Excellent day. I have greegaws for information.""

Melinda did not quite recoil. He was perhaps five feet tall, with a gleaming hairless scalp and a young-old face. He wore a plain gray tunic, and a peddler's tray hung from his thin shoulders.

"Don't want any," Melinda stated flatly.

"Please," he had great, beseeching amber eyes. "They all say that. I haven't much time. I must be back at the University by noon."

"You working your way through college?"

He brightened. "Yes. I suppose you could call it that. Alien anthropology major."
Melinda softened. The initiations those frats pulled nowadays—shaving the poor guy's head, eating goldfish—it was criminal.

"Well?" she asked grudgingly. "What's in the tray?"

"Flanglers," said the little man eagerly. "Oscilloscopes. Portable force-field generators. A neural distorter." Melinda's face was blank. The little man frowned. "You use them, of course! This is a Class IV culture?" Melinda essayed a weak shrug and the little man sighed with relief. His eyes fixed past her to the blank screen of the TV set. "Ah, a monitor."

He smiled. "For a moment I was afraid—May I come in?"

* * * *

Melinda shrugged, opened the door. This might be interesting, like a vacuum-cleaner salesman who had cleaned her drapes last week for free. And Kitty Kyle Battles Life wouldn't be on for almost an hour.

"My name is Porteous," said the little man with an eager smile. "I'm doing a thematic on Class IV cultures." He whipped out a stylus, began jotting down notes. The TV set fascinated him.

"It's turned off right now," Melinda said.

Porteous's eyes widened improbably. "You mean," he whispered in horror, "that you're exercising Class V privileges? This is terribly confusing. I get doors slammed in my face, when Class Fours are supposed to have a splendid gregarian quotient—you do have atomic power, don't you?"

"Oh, sure," said Melinda uncomfortably. This wasn't going to be much fun.

"Space travel?" The little face was intent, sharp.

"Well," Melinda yawned, looking at the blank screen, "they've got Space Patrol, Space Cadet, Tales of Tomorrow ..."

"Excellent. Rocket ships or force-fields?" Melinda blinked. "Does your husband own one?" Melinda shook her blonde head helplessly. "What are your economic circumstances?"

Melinda took a deep rasping breath, said, "Listen, mister, is this a demonstration or a quiz program?"

"Oh, my excuse. Demonstration, certainly. You will not mind the questions?"

"Questions?" There was an ominous glint in Melinda's blue eyes.

"Your delightful primitive customs, art-forms, personal habits—"

"Look," Melinda said, crisply. "This is a respectable neighborhood, and I'm not answering any Kinsey report, understand?"

The little man nodded, scribbling. "Personal habits are taboo? I so regret. The demonstration." He waved grandly at the tray. "Anti-grav sandals? A portable solar converter?"

"Astonishing." He wrote: Feudal anachronisms and atomic power, side by side. Class Fours periodically "rough it" in back-to-nature movements.

"The pre-symptomatic memory is unaffected, due to automatic cerebral compensation."

"Questions?" There was an ominous glint in Melinda's blue eyes.

"Oh, my excuse. Demonstration, certainly. You will not mind the questions?"

"Okay, shoot. But nothing personal."

Porteous was delighted. He asked a multitude of questions, most of them pointless, some naive, and Melinda dug into her infinitesimal fund of knowledge and gave. The little man scribbled furiously, clucking like a gravid hen.

"You mean," he was asking in amazement, "that you live in these primitive huts of your own volition?"

"It's a G.I. housing project," Melinda said, ashamed.

"You don't have a television set?" he asked, surprised.

"It's turned off right now," Melinda said. "How dare you?"

Porteous hesitated. "Would you like me to grow an extra finger, hair?"

"Grow some hair." Melinda tried not to smile.

The little man couldn't stop the vial, poured a shimmering green drop on his wrist, frowning.

"Must concentrate," he said. "Thorium base, suspended solution. Really jolts the endocrine, complete control ... see?"

"How much?" she inquired cautiously.

"A half hour of your time only," said Porteous.

Melinda grabbed the vial firmly, settled down on the sofa with one leg tucked carefully under her.

"Okay, shoot. But nothing personal."

* * * *

"Crazy fraternities," muttered Melinda, turning on the TV set. "Kitty Kyle Battles Life would be on for almost an hour.

"My son is not an idiot! You get out of here this minute and take your--things with you." As she reached for the prism, Harry Junior, bored with the encyclopedia, tried to snatch the book away.

"You're making a fine lawyer someday, not a useless putterer like Big Harry, who works all hours overtime in that damned lab. She scowled as Harry Junior, bored with the encyclopedia, tried to snatch the book away.

"I know just the thing," Porteous said happily. "Here." He dipped into the glittering litter on the tray and handed Harry Junior a translucent prism. "A neural distorter. We use it on the ship."

"Grow some hair." Melinda tried not to smile.

"I was two weeks premature," volunteered Melinda. "He's real sensitive."

"It's a G.I. housing project," Melinda said, ashamed. "Hair's a must, you know."

Porteous was delighted. He asked a multitude of questions, most of them pointless, some naive, and Melinda dug into her infinitesimal fund of knowledge and gave. The little man scribbled furiously, clucking like a gravid hen.

"You mean," he was asking in amazement, "that you live in these primitive huts of your own volition?"

"It's a G.I. housing project," Melinda said, ashamed.

"A neural distorter. We use it on the ship."

"Questions?" There was an ominous glint in Melinda's blue eyes.

"Oh, my excuse. Demonstration, certainly. You will not mind the questions?"

"Okay, shoot. But nothing personal."

* * * *

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"It's a G.I. housing project," Melinda said, ashamed.

"Manifestly insecure," murmured the little man, studying Harry Junior. "Definite paranoid tendencies."

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Melinda shrank limply onto the sofa. "I don't understand," she said painfully. "Was he a thief?"

"He was—careless about his spatial coordinates," Major Nord's teeth showed in the faintest of smiles. "He has been corrected. Where is it?"

"Now look," said Melinda with some asperity. "That thing's kept Harry Junior quiet all day. I bought it in good faith, and it's not my fault—are you have got a warrant?"

"Madam," said the Major with dignity, "I dislike violating local tabs, but must I explain the impact of a neural disruptor on a backwater culture? What if your Nounderthal had been given atomic blasters? Where would you have been today? Swinging through trees, no doubt. What if your Hitler had force-fields?" he exhaled. "Where is your son?"

In the nursery, Harry Junior was contentedly playing with his blocks. The prism lay glinting in the corner.

Major Nord picked it up carefully, scrutinized Harry Junior. His voice was very soft.

"You said he was—playing with it?"

Some vestigial maternal instinct prompted Melinda to shake her head vigorously. The little man stared hard at Harry Junior, who began whimpering. Trembling, Melinda scooped up Harry Junior.

"Is that all you have to do—run around frightening women and children? Take your old disruptor and get out. Leave decent people alone!"

Major Nord frowned. If only he could be sure. He peered stonily at Harry Junior, murmured, "Definite egomania. It doesn't seem to have affected him. Strange."

"Do you want me to scream?" Melinda demanded.

Major Nord sighed. He bowed to Melinda, went out, closed the door, touched a tiny stud on his tunic, and vanished.

"The manners of some people," Melinda said to Harry Junior. She was relieved that the Major had not asked for the green vial.

Harry Junior also looked relieved, although for quite a different reason.

Big Harry arrived home a little after eleven. There were small worry creases about his mouth and forehead, and the leaden cast of defeat in his eyes. He went into the bedroom and Melinda sleepily told him about the little man working his way through college by peddling silly goods, and about that rude cop named Nord, and Harry said that was simply astonishing and Melinda said, "Harry, you had a drink!"

"I had two drinks," Harry told hercoldly. "You married a failure, dear. Part of the experimental model vaporized, woosh, just like that. On paper it looked so good—"

Melinda had heard it all before. She had seen it too if Harry Junior was covered, and Big Harry went unsteadily into the nursery, sat down by his son's crib.

"Poor little guy," he mused. "Your old man's a bum, a useless tinker. He thought he could send Man to the stars on a string of helium nuclei. Oh, he was smart. Thought of everything. A whole bunch of his ideas were worth a few air molecules could defocus the stream? Try a vacuum, stupid."

Big Harry stood up.

"Did you say something, son?"

"Curfle," said Harry Junior.

Big Harry reeled into the living room like a somnambulist.

He got pencil and paper, began jotting frantic formulae. Presently he called a cab and raced back to the laboratory.

"Darling," Big Harry's voice shook. "I've got it! More auxiliary shielding plus a vacuum. We'll be rich!"

"That's just fine," said Melinda crossly. "You woke the baby."

Harry Junior was sobbing bitterly into his pillow. He was sick with disappointment. Even the most favorable extrapolation showed it would take him nineteen years to become master of the world.

An eternity. Nineteen years!
once each five cycles after that. They would have taken care of maintenance. This operation was set up quite a while ago, you know. Operatives get a lot more training now—and we don't use so many of them."

“So, something went wrong,” Konar looked at the equipment on the bench. “How?” he asked. “How could it have happened?”

“Oh, we've got the sequence of events pretty well figured out by now.” Meinora got to his feet. “Of course, it's a virtually impossible situation—something no one would believe could happen. But it did.” He looked thoughtfully at the ruined communicator.

“You know the history of the original operation on this planet?”

“Yes, sir. I looked it over. Planet was checked out by Exploration. They found a couple of civilizations in stasis and another that was about to go to that way. Left alone, the new race evolved into a primitive hunter stage to a tribe to the caves. And when they didn't go clear up again, they'd have been savage terror.”

“Right. So a corps of native operatives was set up by Phosphilosophy, to upset the stasis and hold a core of knowledge till the barbaric period following the collapse of one of the old empires was over. One civilization on one continent was chosen, because it was felt that its impact on the rest of the planet would be adequate to insure progress, and that any more expensive operations would tend to mold the planetary culture.”

Konar nodded. “The old, standard procedure. It usually worked better than this, though. What happened this time?”

“The Merokian Confederation happened.”

“But their penetration was nowhere near here.”

“No, it wasn't. But they did attack Sector Nine. And they did destroy the headquarters. You remember that?”

“Yes, sir. I read about it in school. We lost a lot of people on that one.” Konar frowned. “Long before my time in the Corps, of course, but I studied up on it. They used some sort of screen that scrambled the detectors, didn't they?”

“I believe so. Might have been coupled with someone's inattention, too. But that's unimportant now. The important thing is that the sector records were destroyed during the attack.”

“Sure. But how about the permanent files that were forwarded to Alderbaran depository?”

Meinora smiled grimly. “Something else that couldn't happen. We're still looking for traces of that courier ship. I suppose they ran afoul of a Merokian task force, but there's nothing to go on. They just disappeared.” He picked up the mental communicator, examining the signs of aging.

“One by one, he continued, “the case files and property records of Sector Nine are being reconstructed. Every guardian even remotely associated with the Sector before the attack is being interviewed, and a lot of them are working on the reconstruction. It's been a long job, but we're nearly done now. This is one of the last planets to be located and rechecked, and it's been over a period since the last visit they've had from any of our teams. On this planet, that's some fifty-odd generations. Evidently the original operatives didn't demolish their equipment, and fifty some generations of descendants have messed things up pretty thoroughly.”

Konar looked at the bench. Besides the equipment he had just brought in, there were other items, all in varying stages of disrepair and ruin.

“Why is that?” he agreed. “I mean since I joined the Earldom, they have. Now what?”

“We've been picking up equipment by piece by piece,” he said, “we've been accounting for every one of those items issued. Some of 'em were lost. Some of 'em probably wore out and were discarded, or were burned—like this, only more so.” Meinora pointed at the wrecked communicator.

“Local legends tell us about violent explosions, so we know a few actually discharged. And we've tracked down the place where the flyer cracked up and bit out a hole the size of a bungalow. Some of the items are gone without trace. I'm just guessing.”

“That introduces an uncertainty factor, of course, but the equipment in the hands of natives, and the stuff just lying around in deserted areas has to be tracked down. This planet will develop a technology some day, and we don't want anything about to raise questions and doubts when it does. The folklore running around now is bad enough. When we get the equipment back, we've got to clean up the social mess left by the descendants of those original operatives.”

“Nice job.”

“Very nice. We'll be busy for a long time.” Meinora picked up a small tape reel. “Just got this,” he explained. “That's why I was waiting for you here. It's an account of a meeting and a medal that got away. Probably stolen about twenty years ago, planetary. We're assigned to track it down and pick it up.”

He turned the talk to a technician, who was working at another bench.

“You can have this stuff now. Bring in some more pretty soon.”

* * * * *

Flor, the beater, was bone weary. The shadows were lengthening, hiding the details in the thickets, and the hot day, he had been threshing his way through thickets after thickets, in obedience to the instructions of the foresters. He had struck trees with his short club and had grunted and squealed, to startle the khadra into flight. A few of the ugly beasts had come out, charging into the open, to be run down and speared by the nobles. The mounted man was old and evidently tired from the long day's hunt. He swayed a little in his saddle, then recovered and looked about him, fumbling at his side for his horn. The underbrush rustled and Flor heard the sound of disturbed leaves and heavy footfalls. A hunting charger was approaching, bearing one of the hunters. Quickly, Flor rose to his feet, sidling farther back into the thicket. Possibly, he might remain unseen. He peered out through the leaves.

The mounted man was old and evidently tired from the long day's hunt. He swayed a little in his saddle, then recovered and looked about him, fumbling at his side for his horn. His mount raised his head and beat a forefoot against the ground. The heavy foot made a deep, thumping noise and leaves rustled and rose in a small cloud. Flor sidled farther back into the thicket. Possibly, he might remain unseen. He peered out through the leaves.

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Stunned by the noise, a khadra, which had been hiding beneath a nearby bush, raced into the open. The huge animal flinched away, then reared wildly, dashing his rider's head against a tree limb.

The elderly man slipped in his saddle, reached shakily for his belt, missed, and lost his seat, to crash heavily to the ground.

Flor rushed from his thicket. With the shock of the fall, the Earl's coronet had become dislodged from his head and lay a short distance from the inert form. Flor picked it up, turning it in his hands and looking at it.

Curiously, he examined the golden circlet, noting the tiny bosses inset in the band. Many times, he had watched from a dark corner at the hunting lodge, neglecting his scullery duties, while the Earl showed the powers of this coronet to his elder son. Sometimes, he had been caught by the very powers the circlet gave to the old nobleman, and he winced as he remembered the strong arm of the kitchen master, and the skill with which he wielded a strap. But on other occasions, the Earl had been so engrossed in explaining the device as to neglect the presence of the eavesdropper.

He examined the belt, noting the long metal case, with its engraving and its bosses. At last, he grunted and fastened it about his own waist. He pressed the bosses, then threw the equipment back, we've got to clean up the social mess left by the descendants of those original operatives.”

“Nice job.”

“Very nice. We'll be busy for a long time.” Meinora picked up a small tape reel. “Just got this,” he explained. “That's why I was waiting for you here. It's an account of a meeting and a medal that got away. Probably stolen about twenty years ago, planetary. We're assigned to track it down and pick it up.”
himself against a tree.

Something slowed his fall, and he seemed to be falling on a soft mat. He caught his balance and rested against the tree, nodding in satisfaction. Later, he could experiment further, but now he had other things to do.

He examined the coronet again, remembering that there was something about its bosses, too. He looked closely at them, then pressed. One boss slid a little under his finger and he felt a faint, unfamiliar sense of awareness.

He put the coronet on his head and shuddered a little as the awareness increased to an almost painful intensity. The forest was somehow more clear to him than it had ever been. He seemed to understand many things which he had heard or experienced, but which had been vague before. And memory crowded upon him. He stood still, looking around.

At the edge of his mind was vague, uneasy wonder, obviously not his own thought. There was a dim caricature of himself standing over the body of the Earl. And there was a feeling of the need to do something without understanding of what was to be done, or why.

He could remember clearly now, the Earl's explanations of the action of the coronet. One incident stood out—a time when the old man, having overindulged in the local wine, had demonstrated his ability to divine the thoughts of others. Flor twitched a little in painful recollection. The kitchen master had been especially enthusiastic in his use of the strap that night.

The Earl's mount was eying Flor, who realized without knowing just how, that the vague images and rudimentary thoughts were a reflection of the beast's mind. He looked over at the thicket into which the little animal which had started the charge, was hiding. It was still there, and he could feel a sense of fearful wonder, a desire to be gone, coupled with a fear of being discovered.

Again, he looked about the woods. In a way, the huna and he were akin. It would be bad if he were caught there, too. To be sure, he would be hard to capture, with his new protection, but many men would hunt him. And some of them would be other Earls, or possibly some of the great abbots, who had their own coronets and belts, and possibly other things of great power. These, he knew, might be too much for him. He slunk into the thicker, looked down the hill, and decided on a course which would avoid the paths of the foresters.

As he walked, he plotted methods of using his new-found powers. He considered idea after idea—then discarded them and sought further. With his new awareness, he could see flaws in plans which would have seemed perfect to him only a few short hours before.

First, he realized he would have to learn to control his new powers. He would have to learn how to walk among the ways of the nobility, their manners and their customs. And he would have to find a disguise which would allow him to move about the land. Serfs were too likely to be questioned by the first passer-by who noticed them. Serfs belonged on the land—part of it.

He hid in the bushes at the side of a path as a group of free swordsmen went by. As he watched them, a plan came to him. He examined it carefully, finally deciding it would do.

* * * * *

The man-at-arms sauntered through the forest, swaying a little as he walked. He sang in a gruffly voice, pausing now and then to remember a new verse. Flor watched him as he approached, allowing the man's thoughts to enter his own consciousness. They were none too complicated. The man was a free swordsman, his sword unemployed at the moment. He still had sufficient money to enjoy the forest houses for a time, then he would seek service with the Earl of Konewar, who was rumored to be planning a campaign.

The man swayed closer, finally noticing Flor. He paused in mid stride, eying the escaped serf up and down.

"Now, here's something strange indeed," he mused. He looked closely at Flor's face.

"Tell me, my fellow, tell me this: How is it you wear the belt and coronet of a great noble, and yet have no other garment than the shift of a serf?"

As Flor looked at him insolently, he drew his sword.

"Come," he demanded impatiently, "I must have answer, else I take you to a provost. Possibly his way of finding your secret would be to your liking, eh?"

Flor drew a deep breath and waited. Here was the final test of his new device. He had experimented, finding that even the charge of a khada was harmless to him. Now, he would try if a sword could be rendered harmless. At the approach of the man, he had pressed the boss on his belt. The man seemed suddenly a little uncertain, so Flor spoke.

"Why, who are you," he demanded haughtily, "to question the doings of your betters? Away with you, before I spit you with your own sword."

The man shook his head, smiling sarcastically. "Ha!" he said, approaching Flor. "I know that accent. It stinks of the scullery. Tell me, Serf, where did you steal that—"

He broke off, climaxing his question with an abrupt swing of the sword. Then, he fell back in surprise. Flor had thrust a hand out to ward off the blow, and the sword had been thrown back violently. The rebound tore it from its amazed owner's hand, and it thudded to the ground. The man-at-arms looked at it stupidly.

Flor shrugged aside, scooping up the weapon before the man could recover.

"Now," he cried, "stand quite still. I shall have business with you."

The expression on the man's face told of something more than mere surprise which held him quiet. Here was proof of the powers of the coronet. Flor looked savagely at his captive.

"Take off your cap."

Reluctantly, the man's hand came up. He removed his steel cap, holding it in his hand as he faced his captor.

"That is fine." Flor pressed his advantage. "Now, your garments. Off with them!"

The swordsman was nearly his size. Both of them had the heavy build of their mountain stock, and the garments of the free swordman would do for Flor's purpose, even though they might not fit him perfectly. Who expected one of these roving soldiers of fortune to be dressed in the height of style? They were fighters, not models to show off the tailor's art.

Flor watched as his prisoner started to disrobe, then pulled off his own single garment, carefully guiding it through the belt at his waist, so as not to disturb the talisman's powers.

He threw the long shirt at the man before him.

"Here," he ordered. "Put this on."

He sensed a feeling of deep resentment—of hopeless rebellion. He repeated his demand, more emphatically.

"Put it on, I say!"

As the man stood before him, dressed in the rough shift of a serf, Flor smiled grimly.

"And now," he said, "none will worry too much about a mere serf, or look too closely into his fate. Here."

He slashed out with the sword, awkwardly, but effectively.

"I shall have to find a new name," he told himself as he dressed in the garments of his victim. "No free swordman would have a name like Flor. They all have two names."

He thought of the names he had heard used by the guards of the Earl. Flor, he thought, could be part of a name. But one of the swordsmen would make it Floran, or possibly Floro. They would be hunters, or slayers of elk—not simply elk. He looked at the steel cap in his hands. An iron hat—deri kuna.

"So," he told himself, "I shall be Florel Derikuna."

He inspected his new garments, being sure they hid the belt, and yet left the bosses available to easy reach. At last, he put on the iron cap. It covered the coronet, effectively hiding it. Taking up the sword, he replaced it in its scabbard and swaggered through the forest, imitating the man-at-arms' song.

At one stroke, he had improved his status infinitely. Now, he could roam the land unquestioned, so long as he had money. He smiled to himself. There was money in his scrip, and there would be but slight problems involved in getting more. Tonight, he would sleep in a forest house, instead of huddling in a thicket.

* * * * *

As the days passed, to grow into weeks and then months, Florel wandered over the land. Sometimes, he took service with a captain, who would engage in a campaign. Sometimes, he took service with one of the lesser nobility. A few times, he ran with the bands of the forest and road, to rob travelers. But he was cautious to avoid the great Earls, realizing the danger of detection.

Always, he kept his direction to the east, knowing that he would have to reach the sea and cross to the eastern land before he could feel completely safe. His store of money and of goods grew, and he hoarded it against the time when he would use it.

Sometimes, he posed as a merchant, traveling the land with the caravans. But always, he followed his path eastward.

* * * * *

Florel Derikuna looked back at the line of pack animals. It had been a long trip, and a hard one. He smiled grimly to himself as he remembered the last robber attack. For a time, he thought the caravan guard was going to be overwhelmed. He might have had to join with the robbers, as he had done before. And that would have delayed his plans.

He looked ahead again, toward the hill, crowned with its great, stone castle.

This, then, was the land of the east—the farthest march of the land of the east. It had taken him a long, cautious time to get here. And he had spent his days in fear of a searching party from Budorn, even when he had reached the seacoast itself. But here, he would be safe. None from this land had ever been even to the mountainous backbone of his own land, he was sure. And certainly, there would be no travelers who had guided their steps from here to faraway Budorn and back.

Now here knew Budorn, excepting Flor. Flor, the serf—now Florel Derikuna, swordsman at large—was in a new land. And he would take a new, more useful identity. He looked at the stone buildings of the town and its castle.
They were not unlike the castles and towns of his native land, he thought. There were differences, of course, but only in the small things. And he had gotten used to those by now. He had even managed to learn the peculiar language of the country. He smiled again. That coronet he always wore beneath his steel cap had served him well. It had more powers than he had dreamed of when he had first held it in his hands in those distant woods.

Here in Dwerostel, he thought, he could complete his change. Here, he could take service with the Duke as a young man of noble blood, once afflicted with a restless urge for travel, but now ready to establish himself. By now, he had learned to act. It had not been for nothing he had carefully studied the ways of the nobility.

The caravan clustered through the gate beneath the castle, twisted through the streets just beyond the wall, and stopped in the market place. Derikuna urged his mount ahead and confronted the merchant.

"In is my destination," he said. "So, we'll settle up, and I'll be on my way." The merchant looked at him with a certain amount of relief. The man, he knew, was a tough fighter. His efforts had been largely the cause of the failure of bandits to capture the caravan only a few days before. But there was something about him that repelled. He was a man to be feared, not liked. Somehow, the merchant felt he was well rid of this guard, despite his demonstrated ability. He reached into his clothing and produced two bags.

"We hate to lose you, Derikuna," he disbursed. "Here is your normal wage." He held out one bag. "And this second purse is a present, in memory of your gallant defense of the caravan." Derikuna smiled sarcastically. "Thank you," he said, "and good trading." He reined away.

He had caught the semi-fearful thoughts. Well, that was nothing unusual. Everybody became fearful of the iron hat sooner or later. Here, they would learn to respect him, too. Though their respect would be for a different name. Nor would they be able to deny him aught. They might not like him. That, he had no interest in. They'd do his will. And they'd never forget him.

He was in an inn, where he ordered food and lodging. His meal over, he saw to his beasts, then had a servant take his baggage to his room.

* * * * *

Shortly after daybreak, he awoke. He blinked at the light, stirred restlessly, and got out of bed. Rubbing his eyes, he walked to the other side of the room. For a few minutes, he looked at the tattered floor and the water bucket standing near it. At last, he shrugged and started splashing water over himself. This morning, he spent more time than usual, being sure that no vestige of beard was left on his face, and that he was perfectly clean. He complimented his bath by dashing perfumed water over his entire body.

He opened his traveling chest, picking out clothing he had worn but few times, and those in private. At last, he examined his reflection in a mirror, and nodded in satisfaction. "Truly," he told himself, "a fine example of western nobility." He picked out a few expensive ornaments from his chest, then locked it again and left the inn. He guided his mount through the narrow streets to the castle gate, where he confronted a sleepy, heavily-armed senry.

"Send word to the castle steward," he ordered, throwing his riding cloak back, "that Florel, younger son of the Earl of Konewar, would pay his respects to your master, the Duke of Dwerostel.

The man eyed him for a moment, then straightened and grounded his pile with a crash. "It shall be done, sir." He turned and struck a gong.

A guard officer came through the tunnel under the wall. For a moment, he looked doubtful, then he spoke respectfully and ushered Derikuna through the inner court to a small apartment, where he turned him over to a steward.

"You wish audience with His Excellency?"

"I do, My Man. I wish to pay him my respects, and those of my father, the Earl of Konewar." Derikuna looked haughtily at the man. Like the guard officer, the steward seemed doubtful. For a few seconds, he seemed about to demur. Then, he bowed respectfully.

"Very well, sir." With a final, curious glance at the coronet which shone in Florel's hair, the steward clapped his hands. A page hurried into the room and bowed.

"Your orders, sir?"

"We have a noble guest, Bring refreshment, at once." The steward waved to a table. "If Your Honor will wait here?"

Florel inclined his head, strode to a chair, and sat down. He looked amusedly after the disappearing steward. The coronet of the old Earl, he thought, was a truly potent talisman. Even the disdainful stewards of castles bowed to its force. And, thought the impostor, so would his master—when the time came.

* * * * *

The page reappeared with a flagon of wine and some cakes. Florel was sampling them when the steward returned. The man bowed respectfully, waited for Florel to finish his wine, and led the way through a corridor to a heavy pair of doors, which he swung open.

"Florel, Son of Konewar," he announced ceremoniously.

The Duke flipped a bone to one of his dogs, shoved his plate aside, and looked up. Florel walked forward a few paces, stopped, and bowed low.

"Your Excellency:"

"Aha, as I had hoped," he thought with a molestation of pride. "I see. " The nobleman nodded thoughtfully. "We have heard rumors of your fashions in dress, though no member of any of the great families of your realm has ever come so far before. We are somewhat isolated here." He looked sharply at the younger man.

"Rumor also has it that this is more than mere insignia you wear. I have heard it said that your ornaments give more than mortal powers to their wearer. Is this true?"

"My lord, I can only tell you the truth. They are the outward symbol of that superiority." The Duke nodded, satisfied. He waved a hand.

"Sit down, young man. You must remain at our court for a time. We are hungry for news of the distant lands."

Florel congratulated himself. Well embellished coronet, he had found, was a popular form of entertainment in court and court alike, and his store of gowns was large and carefully gathered. Here at Dwerostel, far from the center of the kingdom, his store of tales would last for a long time—perhaps as long as he needed.

During the days and nights that followed, he exerted himself to gain the favor of the Duke and his household. Much of his time, he spent entertaining others with his tales. But he kept his own ears and eyes open. He became a constant visitor at the castle, finally being offered the use of one of the small apartments, which he graciously accepted. And, of course, he was invited to join the hunts.

Hunting, he discovered, could be a pleasant pastime—so long as it was another who was doing the hard work of beating. And his own experience as a beater proved valuable.

He was familiar with the ways and the haunts of animals. What had once been a matter of survival became a road to acclaim. He was known before long as a skillful, daring hunter.

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He was familiar with the ways and the haunts of animals. What had once been a matter of survival became a road to acclaim. He was known before long as a skillful, daring hunter.

"You, yourself, recognize your own superiority in all ways over your retainers, your vassals, and your townpeople. And so are we above the common man. This insignia is but the outward symbol of that superiority." The Duke nodded, satisfied. He waved a hand.

"Sit down, young man. You must remain at our court for a time. We are hungry for news of the distant lands."

"I arrived in your town last evening, and delayed only to make myself presentable before appearing to pay my respects."

"Very good. Punctuality in meeting social obligations is a mark of good breeding. The Duke eyed Florel's costume.

"Tell me, young man, do all your nobility affect the insignia you wear?"

"I arrived in your town last evening, and delayed only to make myself presentable before appearing to pay my respects." Florel's hand rose to his coronet. "Only members of the older families, Excellency."

"I see." The nobleman nodded thoughtfully. "We have heard rumors of your fashions in dress, though no member of any of the great families of your realm has ever come so far before. We are somewhat isolated here." He looked sharply at the younger man.

"Rumor also has it that this is more than mere insignia you wear. I have heard it said that your ornaments give more than mortal powers to their wearer. Is this true?"

"My lord, I can only tell you the truth. They are the outward symbol of that superiority." The Duke nodded, satisfied. He waved a hand.

"Sit down, young man. You must remain at our court for a time. We are hungry for news of the distant lands."

Florel congratulated himself. Well embellished coronet, he had found, was a popular form of entertainment in court and court alike, and his store of gowns was large and carefully gathered. Here at Dwerostel, far from the center of the kingdom, his store of tales would last for a long time—perhaps as long as he needed.

During the days and nights that followed, he exerted himself to gain the favor of the Duke and his household. Much of his time, he spent entertaining others with his tales. But he kept his own ears and eyes open. He became a constant visitor at the castle, finally being offered the use of one of the small apartments, which he graciously accepted. And, of course, he was invited to join the hunts.

Hunting, he discovered, could be a pleasant pastime—so long as it was another who was doing the hard work of beating. And his own experience as a beater proved valuable.

He was familiar with the ways and the haunts of animals. What had once been a matter of survival became a road to acclaim. He was known before long as a skillful, daring hunter.

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At length, he decided the time was right to talk to the Duke of more serious things. The duchy was at the very border of the kingdom. To the north lay territory occupied only by barbaric tribes, who frequently descended on the northern baronies, to rob travelers of their goods, or to loot villages. Having secured their loot, the tribesmen retreated to their mountains before a fighting force could come up with them.

Florel came upon the Duke while he was considering the news of one of these raids.

"Your Excellency, these border raids could be halted. A strong hand is all that is needed, at the right place. A determined knight, established on the Menstal, could command the river crossing and the pass, thus preventing either entry or exit."

Florel smiled. He had plans concerning the Menstal, and the great river, the Nalen, which raced between high cliffs.

"The merchants, who use the Nalen for their shipments, would welcome protection from the robber bands, I think, as would the travelers of the roads."

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"The merchants, who use the Nalen for their shipments, would welcome protection from the robber bands, I think, as would the travelers of the roads."
"And?" The Duke looked at him thoughtfully.

"Possibly a small tax?" Florel smiled deprecatingly. "Sufficient to maintain a garrison?"

"And who would collect the tax?"

"That, Excellency, I could arrange. I have funds, adequate to garrison the tower of the Menstral, and even to make it livable for a considerable force of men. And I believe I could maintain and increase a garrison there that would serve to hold the barbarians at bay."

"Let me think this over." The Duke sat back, toyng with his cup. "It is true," he mused, "that Menstral is the key to the border. And the small garrison there has proved expensive and ineffective." He tapped the cup on the table, then set it down and looked about the apartment. Finally, he looked up at Florel.

"You have our permission to try your scheme," he decided. "We will invest you with the barony of Menstral."
seen, if it comes to that. There might be another transvisor around." He kicked gently at the seat beside him.

"This was just a secondary job, done in passing," he said, "but it's a good thing we found this out when we did. It'll change our whole primary plan. Now, we'll have to slog it out the hard way. On no account can anyone refuse. It might be suicide. We'll have to talk to travelers. We want to know what abnormal or unusual developments have taken place in what country in the last twenty years. Then, we'll have to check them out. We've got a lot of work to do." He looked around. "Cienmar."

"Yes, sir?" The communications operator looked up.

"Send in a report on this to Group. Make it 'operational.'" Konar tilted his head a little. "Say, chief, you said the transvisor's fear was amplified by my mentalom. What if I wasn't wearing one?"

"You wouldn't feel a thing," Meinora smiled. "But don't get any ideas. Without amplification, you couldn't protect your shield properly. You'd have protection, but your refraction control's entirely mental, and levitation direction depends on mental, not physical, control, remember?"

"But how about you? You don't use amplification. Neither do several of the other team chiefs."

Meinora shrugged. "No," he admitted, "we don't need it, except in abnormal circumstances. But we don't go around scaring transvisors. They can't kill us, but they can make us pretty sick. You see, we're a little sensitive in some ways." He shook his head. "No, the only advantage I've got is that I can spot a transvisor by her mental pattern—if I get close enough. There's a little side radiation that can be detected, though it won't pass an amplifier. When you've felt it once, you'll never forget it. Makes you uncomfortable." He smiled wryly.

"And you can believe me," he added, "when I do get close to a transvisor, I'm very, very careful not to frighten her."

Winter passed, and spring, and summer came. Nal Gerda, Officer of the Guard, stood on the small wharf below the old watchtower. He looked across the narrows, examined the cliff opposite him, then looked upward at the luminous sky. There were a few small clouds, whose fleecy whiteness accentuated the clear blue about them. Brilliant sunshine bathed the wharf and tower, driving away the night mists.

It would not be long before the new guard came down the cliff. Gerda stretched and drew a deep breath, savoring the summer morning air. Now, it was pleasant, a happy contrast to the sullen skies and biting winter winds he had faced a few short months ago.

For a time, he looked at the green atop the cliffs, then he transferred his attention upriver, toward the bend where the Nalen came out of the pass to bleed against the iron cliffs of Mensal. The water flowed swiftly in the narrows, throwing off white glints as its ripples caught the sunlight, then deepening to a dark blue where it came into the shadow of the cliffs.

A sudden call sounded from the lookout far above, and the officer wheeled about, looking to the great chain which stretched from tower to cliff, to block river traffic. It was in proper position, and Gerda looked back at the bend.

As he watched, a long, low barge drifted into sight, picking up speed as it came into the rapid current. Polemen balanced themselves alertly in the bow, their long sticks poised to deflect their course from any threatening rocks.

Gerda threw off the almost poetical admiration of beauty that had possessed him a moment before and faced the guard house, from whence came a scuffle of feet and the clank of arms, to tell of the guard's readiness.

"Turn out the Guard." Gerda drew himself up into a commanding pose. A group of men-at-arms marched stiffly out, followed by a pair of seers. The leader saluted Gerda with upraised hand.

"The Guard is ready, My Captain," he proclaimed. "May the tax be rich."

Gerda returned the salute. "It will be," he stated positively. "These merchants have learned by now that to insult Portal Mensal with poor offerings is unwise in the extreme. And, mark me, they'll never forget!"

The barge approached and swung in toward the wharf in obedience to Gerda's imperious gesture. One of the polemen jumped ashore, securing a line to a bollard. The steerman climbed to the dock, to halt a pace in front of Gerda. He folded his hands and bowed his head submissively.

"Does Your Honor desire to inspect the cargo?"

"Of course," Gerda's haughty glance appraised the man from toe to crown. "Quickly now. I've little time to waste." He glanced back at his clerk, who had a tablet ready.

"Your name, Merchant?"

"Teron, of Krongert, may it please you, sir. I have been to----"

Gerda waved an impatient hand. "Save me your speech, Higgler," he said curtly. "What's your cargo value?"

"Six thousand telena, Your Honor. We have----"

"Unload it. I'll look at it." Gerda waved the man to silence.

As the bales of goods were placed on the wharf, Gerda examined them critically. A few, he ordered set aside after a quick check and a few questions. Others, he ordered opened and spread out. At last, satisfied with his estimate of the cargo's valuation, he turned.

"Your choice, Merchant?"

"I would pay, Your Honor," said the man, "to the tenth part of my cargo." He extended a leather bag.

"Don't haggle with me," snapped Gerda. "The tax is a fifth of your cargo, as you should well know." His hand sought his sword hilt.

The merchant's face fell a little, and he produced a second bag, which he held out to the officer. "I must apologize," he said. "I am new to this land."

"See that you learn its customs quickly, then," Gerda handed the bags to his clerk. "Check these, Lor."

"I make it a thousand, six hundred telena."

An expression of dismay crossed the merchant's face.

"Your Honor," he wailed, "my cargo is of but six thousand valuation. I swear it."

Gerda stepped forward swiftly. His hand raised, to swing in a violent, back-handed arc, his heavy rings furrowing the merchant's face. The man staggered back, involuntarily raising a hand to his injured cheek.

As a couple of the men-at-arms raised their pikes to the ready, the merchant righted himself, folded his hands again, and bowed in obedience. Blood trickled down his chin, a drop spattering on his clothing. He ignored it.

"You would dispute my judgment?" Gerda drew his hand up for a second blow. "Here is no market place for your sharp bargaining. For your insolence, another five hundred telena will be exacted. Make speed!"

The merchant shook his head despairingly, but offered no word of protest. Silently, he dug into his possessions, to produce a third bag. For a moment, he weighed it in his hand, then reached into it, to remove a few loose coins. He extended the bag to the officer of the guard.

Gerda turned. Lor had gone into the guard house, to count the other two bags. The officer raised his voice.

"Lor, get back out here. I've more for you to count."

He tossed the bag to the clerk, then stood, glaring at the unfortunate trader. At last, he kicked the nearest bale.

"Well," he growled, "get this stuff off the wharf. What are you waiting for?"

He watched the barge crew load, then turned. Lor came from the guard house.

"All is in order, My Captain."

"Very well." Gerda looked at him approvingly. Then, he swung to the merchant, fixing him with a stern glare.

"We shall make note of your name, Merchant. See thou that you make honest and accurate valuation in the future. Another time, we shall not be so lenient. The dungeon of Mensal is no pleasant place."

He watched till the last of the bargeload was stowed, then nodded curtly.

"You may show off," he said. He turned his head toward the tower.

"Down chain," he ordered loudly.

The windlass creaked protestingly and the heavy chain dropped slowly into the river. The barge steered to the center of the channel, gathering speed as it passed over the lowered chain.

When the barge had cleared, serfs inside the tower strained at the windlass in obedience to the commands of their overseer, and the chain rose jerkily, to regain its former position across the stream.

Gerda watched for a moment, then strode toward the guard house. He went inside, to look at the bags of coin on the counting table.

"Cattle," he growled, "I'd think they could cheat the Baron Bel Mensal of his just tax."

He stepped back out for a moment, to watch the merchant barge enter the rapids beyond the chain. Then, he swung about and re-entered the tower.

Inside, he sat down at his counting table. He opened the bags, spilling their contents out on the boards, and checked their count.

There were forty-eight over.

He turned to his clerk.
"What was your count, Lor?"

"Two thousand, one hundred, sir, and forty-eight."

"Very good." Gerda smiled a little. "For once in his thieving life, the merchant was anxious to give full weight!"

Lor spread his hands. "He'll get it back, and more, at Oriano, sir."

"Oh, to be sure." Gerda shrugged indifferently as he scooped the coins back into the bags. He chose three small scraps of wood, screwed tally marks on them, and went over to a heavy chest.

Taking a key from his belt, he unlocked the chest and raised its lid. He looked at the bags lying within, then tossed the new ones on top of them. As he locked the chest again, he left Gor to his account book, to enter the new collection.

The Officer of the Guard straightened, stretched for a moment, then glanced critically in at the windlass room. The serfs had secured the windlass and racked their poles. Now, they were sitting, hunched against the wall, staring vacantly, in the manner of serfs. The guardroom, its commander noted, was properly clean. He shrugged and walked out again to the wharf. Once more, he looked at the iron cliffs opposite him, then glanced downriver. The merchant barge had disappeared.

Beyond Menstal, the cliffs closed in still farther, to become more rugged and to form a narrow gorge. Between them, the Nalen took a tortuous course, turbulently fighting its way over the rocks. Eventually, it would drop into the lowlands, to become a broad, placid river, flowing quietly under the sunshine to water the fields of Oriano. But during its passage through the mountains, it would remain a dark, brawling torrent.

The merchant barge swept through the rapids just beyond Menstal, her poles deftly preventing disaster against the rocks. At last, as the gorge became a little wider, the steersman guided his course toward a small beach beneath the cliffs. With his free hand, he thoughtfully rubbed his injured cheek.

As they rowed toward the beach, he shook his head and stepped forward. For a moment, he huddled under a thwart, then he brought out a small case.

"Konar," he called, "fix this thing up for me, will you?" He opened the case and laid it on the thwart. One of the polemen laid his stick down and came aft.

"Pretty nasty clip, wasn't it, sir?"

Meinora grinned. "Guy's got a heavy hand, all right," he admitted. "Made me dizzy for a second. Almost got mad at him."

Konar raised an eyebrow. "I felt it," he said. "Good thing Ciemor and I backed you up a little. Wouldn't help us much to knock out the baron's river detachment right now, would it?" He reached into the case.

"I looked through the merchants weren't exaggerating, if you ask me," he added. He approached Meinora, a small swab in his hand.

"Hold still, sir," he instructed. "This'll sting for a few seconds." He dabbed at the cut cheek, then reached back into the case for an instrument.

"Ouch!" Meinora winced. "Did you have to use that stuff full strength? After all, I can wait a couple of hours for it to heal." He shook his head as his companion turned back toward him, then dashed involuntarily. They fell from his eyes and blinked a few times to clear his vision.

"No," he added, "the merchants aren't exaggerating a bit on this one. Bel Menstal's a pretty rough customer, and he keeps rough boys. Now, we'll see whether he's the guy we've been looking for, the guy with our equipment."

Konar focused the small instrument on his superior's face, passing it along the line of the jagged cut. "You didn't explain that part."

"Simple enough." Meinora grinned wolfishly. "Those coins were a Vadin-Chelled dummy. Now that we're out of the forest field, they'll start to sublime. In a couple of hours or so, they'll be gone, and someone will be asking a lot of questions. Set up the detectors. If the baron is the boy we think he is, we should be getting a fairly strong reading shortly after that guard's relieved."

From somewhere atop the cliff, a bell tolled. The hoarse voice of the lookout drifted down to the wharf.

"Relieve the guard."

Nal Gerda looked up. A line of men were coming down the steep path, stepping cautiously as they wound about the sharp turns. Gerda nodded and walked back into the guard room.

"Draw up your guard," he ordered. He beckoned to two of the serfs.

"Take the chest," he directed, "and stay close in front of me."

Nal Gerda nodded. He went out to the wharf. His guard was drawn up in their proper station, facing upstream, so that they could view both the steps from the cliff and the river. No traffic was in sight in the long gorge.

The new guard came slowly down the trail, formed at the foot of the steps, and marched to the tower portal. Their commander dressed their ranks, motioned to his clerk, and came forward, saluting as he approached Gerda.

"Anything unusual?"

"Nothing," Gerda told him. "Seven barges, this watch. Traders are gathering for the fair at Oriano."

"I know," the other agreed. "We'll have rich collections for the rest of the summer, what with fairs all down the valley. You'll be going to the Oriano Fair?"

"Got my permission yesterday. I'm to ride with the Baron. Have to give the merchants back part of their money, you know."

"Yes, I suppose so." The other grinned, then sobered. "I'll relieve you, sir."

"Very good," Gerda saluted, then turned.

"March off the old guard," he ordered.

The men started up the steps. Gerda followed the serfs with the money chest, bringing up to the rear.

The steersman deftly steered his craft through the rapids, then banked his boat. He pasted their way up the trail, halting at the halfway point for a brief rest. At last, they were at the top of the cliff. Before them, the castle gate opened. Within the tunnel-like passage through the wall, two sentries guarded their pikes.

Gerda nodded to his clerk, accepted the account tablet, and followed his serfs, who still hauled the money chest, into the castle. Inside the main counting room, his hearers set the chest on a large table. The castle steward came toward them.

"And how were collections?"

"Reasonably good, sir. Seven barges came through during the night, with good cargoes," Gerda held out the tablet.

The steward looked at it, checking off the entries. "Merion, of Vador—yes, he would have about that. And Borowa? A thousand?" He nodded thoughtfully. "That seems about right for him." He tapped the tablet a few times, squinting at the last name on the list. "But who is this Teron? I never heard of him. Must have had a rich cargo, too."

Gerda laughed softly. "He's a new one to me. He tried to get away with a thief, then protested the valuation. I fined him an extra five hundred."

"Oh, no!" The steward smiled thinly. "What then?"

Gerda shook his head. "Oh, he was suddenly so anxious to pay the right amount, he gave me forty-eight teloa overweight. I'll know him next time I see him, I'm sure. I marked him well for receipt."

He inspected his knuckles reflectively, then took the key from his belt and opened the chest.

"You'll want to verify my count, of course?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure. Have to be certain, you know. And there's your share of the fine and overpayment to be taken care of. The steward reached into the chest, removing bags which clicked as they were dropped to the table. He stopped, to look into the chest with a puzzled expression on his face.

"And what are these?" He reached in, to withdraw three obviously empty bags. He looked curiously at the thongs which tied their mouths, then shook them and looked questioningly at Gerda.

"Why, I...I don't know." Gerda looked incredulously at the bags. "Certainly, I had no extra money bags."

"I should think not." The steward frowned, then beckoned behind him. Two heavily armed guards approached.

"We'll have to examine into this."

As the guards came close to Gerda, the steward looked closely at the bags on the table, then picked one up, opening it.

"Borowa," he muttered after looking inside and comparing the tally chip with the count tablet. He weighed the bag in his hand. "Yes, it seems to be about right. Certainly not overweight." He picked up another, then still another. At last, he looked up.

"Of course, I shall have to count all of these carefully," he remarked grimly, "but I see no coin from this Teron you have listed." He stared coldly at Gerda. "And the tower lookout confirms that you had seven barges. That was a considerable amount. What did you do with that money?"

"Why, I counted it. It was all there!" Gerda shook his head unbelievingly. "My count agreed with that of my clerk, and I dropped tallies in and closed the bags again."

"Of course, I have to have all these carefully counted."

"But who is this Teron? I never heard of him. Must have had a rich cargo, too."
"We'll see." The steward motioned at the two guards. "Search this man."

Dazedly, Gerda stood still, submitting as one of the guards went through his clothing while the other stood ready to deal with any resistance. The searcher made a thorough examination of Gerda's clothing, muttered to himself, and went over his search again. A pile of personal objects lay on the table when he had finished. At last, he looked at the prisoner, then faced his chief.

"He has nothing on him, sir, not even a tesa." "So I see." The steward frowned, then looked at Gerda. "You may reclaim your possessions now, captain. Is there any chance that your clerk might have opened the money chest?"

Gerda shook his head. "I don't see how he could, sir, unless he had a duplicate key, and that's hardly possible. I kept the chest locked at all times, and the key never left my person."

"And there is no chance that any of your men could have hidden anything on the way here?"

Again, Gerda shook his head. "None," he said passively. "I was behind them all the way, and would have seen if any had made any unusual motion."

"Very well." The steward clapped his hands sharply.

There was a clatter of arms, followed by the scuffle of feet. Across the room, a door opened and a detachment of the castle guard filed in. Their leader stepped forward, saluting the steward.

"There is a river watch outside," he was told. "Disarm them, take them to a cell, and search them thoroughly. A considerable amount of coin has been stolen. Report to me when you have finished."

"Yes, sir." The group filed out.

The steward turned to Gerda again.

"This matter must be examined carefully," he declared. "You may have been the victim of witchcraft, of course, though I doubt it, never having witnessed such a thing. Or one of your men may have worked out a cunning method of theft, an occurrence which I have witnessed many times. Or, there's the other possibility. ' He stroked his chin. "After all, you were the nearest man, and the one none other would observe."

Gerda looked at him fearfully.

"This may become a matter for the Baron's personal attention," continued the steward. He looked sharply at Gerda. "How long have you been in the Baron's service?"

"Why, you know that, sir. Ten years, ever since I reported."

"Yes, yes, I remember. And you know how hopeless it is to try to decipher the Baron?"

"Yes, sir." Gerda swallowed painfully.

"But you still insist you had nothing to do with the disappearance of this money?"

Gerda spread his hands. "I can't understand it, sir. But I had nothing to do with it myself. As I told you, we collected it, listed it, counted it, and I put it in the chest and locked it up. He shook his head again. "It's witchcraft, sir."

The steward leaned back, a slight smile playing about his lips.

"Witchcraft is good enough for serfs," he said smoothly, "but you and I are intelligent men. We have had collection money disappear before, many times. Almost always, there has been the cry, it's witchcraft! And always there has been a more simple, worldly explanation." He snapped his fingers and a page hurried forward.

"A cup of wine," ordered the steward. "This questioning is thirsty work." He faced back to Gerda.

"Always," he repeated, "some explanation has been forthcoming. Usually, I have discovered the errant one--with the help of my guards, of course. And the criminal has been duly punished. But there have been some few occasions when the malefactor was so clever as to force the Baron's intervention." He paused, leaning forward a little.

"And do you know what happened then?"

Gerda's face was becoming dry. His mouth opened, but he closed it again.

The page returned, bearing a large cup and a flagon of wine. Carefully, he filled the cup, then set it before the steward, who lifted it to his lips, drank, and set it down with a satisfied sigh.

"Thank you, boy. Here is one thing we can produce while we stand in these mountains." He wiped his lips and turned his gaze to Gerda again. He shook his head slowly.

"It takes a good detective or innocence in a moment. For a short time, he questioned the prisoner himself. He soon discovered the guilty ones, and wrong confessions from their wretched lips. We then took them away, and turned them over to the torturers." He raised the cup again.

"You know," he added, "I'm told that some of them lasted as long as ten full days." He shook his head. "I could never understand how the executioners can put up with such noise for so long. But then, I suppose one gets used to most anything."

Again, Menstal smiled to himself as he thought of the daughter of Orieano. Next month, at the fair, he would press suit for the hand of the heiress, and a few months after that, he would have control of the rich farm lands and the trading city.

And the Duke himself? Ah, well, perhaps it would be as well to allow him to finish his life in peaceful possession of his broad fields. But certainly, the son of Dwerostel would have no word in the control of the duchy. An accident could be easily arranged, and Flor, one-time woods beater and scullery boy of Budorn, would become the great Duke he had planned long to be. No, it wouldn't take too many more years.

He filled himself a cup, and looked complacently into its clear depths. The tap on the door broke his reverie, and he looked up, annoyed.

"What now, Weron?" He set the cup down. "Must I be bothered with all your petty problems?"

"This, Excellency, is an unusual problem. A sizable tribute payment has disappeared without trace. The empty bags were left, and the culprit has--"

"Enough!" The Baron waved a hand impatiently, then adjusted his golden coronet to a more comfortable angle. For an instant, his fingers played with the ornamental bosses.

"Yes, yes, I see," he snapped. "You can spare me your mumbled details. This man is the officer of the guard?"

"Yes, sir." The steward motioned at the two guards. "Search this man.

But you still insist you had nothing to do with the disappearance of this money?"

"Yes, sir." The group filed out.

The steward turned to Gerda again.

"This matter must be examined carefully. You must know something. You must know something. Tell it!

"You know something. You must know something. Tell it!"

Gerda looked incredulously at his master. He had stolen nothing. As far as he knew, he had done nothing wrong. But he seemed to be condemned in advance. Something was insistently pressing on his brain, demanding a confession. He had nothing to confess, but the demanding pressure remained. He struggled against it, and it grew.

Admit it. How did you do it? Where is the money?

The pressure became a tearing force. Gerda swayed weakly. "I don't know what happened," he insisted. "I told--"

The words stopped as the force became almost unbearable intense. A sudden, sharp pain tore at Gerda's throat, and blinding light seemed to strike back of his eyes. Through the glare, he dimly saw the Baron raise a hand threateningly.

"You claim to have no idea at all how the money was taken, or which of your men may have been the thief? This is not a sensible attitude."

"You know something. You must know something. Tell it!"

Gerda shook his head miserably, entirely unable to speak. Somehow, nothing was clear. He remembered that something had gone wrong. Somehow, he had failed his duty. But how? The room was hazy. Snatches of his last tour of duty rose to his consciousness, then were abruptly blotted out--gone. The faces of his clerk and of the men-at-arms came out...
of the haze for an instant. Then, they, too, were gone.

The room seemed to spin and an irresistible force bore him to the floor. As he slowly was pressed downward, he wondered who he was—why he was here—what had happened. Then, the floor came at him with blinding speed and he ceased to wonder. The haze about him scintillated and became impenetrable darkness.

The Baron looked down at the crumpled form.

"Take this man away, Weron," he ordered. "He knew nothing." He stroked his hair. "When he recovers, assign him to some unimportant duty in the castle. Something, of course, that will demand little thought or spirit."

"And the others, Excellency?"

"Oh, bring them in, one at a time. One of them managed to make a complete fool of his officer, of course. But I'll find him."

Bel Mensal waved his hand in dismissal, then leaned back in his chair, watching as his steward directed a pair of men-at-arms. They carried the limp form from the room.

"There! That'll pick up any power radiation from the castle." Konar straightened, looking at the small panel.

"Good enough." Meinora leaned over, checking the dials. "See you've set it for average power."

"Yes, sir. I'll give a flicker indication for low levels and it'll fail to trip for unaided thought. Not too much chance of an overload, either."


Koran glanced at the panel again. "I remembered it this time." He grinned, then looked curiously at his superior's cut cheek. The wound was healing nicely. In an hour or so, there would be no visible trace of the injury.

"Say, Chief," he asked, "how'd you happen to get slapped?"

"Yes, sir. I know that. But what was the purpose?"

"This continent has never been thoroughly checked, so we're sampling the culture. We know a lot about them now, but there's a lot we still have to know. For example, how do they react to various stimuli? And how much stimulus is necessary to produce a given action? Of course, we can't check every individual, but we can pick up a sample from each community we contact and extrapolate from them." Meinora spread his hands.

So, I presented a minor irritation to that officer, and he reacted—fast. He didn't just slap me for effect. He was infuriated at the insult to his authority. Not only that, but his men expected him to react in just that manner. I noted that, too. He'd have lost face if he'd acted in any other way. And the men-at-arms were disappointed when we discovered they had no further excuse for violence. We really lost face with them. There, we have an indication that violence is the expected thing in this particular castle, which is a community of the duxy. Right?"

"Yes." Meinora nodded thoughtfully. "They're not only violent themselves, but they expect violence from others. I see what you mean. You'll sample the other baronies?"

"Certainly. As many as we can contact. They can tell us quite a bit. We'll have to get on with the procedure?"

A buzzer interrupted him. Meinora snapped a switch and sat forward alertly.

A needle quivered, rose from its rest, and swung abruptly across the meter scale. With an audible ping, it slapped against the stop beyond the maximum reading.

Meinora looked sharply at the detector set, then turned a selector switch. The needle moved reluctantly away from the pin, but remained above the red line at center scale.

Meinora grimaced, twisted the selector again, and adjusted another knob, till the needle came to rest at center.

He examined the dial readings, frowned incredulously, then turned.

"Look at it," he invited. "It's a wonder he hasn't burned that amplifier out. It's a heavy duty job, I know. But——"

"Yes, Excellency," Meinora nodded over his chief's shoulder.

"What an overload! We've found it, all right. But what's going on?"

"Let's find out." Meinora flipped a switch. The two men tensed against the resultant shock and were silent for a time. At last, Konar reached out to snap the switch off.

"Just raw, crushing force," he said wonderingly. "A ferocious demand, with no regard for facts, no consideration of mental characteristics, no thought of consequence." He shook his head slowly.

"Never experienced anything just like that before."

"With the power he's using," Meinora remarked, "it's a wonder he doesn't upset every mind in his castle." He snapped the detector off.

"Including his own." Koran nodded and looked at the dial settings. "One thing's sure. This boy never had any instruction. He stepped back. 'Well, we know he has. What's the procedure?'"

Meinora was frowning thoughtfully. He stroked his injured cheek, then nodded, and studied the head. "We certainly let that guard officer in for something," he mused. "Have to pick him up and give him therapy, I think." He looked at Konar. "Oh, procedure?"

"Yes, sir. Do we have to treat him alone and proceed as we did with the last one? That worked with no trouble."

"No, I don't think I'd work out so well in this case. If I caught it right, this one's almost never by himself outside his apartment. Likes to impress his personality on people."

Meinora looked at the detector set, then around at the younger man beside him.

"You know, I got some interesting side thoughts just now. Maybe we can do two jobs in one this time. It'll take a little longer, but it might save time in the long run."

The communications operator came over. "Not another of those?" he asked with a grin.

Meinora nodded. "I'm just dreaming up a nice, dirty trick," he admitted. "Tried something like it once before, on a smaller scale. It worked." He stood up, stretching.

"Yes. Be a pretty big affair, too, I think. Why?"

"And the Duke will be there, of course, along with most of his court and a good share of his fighting men?"

"Yes, sir. They tell me he's always been there. Don't suppose he'll skip it this time."

"So it's perfect. We'll get this set of equipment up to public, with equipment in particular, and with apparent legitimacy. And in the process, we'll set up social strains that'll result in this area reorienting itself," Meinora muttered.

"Look, call Barskor. Tell him to pick us up with the flier. We'll go down to the hills south of Orieano. Tell you about it on the way."

The last of the river guards was carried out, head dangling limply from the arms of one of the bearers. Bel Mensal sat back in his chair, frowning. Abruptly, he turned on his steward.

"None of them knew a thing," he snarled. "None of them. There's something funny going on here."

The steward's face was drawn. Disagreed forces had assailed him and he had almost collapsed several times during the questioning. He tried to gather his hazy thoughts. Too many kept coming too fast.

"Yes, Excellency," he agreed. "Maybe it is witchcraft."

Bel Mensal's face darkened. "Nonsense," he growled, rising part way out of his chair. "Witchcraft be damned! There's some explanation to this, and I'm going to find out what it is."

"Yes, Excellency."

The Baron looked up, then stared contemptuously at his man.

"Yes, Excellency," he mimicked in a singsong voice. "Always 'Yes, Excellency.' Haven't you an idea of your own?"

"Yes, Excellency, I——"

"Inept fool! There's an explanation to this, I tell you. And peasant superstition has no part in it. You should have found it. But no! You came, dragging a whole detachment of guards in for me to question. Me, the Baron! I have to do all the work—all the thinking. Of course, that will demand little thought or spirit."

"And the others, Excellency?"

"Oh, bring them in, one at a time. One of them managed to make a complete fool of his officer, of course. But I'll find him."

Bel Mensal waved his hand in dismissal, then leaned back in his chair, watching as his steward directed a pair of men-at-arms. They carried the limp form from the room.
He went back to his chair and watched as the guards came in. In obedience to his gesture, they carried the one-time steward from the room. The door closed, and Bel Menstal was alone. Slowly, the stimulation of the encounter faded, and he shook his head. It had been pleasant for a few minutes, he thought, but he had solved nothing.

Could it be that searchers from his native land had at last found him? He frowned. No, they wouldn't use some devious method, even supposing they could find some way of corrupting his household. They would simply expropriate him and accuse him before the Duke. They'd storm his castle if necessary, to take him by force. This was something else. He would have to think. He put his elbows on the table, cupping his face in his hands.

The great market square at Orieano was crowded. Colorful tents hid most of the cobblestones, and the rest of the pavement was obscured from view by the droves of people. Merchants and their assistants hovered about, each endeavoring to outdo the rest in enticing the swarming crowd into his tent. Jugglers and mountebanks competed for attention, outdoing even themselves in their efforts to gain the ears, the eyes, and the coins of the mob of bargain hunters.

At one side of the square, the cart mant was drawing many, who listened to the noise of the beasts and the shouts of the vendors. Some paused to bargain. Others simply stood there, still looking for the things they had come to seek out. Here and there, a cutpurse slunk through the crowd, seeking his own type of bargain—an unwary victim.

The Duke of Dwerestol rode into the market, conscious of a buzz which rose to a loud hum. The bellowing of beasts, the cries of vendors, the scuffling of many feet, all blended into one great sound—the voice of the fair.

The Duke listened contentedly. Here, he thought, was activity. Here, his chamberlain would find the things he had been ordered to get that the comfort of the castle might be furthered. And here was a certainty of tolls and taxes, which would enrich the duchy.

He continued at the head of his reitinue, through the center of the square. Time enough to take close note of the market later. Now, he wished to get to the castle of Orieano, where he would get a freshening of air after his rip.

He looked up at the heights above the town. Pennants were flying from the stone battlements. And he could see the tiny figures of the guard. His presence in the town had certainly been noted. He rode to the other side of the square, and led his company up the steep, winding road to the castle's town gate.

The sentries grounded their pikes and stood rigidly as the ducal escort rode through the gate, the pennons on their lances flying with the breeze of their passage. The ducal party swept through the outer ward, through the inner wall, and came to a halt before the keep.

The Baron of Orieano waited before his keep. He came forward, bowing low before his liege, then stationed a stirrup as the Duke dismounted. He waved toward the dinning hall.

"Your Excellency will grace us with his presence at meal?"

The Duke gestured to a page, who took the charger's reins to guide the beast away.

"It would be pleasing to us," he said.

He nodded graciously and followed his vassal into the hall. He nodded in approval at the long tables, waited until the clanging of the welcoming salute subsided, and went to the elevated table set for his use and that of his Baron.

He sat down, looking over the company. A glint of gold caught his eye, and he looked curiously at two men who sat a little way down the table.

These two were elegantly turned out, their long cloaks thrown back to expose richly embroidered cloth. The Duke examined them closely. Obviously, here was one of the great westerners, with an almost equally noble bearing and richly dressed of both confirmed their station. Somehow, the Duke thought, these two presented a far more imposing appearance than his vassal, the Baron Bel Menstal, despite that Baron's overwhelming personality.

He thought of his hard fighting border protector. Of course, he had far to come, and the way through the mountains could be difficult. But it was a little strange he was not yet here.

The Duke remembered some of the resentful gazes he had noted during his passage through the fair. He must have words, he decided, with Bel Menstal. Possibly the man was a little too eager to collect his road and river taxes. Possibly this hard man of his was too hard, too grasping. Of course, he held a valuable bastion against the tribes of the Ajerical, but----

He shrugged away his thoughts and devoted his attention to the dishes before him.

As the Duke took up his food, the waiting company commenced reaching for dishes. Konar turned toward Meinora with a slight smile.

"Got'em well trained, haunter?"

"That he has. Another note for our cultural information."

"When do you want me to talk to him?"

"After he's finished his main courses and got a few cups of wine in him. Our boy'll be delayed for a while, you know. We've plenty of time to let Orieano fill the Duke in before Bel Menstal arrives."

Klion Meinora turned his attention to the tureen before him for a moment, then looked toward his companion again.

"Notice the girl sitting by the Baron?"

"Yes. I mean Orieano's daughter?"

"Precisely. Don't give her any cause for fear. Don't even make a sudden move in her presence."

"You mean—-

"I do. She could become Lady Death, if she got frightened."

Konar looked toward the elevated table. The girl looked harmless enough. She was slender, attractive, even delicate looking. But he remembered a horror-distorted face, a mind-shattering scream, and a blinding flash of light. He shuddered a little and turned his attention to his food.

Florel Bel Menstal strode into the hall, looking toward the table head. The Duke, he noted, was still at table, though he had finished his meal. Now, he was engaged in earnest conversation with Oriano.

This, Bel Menstal thought, must be checked. Haughtily ignoring the rest of the company, he paced to the head of the table, where he made perfunctory obeisance.

"Your Excellency," he greeted. He straightened. "I offer my apologies for my late appearance. My men had to clear a slide from the way." He turned toward Oriano.

"You would do well to instruct your serfs in the art of road building. Their work seems slack."

Bel Menstal hesitated. His men were outside the castle, of course. It was against etiquette to bring them inside, especially when the Duke was present. But there were plenty of them. Possibly he should fight his way out of here now. Once in his hilltop castle, he would be impregnable. And his raiding parties could keep the barony in supplies. Or possibly it would be better to—-

He forced his panic down. After all, what could these two do? There could be little evidence they could offer. Well over twenty years had passed. He had adopted the ways of the land. Now, he was one of the Duke's powerful arms. And what could they give to offset that?

Here was no cause for fear. He could bluff his way out of this accusation, discredit the searchers, and make his position permanently secure. Possibly it was even better this way. He looked scornfully at the two men who moved toward him.

They were dressed in the ornate court dress of the Western Empire, he saw. Unquestionably, these were genuine men of the west. But he was now of the east. And here, he had established himself, and would soon establish himself more firmly, while they were mere foreigners. When it came to it, the Duke would hardly dare he too critical of him. Confidently, he pushed his way past the nearer of the two westerners, to follow the Duke to the audience chamber.
unfamiliarity with your home county to misrepresent your station?"

Flor looked around the room. Possibly there was still time to—Or possibly he could still face these men down. Only one of them wore a coronet. He drew himself up arrogantly.

"These are cunning deceivers," he stated proudly. "When I left Konewar, my father himself—"

Meinora raised a hand threateningly. "Your father was never in Konewar, Herr," he said sternly. "Your father still tends his master's fields in the hills of Budorn."

Flor snatched his sword from its sheath. This was the unprotected one. He could be struck with the sword, and perhaps in the confusion, an escape would be possible.

"That is the last insult," he snarled. "I challenge you to combat, to test whether you can support your lies."

"Robes," was the reply, "do not fight with serfs. You should know that. The great ones, like him," Meinora pointed at Konar, who stood close to the Duke, "have no contact with such as you. But I am here. And when a serf becomes insolent, we have ways of punishing him."

Konar smiled a little, pointing a small object as Meinora slipped his own sword out. Flor lunged furiously, and Meinora stopped aside. The man had determination and fierce courage. But he had never bothered to really learn the use of his weapon. No need, of course. He had never been compelled to put up a defense. Not till now. The hand weapon held by Konar would destroy his invulnerability.

Meinora struck suddenly at Flor's hand with the flat of his blade, then engaged the man's sword with his own, and twisted. The weapon clattered to the floor and Flor stooped to recover it.

The team chief laughed shortly, bringing the flat of his blade down in a resounding smack and Flor straightened, involuntarily bringing a hand to his outraged rear. Again, the blade descended, bringing a spurt of dust from his clothing. Flor twisted, trying to escape, but his assailant followed, swinging blow after full armed blow with the flat of his sword. He worked with cool skill.

The final, punishing steel came from all directions, to strike him at will. Blows fell on his back, his legs, even his face, and he cringed away, trying desperately to escape the stinging pain. Under the smattering blows, he remembered previous whippings, administered by a strong-armed kitchen master, and he seemed to smell the stench of the scullery once more. Suddenly, he sank to his knees in surrender.

"Please, Master. No more, please." He raised his hands, palms together, and looked up pleadingly.

The Duke looked down in horrified disgust.

"And this, I accepted. This, I made a Baron of my realm. He transferred his gaze to Konar. Suddenly, he looked feeble and humbly suppliant.

Flor sniffled audibly.

"I know you have come a long way," the Duke said, "but I would ask of you a favor. I would deal with this miscreant. Your injury is old. It has been partially healed by time, and it does not involve honor so deeply as does my own." He shook his head.

"I have abandoned the dignity of my station, and the injury is fresh and must continue unless I act to repair it."

Konar looked graciously. "Your Excellency's request is just," he said. "We but came to reclaim the lost insignia of Budorn. He stepped forward, taking the circlet from Flor's head. Two guards seized the prisoner, and Konar tore the belt from the man's waist.

"This insignie must be remounted," he said. "The belt has been dis honored for too long." He broke the fastenings holding the body shield to the leather, and threw the heavy strap back at Flor.

"We are deeply indebted to you, Excellency," he added, turning to the Duke. "If it is your will, we shall remain only for the execution, then return to our own land."

The Duke sighed. "It is well." He nodded at the guards. "He ordered. "An execution will be held at daybreak."

"Very good, Konar. You handled that beautifully."

"Thanks, Chief. What's next?"

"Just keep the Duke busy with bright conversation. Buck up his spirits a bit. The old boy's had a nasty shock, and unfortunately, he's due for another one. Too bad, but it's for the best. I'll take it from here."

Diners looked up curiously as the two guards led Flor through the hall to the outer door. A few rose and followed as the three men went past the sentries at the portal, and came out into the sunbeam of the inner door. Across the cobbled stones was the narrow entrance to the dungeon.

"Flor looked around despairingly. His charger stood, waiting for the rider, who would never again—Or would he?

He remembered that he was still carrying the heavy belt that had been so contemptuously flung at him. When the strap had been thrown, he had flung a hand up to protect his already aching face. He had caught and held the belt, and no one had thought to take it from him.

He turned away from the door, and made his way over to the entrance to the dungeon. Across the cobbled stones was the narrow entrance to the dungeon.

"The Duke hangs nobody," he shouted, "unless he can catch and hold him." He turned, to make his way through the trees.

"In fact," he added to himself, "I may yet return to hang the Duke."

He went to the meadow where his escort was encamped. Flor snatched his sword from its sheath. This was the unprotected one. He could be struck with the sword, and perhaps in the confusion, an escape would be possible.

Heads were appearing atop the wall. At the edge of the moat, the charger struggled vainly, then dropped from sight. Flor waved defiantly at the growing crowd which stared from the high wall.

"The Duke hangs nobody," he shouted, "unless he can catch and hold him." He turned, to make his way through the trees.

"In fact," he added to himself, "I may yet return to hang the Duke."

He went to the meadow where his escort was encamped.

"We have been betrayed," he shouted. "The Duke plots with the merchants to destroy Bel Menstal and hang his men. Break camp! We must gather the forces of the barony."

Baron Bel Orieano looked worried.

"The Duke has sent couriers," he said, "to gather the fighting men of the duchy. But it will be a long, hard struggle. The serf has gained the hills of Menstal. He has raised his men, and has dared to attack. Some say he has enlisted those very hill tribes, from whose depredations he swore to defend the duchy, and even has them serving under his banner."

Baron Orieano leaned back in his chair. He had heard some of these arguments before, but had ignored them, thinking that they were mere special pleading from interested officers. Many of them have been imprisoned, and held for ruinous ransom. Others have been tortured and killed. Under the serf, they would suffer additional taxes, until they were driven from the land, or themselves reduced to serfdom and even slavery."

Finally, he rose to his feet. "Come," he said, "we will seek audience with the Duke and put this matter before him."
Larry Thomas bought a cuckoo clock for his wife—without knowing the price he would have to pay.

That night at the dinner table he brought it out and set it down beside her plate. Doris stared at it, her hand to her mouth. "My God, what is it?" She looked up at him, bright-eyed.

"Well, open it."

Doris tore the ribbon and paper from the square package with her sharp nails, her bosom rising and falling. Larry stood watching her as she lifted the lid. He lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall.

"A cuckoo clock!" Doris cried. "A real old cuckoo clock like my mother had." She turned the clock over and over. "Just like my mother had, when Peter was still alive." Her eyes sparkled with tears.

"It's made in Germany," Larry said. After a moment he added, "Carl got it for me wholesale. He knows some guy in the clock business. Otherwise I wouldn't have—" He stopped.

Doris made a funny little sound.

"I mean, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to afford it." He scowled. "What's the matter with you? You've got your clock, haven't you? Isn't that what you want?"

Doris sat holding onto the clock, her fingers pressed against the brown wood.

"Well," Larry said, "what's the matter?"

He watched in amazement as she leaped up and ran from the room, still clutching the clock. He shook his head. "Never satisfied. They're all that way. Never get enough."

He sat down at the table and finished his meal.

The cuckoo clock was not very large. It was hand-made, however, and there were countless frets on it, little indentionations and ornaments scored in the soft wood. Doris sat on the bed drying her eyes and winding the clock. She set the hands by her wristwatch. Presently she carefully moved the hands to two minutes of ten. She carried the clock over to the dresser and propped it up.

Then she sat waiting, her hands twisted together in her lap—waiting for the cuckoo to come out, for the hour to strike.

But she was glad of the little clock sitting there by itself, with its funny grilled edges and the door. Inside the door was the cuckoo, waiting to come out. Was he fightting? The people who come from here will be something to deal with. But they'll knock their own rough edges off. No, they won't be savages."

THE END.

Contents

BEYOND THE DOOR

By Philip K. Dick

Larry Thomas bought a cuckoo clock for his wife—without knowing the price he would have to pay.
Larry laughed. He put the clock back on the wall and gingerly removed his thumb. When Doris wasn't looking he examined his thumb.

There was still a trace of the nick cut out of the soft part of it. Who—or what—had pecked at him?

One Saturday morning, when Larry was down at the office working over some important special accounts, Bob Chambers came to the front porch and rang the bell.

Doris was taking a quick shower. She dried herself and slipped into her robe. When she opened the door Bob stepped inside, grinning.

"Hi," he said, looking around.

"It's all right. Larry's at the office."

"Fine." Bob gazed at her slim legs below the hem of the robe. "How nice you look today."

She laughed. "Be careful! Maybe I shouldn't let you in after all."

They looked at one another, half amused half frightened. Presently Bob said, "If you want, I'll—"

"No, for God's sake." She caught hold of his sleeve. "Just get out of the doorway so I can close it. Mrs. Peters across the street, you know."

She closed the door. "And I want to show you something," she said. "You haven't seen it."

He was interested. "An antique? Or what?"

She took his arm, leading him toward the dining-room. "You'll love it, Bobby." She stopped, wide-eyed. "I hope you will. You must; you must love it. It means so much to me—it means so much."

"He?" Bob frowned. "Who is he?"

Doris laughed. "You're jealous! Come on." A moment later they stood before the clock, looking up at it. "He'll come out in a few minutes. Wait until you see him. I know you two will get along just fine."

"What does Larry think of him?"

"They don't like each other. Sometimes when Larry's here he won't come out. Larry gets mad if he doesn't come out on time. He says—"

"Says what?"

Doris looked down. "He always says he's been robbed, even if he did get it wholesale." She brightened. "But I know he won't come out because he doesn't like Larry. When I'm here alone he comes right out for me, every fifteen minutes, even though he really only has to come out on the hour."

She gazed up at the clock. "He comes out for me because he wants to. We talk; I tell him things. Of course, I'd like to have him upstairs in my room, but it wouldn't be right."

There was the sound of footsteps on the front porch. They looked at each other, horrified.

Larry pushed the front door open, grinning. He set his briefcase down and took off his hat. Then he saw Bob for the first time.

"Chambers. I'll be damned." His eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here?" He came into the dining-room. Doris drew her robe about her helplessly, backing away.

"I—" Bob began. "That is, we—" He broke off, glancing at Doris. Suddenly the clock began to whir. The cuckoo came rushing out, bursting into sound. Larry moved toward him.

"Shut that din off," he said. He raised his fist toward the clock. The cuckoo snapped into silence and retreated. The door closed. "That's better." Larry studied Doris and Bob, standing mutely together.

"I came over to look at the clock," Bob said. "Doris told me that it's a rare antique and that—"

"Nuts. I bought it myself." Larry walked up to him. "Get out of here."

He paused, rubbing his chin. "No. Leave the clock here. It's mine; I bought it and paid for it."

In the weeks that followed after Doris left, Larry and the cuckoo clock got along even worse than before. For one thing, the cuckoo stayed inside most of the time, sometimes even for whole days, when he should have been busiest. And if he did come out at all he usually spoke only once or twice, never the correct number of times. And there was a sullen, uncooperative note in his voice, a jarring sound that made Larry uneasy and a little angry.

But he kept the clock wound, because the house was very still and quiet and it got on his nerves not to hear someone running around, talking and dropping things. And even the whirring of a clock sounded to him.

But he didn't like the cuckoo at all. And sometimes he spoke to him.

"Listen," he said late one night to the closed little door. "I know you can hear me. I ought to give you back to the Germans—back to the Black Forest."

He paced back and forth. "I wonder what they're doing now, the two of them. That young punk with his books and his antiques. A man shouldn't be interested in antiques; that's for women."

He looked at the face of the clock. It was almost eleven, just a few seconds before the hour. "All right. I'll wait until eleven. Then I want to hear what you have to say. You've been pretty quiet the last few weeks since she left."

He grinned wryly. "Maybe you don't like it here since she's gone."

He walked up to him. "You know what I have here? You know what I'm going to do with it? I'm going to start on you—first."

He smiled. "Birds of a feather, that's what you are—the three of you."

"Of course," the doctor said.

"Is it very easy to break your neck, falling from so low a chair? It wasn't very far to fall. I wonder if it might not have been an accident. Is there any chance it might have been—"

"I don't mean suicide," Bob murmured under his breath, looking up at the clock on the wall. "I meant something else."

He paused, rubbing his chin. "No. Leave the clock here. It's mine; I bought it and paid for it."

He went unhappily into the kitchen and opened the great gleaming refrigerator. As he poured himself a drink he thought about the clock.

There was no doubt about it—the cuckoo should come out, Doris or no Doris. He had always liked her, from the very start. They had got along well, the two of them. Probably he means so much."

He set his jaw. "Isn't that right?"

The clock said nothing. Larry walked up in front of it. "Isn't that right?" he demanded. "Don't you have anything to say?"

He looked at the face of the clock. It was almost eleven, just a few seconds before the hour. "All right. I'll wait until eleven. Then I want to hear what you have to say. You've been pretty quiet the last few weeks since she left."

He grinned wryly. "Maybe you don't like it here since she's gone."

He scowled. "Well, I paid for you, and you're coming out whether you like it or not. You hear me?"

Eleven o'clock came. Far off, at the end of the town, the great tower clock tooted sleepily to itself. But the little door remained shut. Nothing moved. The minute hand passed on and the cuckoo did not stir. He was someplace inside the clock, beyond the door, silent and remote.

"All right, if that's the way you feel," Larry murmured, his lips twining. "But it isn't fair. It's your job to come out. We all have to do things we don't like."

He went unhappily into the kitchen and opened the great gleaming refrigerator. As he poured himself a drink he thought about the clock.

There was no doubt about it—the cuckoo should come out, Doris or no Doris. He had always liked her, from the very start. They had got along well, the two of them. Probably he liked Bob too—probably he had seen enough of Bob to get to know him. They would be quite happy together, Bob and Doris and the cuckoo.
"All right, the human is rather big for its age," surrendered Wiln. 'Tou may ride it if you promise not to run it I don't want you breaking the wind of any of my prize stock."
So Blik strapped the bridle-helmet with the handgrips on Alan's head and threw the saddle-chair on Alan's shoulders.
Wiln saddled up Robb, a husky man he often rode on long trips, and they were off to the city at an easy trot
The Star Tower was visible before they reached Falldyn. Alan could see its spire above the tops of the ttornot trees as soon as they emerged from the Blue Forest Blik saw it at
the same time. Holding onto the bridle-helmet with erne four-fingered hand, Blik poked Alan and pointed.
"Look, Alan, the Star Tower!" cried Blik. "They say humans once lived in the Star Tower."
"Blik, when will you grow up and stop talking to the humans?" chided his father. "I'm going to punish you severely one of these days."
Alan did not answer Blik, for it was forbidden for humans to talk in the Hussir language except in reply to direct questions. But he kept his eager eyes on the Star Tower and
watched it loom taller and taller ahead of them, striking into the sky far above the buildings of the city. He quickened his pace, so that he began to pull ahead of Robb, and Robb
had to caution him.
Between the Blue Forest and Falklyn, they were still in wild country, where the land was eroded and there were no farms and fields. Little clumps of ttornot trees huddled here
and there among the gullies and low hills, thickening back toward the Blue Forest behind them, thinning toward the northwest plain, beyond which lay the distant mountains.
They rounded a curve in the dusty road, and Blik whistled in excitement from Alan's shoulders. A figure stood on a little promontory overhanging the road ahead of them.
At first Alan thought it was a tall, slender Hussir, for a short jacket partly concealed its nakedness. Then he saw it was a young human girl. No Hussir ever boasted that mop of
tawny hair, that tailless posterior curve.
"A Wild Human!" growled Wiln in astonishment Alan shivered. It was rumored the Wild Humans killed Hussirs and ate other humans.
The girl was looking away toward Fafflyn. Wfln unslung his short bow and loosed an arrow at her.
The bolt exploded the dust near her feet With a toss of bright hair, she turned her head and saw them. Thai she was gone like a deer.
When they came up to where she had stood, there was a brightness in the bushes beside the road. It was a pair of the colorful trousers such as Hussirs wore, only trimmer,
tangled inextricably in a thorny bush. Evidently the girl had been caught as she climbed up from the road, and had had to crawl out of them.
"They're getting too bold," said Wfln angrily. 'This close to civilization, in broad daylight!"
Alan was astonished when they entered Falldyn. The streets and buildings were of stone. There was little stone on the other side of the Blue Forest, and Wiln Castle was built
of polished wooden blocks. The smooth stone of Falklyn's streets was hot under the double sun. It burned Alan's feet, so that he hobbled a little and shook Bilk up. Blik clouted
him on the side of the head for it
There were so many strange new things to see in the city that they made Alan dizzy. Some of the buildings were as much as three stories high, and the windows of a few of the
biggest were covered, not with wooden shutters, but with a bright, transparent stuff that Wiln told Blik was called "glaz." Robb told Alan in the human language, which the Hussirs
did not understand, that it was rumored humans themselves had invented this giaz and given it to (heir masters. Alan wondered how a human could invent anything, penned in
open fields.
But it appeared that humans in the city lived closer to their masters. Several times Alan saw them coming out of houses, and a few that he saw were not entirely naked, but
wore bright bits of doth at various places on their bodies. Wiln expressed strong disapproval of this practice to Blik.
"Start putting clothing on these humans and they might get the idea they're Hussirs," he said. "If you ask me, that's why city people have more trouble controlling their humans
than we do. Spoil the human and you make him savage, I say."
They had several places to go in Falldyn, and for a while Alan feared they would not see the Star Tower at close range. But Blik had never seen it before, and he begged and
whistled until Wiln agreed to ride a few streets out of the way to look at it.
Alan forgot all the other wonders of Falldyn as the great monument towered bigger and bigger, dwarfing the buildings around it, dwarfing the whole city of Falldyn. There was
a legend that humans had not only lived in the Star Tower once, but that they had built it and Falldyn had grown up around it when the humans abandoned it. Alan had heard this
whispered, but he had been warned not to repeat it, for some Hussirs understood human language and repeating such tales was a good way to get whipped.
The Star Tower was in the center of a big circular park, and the houses around the park looked like dollhouses beneath it. It stretched up into the sky like a pointing finger, its
strange dark walls reflecting the dual sunlight dully. Even the flying buttresses at its base carved up above the big trees in the park around it
There was a railing round the park, and quite a few humans were chained or standing loose about it while their riders were looking at the Star Tower, for humans were not
allowed inside the park. Blik was all for dismounting and looking at the inside of the tower, but Wiln would not hear of it.
"There'll be plenty of time for that when you're older and can understand some of the things you see," said Wiln.
They moved slowly around the street, outside the rail In the park, the Hussirs moved in groups, some of them going up or coming down the long ramp that led into the Star
Tower. The Hussirs were only about half the size of humans, with big heads and large pointed ears sticking straight out on each side, with thin legs and thick tails that helped to
balance them. They wore loose jackets and baggy colored trousers.
As they passed one group of humans standing outside the rafl, Alan heard a familiar bit of verse, sung in an undertone:
"Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,
I can reach you, though you're far.
Shut my mouth and find my head,
Find a worm"
Wiln swung Robb around quickly, and laid his keen whip viciously across the singer's shoulders. Slash, slash, and red welts sprang out on the man's back. With a muffled
shriek, the man ducked his head and threw up his arms to protect his face.
"Where is your master, human?" demanded Wiln savagely, the whip trembling in his four-fingered hand.
"My master lives in Northwesttown, your greatness," whimpered the human. "I belong to the merchant Senk."
"Where is Northwesttown?"
"It is a section of FaDdyn, sir."
"And you are here at the Star Tower without your master?"
"Yes, sir. I am on free time."
Wiln gave him another lash with the whip.
"You should know humans are not allowed to run loose near the Star Tower," Wfln snapped. "Now go back to your master and tell him to whip you."
The human ran off. Wiln and Blik turned their mounts homeward. When they were beyond the streets and houses of the town and the dust of the roads provided welcome relief
to the burning feet of the humans, Blik asked:
"What did you think of the Star Tower, Alan?"
"Why has it no windows?" Alan asked, voicing the thought uppermost in his mind.
It was not, strictly speaking, an answer to Bilk's question, and Alan risked punishment by speaking thus in Hussk. But Wiln had recovered his good humor, with the prospect of
getting home in time for supper.
"The windows are in the very top, little human," said Wfln indulgently. "You couldn't see them, because they're inside."
Alan puzzled over this all the way to Wiln Castle. How could windows be inside and none outside? If windows were windows, didn't they always go through both sides of a
wall?
When the two suns had set and Alan was bedded down with the other children in a corner of the meadow, the exciting events of the day repeated themselves in his mind like a
series of colored pictures. He would have liked to question Robb, but the grown men and older boys were kept in a field well separated from the women and children.
A little distance away the women were singing their babies to sleep with the traditional songs of the humans. Their voices drifted to him on the faint breeze, with the perfume
of the fragrant grasses.
"Rock-a-bye, baby, in mother's arm, Nothing's neaaby to do baby harm. Sleep and sweet dreams, till both suns arise, Then will be time to open your eyes"
That was a real baby song, the first he ever remembered. They sang others, and one was the song Wfln had interrupted at the Star Tower.
"Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,
I can reach you, though you're jar.
Shut my mouth and find my head,
Find a worm thafs striped with red,
Feed it to the turtle shell,
Then go to sleep, for all is well"
Half asleep, Alan listened. That song was one of the children's favorites. They called it "The Star Tower Song," though he had never been able to find out why.
It must be a riddle, he thought drowsily. "Shut my mouth and find my head..." Shouldn't it be the other way around "Find my head (first) and shut my mouth..."? Why wasn't it?
And those other lines. Alan knew worms, for he had seen many of the creepy, crawly creatures, long things in many bright colors. But what was a turtle?
The refrain of another song reached his ears, and it seemed to the sleepy boy that they were singing it to him.
"Alan saw a little zird,


Its wings were all aglow.
He followed it away one night.

It filled his heart with woe."

Only that the last line the children themselves sang. Optimistically, they always ended that song. "... To where he Weed to go"

Maybe he was asleep and dreamed it, or was, he was lying there, and a zird flew over the high fence and lit in the grass near him. Its luminous scales pulsed in the darkness, faintly lighting the faces of the children huddled asleip around him. It opened its beak and spoke to him in a raucous voice.

"Come with me to freedom, human," said the zird. "Come with me to freedom, human."

That was all it could say, and it repeated the invitation at least half a dozen times, until it grunted on Alan's ears. But Alan knew that, despite the way the children sang the song, it brought only sorrow to a human to heed the call of a zird.

"Go away, zird," he said crossly, and the zird flew over the high fence and faded into the darkness.

Sighing, Alan went back to sleep to dream of the Star Tower.

Blik died three years later. The young Hussir's death brough sorrow to Alan's heart, for Blik had been kind to him and their relationship was the close one of well-loved pet and master. The deprivation always would have been more difficult for him had it not been so long delayed, but he found a place in the scheme of things somewhat high for a newcomer because he was older than most of them and big for his age. Scratched and battered, he gained the necessary initial respect from his new associates by troancing several boys his own size.

That night, lonely and unhappy, Alan heard the keening of the Hussirs rise from Wiln Castle. The night songs of the men, deeper and lustier than those of the women and children, faded and stopped as the sound of mourning drifted to them on the wind. Alan knew it meant that Blik's long illness was over, that his young master was dead.

Alan twisted and turned momentarily, but his common sense saved him. Had he fallen to the ground and rolled, or tried to rub Snuk off against a tornot tree, it would have meant death for him. There was no appeal from his new master's cruelty.

A third time Snuk applied the spurs and Alan spurted down the tree-lined lane away from the castle at a dead run. Snuk gave him his head and raked his sides brutally. It was only when he slowed to a walk, panting and perspiring, that Snuk pulled on the reins and turned him back toward the castle. Then the Hussir forced him to trot back.

Win was waiting at the corral when they returned.
"Aren't you treating it a little rough, Snuk?" asked the older Hussir, looking the exhausted Alan up and down critically. Blood streamed from Alan's gashed sides.

"Just teaching it right at the outset who is master," replied Snuk casually. With an unnecessarily sharp rap on the head, he sent Alan to his knees and dismounted. "I think this one will make a valuable addition to my stable of ridables, but I don't intend to pamper it like Blik."

Win flicked his ears.
"Well, you've proved you know how to handle humans by now, and you'll be master of them all in a few years," he said mildly. "Just take your father's advice, and don't break this one's wind."

The next few months were misery to Alan. He had the physical qualities Snuk liked in a mount, and Snuk rode him more frequently than any of his other saddle men. Snuk liked to ride fast, and he ran Alan unmercifully. They would return at the end of a hot afternoon, Alan bathed in sweat and so tired his limbs trembled uncontrollably.

Besides, Snuk was an uncompromising master with more than a touch of cruelty in his make-up. He would whip Alan savagely for minor inattention, for failure to respond promptly to his word, for speaking all at once in his presence. Alan's back was soon covered with spur scars, and one eye often ached so badly it would not open. It turned his interest to more mature experimentation. At that, he realized that only the aloofness he had developed as a result of being Blik's pet had prevented his being taken to the

He found a secluded corner of the field and cried himself to sleep under the stars. He had loved Blik.

That was all it could say, and it repeated the invitation at least half a dozen times, until it grated on Alan's ears. But Alan knew that, despite the way the children sang the song, it brought only sorrow to a human to heed the call of a zird.

"Come with me to freedom, human," said the zird. "Come with me to freedom, human."

As he had before, he wondered. A zird was only a scalywinged little night creature. How could it speak human words? Where did zirds come from, and where did they go in

After Blik's death, Alan thought he might be put with the laboring men, to pull the plows and work the crops. He knew he did not have the trying for work in and around the

Only that wasn't the last line the children themselves sang. Optimistically, they always ended that song. "... To where he Weed to go"

From behind him came the voices of the men, nearer and louder:
"Star light, star bright, Star that sheds a golden light, I wish I may, I wish I might, Reach you, star that shines at night"

That night Alan nursed his freshest wounds beside the fence closest to the women's and children's field and gave himself up to nostalgia. He longed for the happy days of his

That night Alan nursed his freshest wounds beside the fence closest to the women's and children's field and gave himself up to nostalgia. He longed for the happy days of his childhood and Blik's kind mastery.

Across the intervening fields, faintly, he heard the soft voices of the women. He could not make out the words, but he remembered them from the tune:

"Come with me to freedom, human," said the zird. "Come with me to freedom, human."

As he had before, he wondered. A zird was only a scalywinged little night creature. How could it speak human words? Where did zirds come from, and where did they go in the daytime? For the first time in his life, he asked the zird a question.

What and where is freedom, zird?" asked Alan.

"Come with me to freedom, human," repeated the zird. It flapped its wings, rising a few inches above the fence, and settled back on its perch.

"Is that all you can say, zird?" asked Alan irritably. "How can I go with you when I can't fly?"

"Come with me to freedom, human," said the zird. A great change surged in Alan's heart, sparked by the drayry prospect of having to endure Snuk's sadism again on the morrow. He looked at the fence.

Alan had never paid much attention to a fence before. Humans did not try to get out of the fenced enclosures, because the story parents told to children who tried it was that
strayed humans were always recaptured and butchered for meat
It was the strangest coincidence. It reminded him of that night long ago, the night after he had gone into Falklyn with Blik and first seen the Star Tower. Even as the words of
the song died away in the night air, he saw the glow of the zird approaching. It lit on top of the fence and squawked down at him.
The links of the fence were close together, but he could get his fingers and toes through them. Tentatively, he tried it. A mounting excitement taking possession of him, he
climbed.
It was ridiculously easy. He was in the next field There were other fences, of course, but they could be climbed He could go into the field with the women his heart beat faster
at the thought of the blonde girl or he could even climb his way to the open road to Falklyn.
It was the road he chose, after all. The zird flew ahead of him across each field, lighting to wait for him to climb each fence. He crept along the fence past the crooning women
with a muffled sigh, through the field of ripening akko grain, through the waist-high sento plants. At last he climbed the last fence of alL
He was off the Wiln estate. The dust of the road to Falklyn was beneath his feet
What now? If he went into Falfclyn, he would be captured and returned to Wiln Castle. If he went the other way the same thing would happen. Stray humans were spotted
easily. Should he turn back now? It would be easy to climb his way back to the men's field and there would be innumerable nights ahead of him when the women's field would be
easily accessible to him.
But there was Snuk to consider.
For the first time since he had climbed out of the men's field, the zird spoke.
"Come with me to freedom, human," it said
It flew down the road, away from Falklyn, and lit in the dust, as though waiting. After a moment's hesitation, Alan followed.
The lights of Wiln Castle loomed up to his left, up the lane of ttornot trees. They fell behind and disappeared over a hill. The zird flew, matching its pace to his slow trot
Alan's resolution began to weaken.
Then a figure loomed up beside him in the gloom, a human hand was laid on his arm and a female voice said:
"I thought we'd never get another from Wiln Castle. Step it up a little, fellow. We've a long way to travel before dawn."
They traveled at a fast trot all that night, the zird leading the way like a giant firefly. By the time dawn grayed the eastern sky,.they were in the mountains west of Falklyn, and
climbing.
When Alan was first able to make out details of his nocturnal guide, he thought for a minute she was a huge Hussir. She wore the Hussir loose jacket, open at the front, and the
baggy trousers. But there was no tail, and there were no pointed ears. She was a girl, his own age.
She was the first human Alan had ever seen fully clothed Alan thought she looked rather ridiculous and, at the same time, he was slightly shocked, as by sacrilege.
They entered a high valley through a narrow pass, and slowed to a walk. For the first time since they left the vicinity of Wiln Castle, they were able to talk in other than short,
disconnected phrases.
"Who are you, and where are you taking me?" asked Alan. In the cold light of dawn he was beginning to doubt his impetuousness in fleeing the castle.
"My name is Mara," said the girl. "You've heard of the Wild Humans? I'm one of them, and we live in these mountains,"
The hair prickled on the back of Alan's neck. He stopped in his tracks, and half turned to flee. Mara caught his arm.
"Why do all you slaves believe those fairy tales about cannibalism?" she asked scornfully. The word cannibalism was unfamiliar to Alan. "We aren't going to eat you, boy,
we're going to make you free. What's your name?"
"Alan," he answered in a shaky voice, allowing himself to be led onward. "What is this freedom the zird was talking about?"
"You'll find out," she promised. "But the zird doesn't know. Zards are just flying animals. We train them to say that one sentence and lead slaves to us,"
"Why don't you just come in the fields yourselves?" he asked curiously, his fear dissipating. "You could climb the fences easily."
"That's been tried. The silly slaves just raise a clamor when they recognize a stranger. The Hussirs have caught several of us that way."
The two suns rose, first the blue one, the white one only a few minutes later. The mountains around them awoke with light.
In the dawn, he had thought Mara was dark, but her hair was tawny gold in the pearly morning. Her eyes were deep brown, like the fruit of the ttornot tree.
They stopped by a spring that gushed from between huge rocks, and Mara took the opportunity to appraise his slender, well-knit frame.
"You'll do," she said. "I wish afl of them we get were as healthy."
In three weeks, Alan could not have been distinguished from the other Wild Humans outwardly. He was getting used to wearing clothing and, somewhat awkwardly, carried
the bow and arrows with which he was armed. He and Mara were ranging several miles from the caves in which the Wild Humans lived
They were hunting animals for food, and Alan licked his lips in anticipation. He liked cooked meat. The Hussirs fed their human herds bean meal and scraps from the kitchens.
The only meat he had ever eaten was raw meat from small animals he had been swift enough to catch in the fields.
They came up on a ridge and Mara, ahead of him, stopped. He came up beside her.
Not far below them, a Hussir moved, afoot, carrying a short, heavy bow and a quiver of arrows. The Hussir looked from side to side, as if hunting, but did not catch sight of
them.
A quiver of fear ran through Alan. In that instant, he was a disobedient member of the herd, and death awaited him for his escape from the fields.
There was a sharp twang beside him, and the Hussir stumbled and fell, transfixed through the chest with an arrow. Mara calmly lowered her bow, and smiled at the fright in his
eyes.
"There's one that won't find Haafin," she said. "Haafin" was what the Wild Humans called their community.
"The there are Hussirs in the mountains?" he quavered.
"A few. Hunters. If we get them before they run across the valley, we're all right Some have seen us and gotten away, though. Haafin has been moved a dozen times in the last
century, and we've always lost a lot of people fighting our way out Those little devils attack in force."
"But what's the good of all this, then?" he asked hopelessly. "There aren't more than four or five hundred humans in Haafin. What good is hiding, and running somewhere else
when the Hussirs find you, when sooner or later there'll come a time when they'll wipe you out?"
Mara sat down on a rock,
"You learn fast," she remarked. "YouTI probably be surprised to learn that this community has managed to hang on in these mountains for more than a thousand years, but
you've still put your finger right on the problem that has faced us for generations."
She hesitated and traced a pattern thoughtfully in the dust with a moccasined foot.
"It's a little early for you to be told, but you might as well start keeping your ears open," she said. "When you've been here a year, you'll be accepted as a member of the
community. The way that's done is for you to have an interview with The Refugee, the leader of our people, and he always asks newcomers for their ideas on the solution of that
very problem."
"But what will I listen for?" asked Alan anxiously.
"There are two different major ideas on how to solve the problem, and FH let you hear them from the people who believe in them," she said. "Just remember what the problem
is: to save ourselves from death and the hundreds of thousands of other humans in the world from slavery, we have to find a way to force the Hussirs to accept humans as equals,
not as animals!" Many things about Alan's new life in Haafin were not too different from the existence he had known. He had to do his share of work in the little fields that clung to
the edges of the small river in the middle of the valley. He had to help hunt animals for meat, he had to help make tools such as the Hussirs used. He had to fight with his fists, on
occasion, to protect his
But this thing the Wild Humans called "freedom" was a strange element that touched everything they were and did. The word meant basically, Alan found, that the Wild
Humans did not belong to the Hussirs, but were their own masters. When orders were given, they usually had to be obeyed, but they came from humans, not Hussirs.
There were other differences. There were no formal family relationships, for there were no social traditions behind people who for generations had been nothing more than
domestic animals. But the pressure and deprivations of rigidly enforced mating seasons were missing, and some of the older couples were mated permanently.
"Freedom," Alan decided, meant a dignity which made a human the equal of a Hussir.
The anniversary of that night when Alan followed the zird came, and Mara led him early in the morning to the extreme end of the valley. She left him at the mouth of a small
cave, from which presently emerged the man of whom Alan had heard much but whom he saw now for the first time.
The Refugee's hair and beard were gray, and his face was lined with years.
"You are Alan, who came to us from Wfln Castle," said the old man.
"That is true, your greatness," replied Alan respectfully.
"Don't call me 'your greatness.' That's slave talk. I am Roand, The Refugee."
"Yes, sir."
"When you leave me today, you will be a member of the community of Haafin, only free human community in the world," said Roand. "You will have a member's rights. No
man may take a woman from you without her consent. No one may take from you the food you hunt or grow without your consent. If you are first in an empty cave, no one may
move into it with you unless you give permission. That is freedom.
"But, as you were no doubt told long ago, you must offer your best idea on how to make all humans free."


Hussir hopped hastily across the street, sometimes making it, sometimes falling from a human arrow. Balconies, and arrows began to sail in among the humans to match their own. The motley army began to break up as its soldiers sought cover. Its progress was slowed, and there were few Hussirs abroad. The humans were jubilant as those who escaped their arrows fled, whistling in fright.

Alan nodded. Balconies, and arrows began to sail in among the humans to match their own. The motley army began to break up as its soldiers sought cover. Its progress was slowed, and there were few Hussirs abroad. The humans were jubilant as those who escaped their arrows fled, whistling in fright.

Alan nodded. But I like the other way better,” Alan said. “There must be a reason why they won’t let humans enter the Star Tower.”

“Why can’t it be done that way?”

“Sir, when I was a small child, I played a game called Two Herds,” said Alan slowly. “The sides would be divided evenly, each with a tree for a haven. When two of opposite sides met in the field, the one last from his haven captured the other and took him back to join his side.”

Roand shook his head. “There are rules, but no man tells another what to do,” he said. “We are free here.”

Roand nodded. “You have indeed brought us a new idea, my boy, but you and I will have to surrender our own viewpoint by it, I’m afraid. There are a few more people in our government who think we should attack the Hussirs with weapons than believe in the old tradition.”

“Sir,” interrupted Roand, “I’m going to give you some help. Come into the cave.”

Roand nodded. “But I like the other way better,” Alan said. “There must be a reason why they won’t let humans enter the Star Tower.”

They were about a third of the way to the center of Falklyn when the bells began ringing, first near at hand and then all over the city. Hussirs popped out of doors and onto the street. It was suppertime in Falklyn, and few Hussirs were abroad. The humans were jubilant as those who escaped their arrows fled, whistling in fright.

Roand leaned out of the doorway. “You are a mystic, as I am, young Alan,” he said. “But the tradition says that for a human to enter the Star Tower is not enough. Let me tell you of the tradition.”

Alan nodded. “There must be a reason why they won’t let humans enter the Star Tower.”

Roand looked at him with sudden hope. “What do you mean?”

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Alan shook his head. "That may just mean well have more trouble getting out of the city," he said. "The Hussirs outnumber us twenty to one, and you're in need of us than we're killing of them."

The door beside them opened and a Hussir leaped all the way out before seeing them. Alan dispatched him with a blow from his spear. Mara at his heels, he ran forward to the next doorway. Shouts of humans and whistles and cries of joy. The fighting humans were perhaps halfway to the Star Tower when from ahead of them came the sound of shouting and chanting. From the dimness it seemed that a solid river of white was pouring toward them, filling the street from wall to wall.

A Wild Human across the street from Alan and Mara shouted in triumph.

"They're humans! The slaves are coming to help us!"

A ragged shout went up from the embattled Wild Humans. But as it died down, they were able to distinguish the words of the chanting and the shouting from that of massed humanity.

"KILL the Wild Humans! Kill the Wild Humans! Kill the Wild Humans!"

Remembering his own childhood fear of Wild Humans, Alan suddenly understood. With a confidence fully justified, the Hussirs had turned the humans' own people against them.

The invaders looked at each other in alarm, and drew closer together beneath the protection of overhanging balconies. Hussirs arrows whistled near them unheeded. They could not kill their enslaved brothers, and there was no chance of breaking through that oncoming avalanche of humanity. First by ones and twos, and then in groups, they turned to retreat from the city. The streets were crowded. Up the street from the direction in which they had come moved orderly ranks of armed Hussirs. Some of the Wild Humans, among them Alan and Mara, ran for the nearest cross streets. Along them, too, approached companies of Hussirs.

The Wild Humans were trapped in the middle of Falldyn. Terrified, the men and women of Haafin converged and swirled in a helpless knot in the center of the street Hussirs arrows from nearby windows picked them off one by one. The advancing Hussirs the street were almost within bowshot, and the yelling, unarmed slave humans were even closer.

"Your clothes!" shouted Alan, on an inspiration "Throw away your clothes and weapons! Try to get back to the mountains!"

In almost a single swift shrug, he divested himself of the open jacket and baggy trousers and threw his bow, arrows and spear from him. Only the Silk still fluttered from his neck.

As Mara stood open-mouthed beside him, he jerked at her jacket impatiently. Suddenly getting his idea, she stripped quickly. The other Wild Humans began to follow suit.

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In almost a single swift shrug, he divested himself of the open jacket and baggy trousers and threw his bow, arrows and spear from him. Only the Silk still fluttered from his neck.

"We took the wrong turn when we left the alley," said Alan miserably. "Look straight ahead!"

But there was something wrong. The cross street just ahead curved too much, and there was the glimmer of lights some distance beyond it.

"We must have reached the outskirts," she said, waving her hand at the open space ahead of them. They had not been walking long when Mara stopped. Alan came up beside her.

"We'll have to be careful," he said. "They may have guards at the edge of the city. We outtalked that Hussir, but you'd better go ahead of me till we get to the outskirts. It'll look less suspicious if we're not together."

At the cross street, they turned right Mara moved ahead about thirty feet, and he followed. He watched her slim white figure swaying under the flickering gas lights of FalMyn and suddenly he laughed quietly. The memory of the blonde girl at Wiln Castle had brought him, and the thought that he had never kissed her.

The streets were nearly empty. Once or twice a human crossed ahead of them at a trot, and several times Hussirs passed them. For a while Alan heard shouting and whistling not far away, then these sounds faded.

They had not been walking long when Mara stopped. Alan came up beside her.

"We must have reached the outskirts," she said, waving her hand at the open space ahead of them. They turned to the tremendous pressure and flew inward. Somehow, only the two of them lost their balance and sprawled on the carpeted floor inside.

A Hussir appeared from an inside door, a barbed spear upraised. "Mercy, your greatness!" cried Alan in the Hussir tongue, groveling. The Hussir lowered the spear.

"Who is your master, human?" he demanded.

"I'm afraid so," he said ominously. "Yes, your greatness, " whispered Alan, and prayed for no more coincidences. "I belong to the merchant, Senk."

"My master lives in Northwesttown, your greatness." The spear point dropped to the floor again.

"I felt sure you were a town human," said the Hussir, his eyes on the scarf around Alan's neck. "I know Senk well. And you, woman, who is your master?"

Alan did not wait to find out whether Mara spoke Hussir.

"He also belongs to my lord Senk, your greatness." Another recollection came to his aid, and he added, "It's mating season, your greatness."

The Hussir gave the peculiar whistle that served for a laugh among his race. He beckoned to them to rise.

"Go out the back door and return to your pen," he said kindly. "You're lucky you weren't separated from each other in that herd."

Gratefully, Alan and Mara slipped out the back door and made their way up a dark alley to a street. He led her to the left.

"We well have to find a cross street to get out of Falldyn," he said. "This is one of the circular streets."

"I hope most of the others escape," she said fervently.

"There's no one left in Haafin but the old people and the small children."

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Dimly against the stars loomed the dark bulk of the Star Tower. The great metal building stretched up into the night sky, losing itself in the blackness. The park around it was unlit, but they could see the glow of the lamps at the Star Tower's entrance, where the Hussir guards remained on duty. They were tain back," said Alan dully. She stood close to Alan and looked up at him with large eyes. "All the way back through the city? There was a tremor in her voice. "I'm afraid so."

He put his arm around her shoulders and they turned away from the Star Tower. He stumbled at his scarf as they walked slowly back down the street. His scarf! He stopped, halting her with a jerk. The Silk!

He grasped her shoulders with both hands and looked down into her face.

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"We took the wrong turn when we left the alley," said Alan miserably. "Look straight ahead!"

"I couldn't both of us?" she whispered back.

"No! They're little, but they're strong. Much stronger than a woman."

Against the glow of the light, something projected a few inches over the edge of the ramp above them.

"Maybe it's a spear," whispered Alan. "I'll lift you up."

In a moment she was down again, the object in her hands.

"Just an arrow," she muttered in disgust. "What good is it without a bow?"

"If we could only have brought a bow!" exclaimed Alan in a whisper. "I could handle one of them without a weapon, but not two."

"It may be enough," he said. "You stay here, and when I get to the foot of the ramp, make a noise to distract them. Then run for it."

"That may just mean well have more trouble getting out of the city," he said. "The Hussirs outnumber us twenty to one, and you're in need of us than we're killing of them."
He crept on his stomach to the point where the ramp angled to the ground. He looked back. Mara was a lightness against the blackness of the corner.

Mara began hanging against the side of the ramp with her fists and chanting in a low tone. Grabbing her bows, both Hussir guards moved quickly to the edge. Alan stood up and ran as fast as he could up the ramp, the arrow in his hand.

Their bows were drawn to shoot down where Mara was, when they felt the vibration of the ramp. They turned quickly.

Their arrows, hurriedly loosed, missed him. He plunged his own arrow through the throat of one and grappled with the other. In a savage burst of strength, he hurled the Hussir over the side to the ground below,

Mara cried out A patrol of three Hussirs had been too close. She nearly reached the foot of the ramp, when one of them plunged from the darkness and locked his arms around her hips from behind. The other two were hopping up the ramp toward Alan, spears in hand.

Alan snatched up the bow and quiver of the Hussir he had slain. His first arrow took one of the approaching Hussirs, halfway down the ramp. The Hussir that had seized Mara hurled her away from him to the ground and raised his spear for the kill.

Alan's arrow only grazed the creature, but it dropped the spear, and Mara fled up the ramp.

The third Hussir lurched at Alan behind its spear. Alan dodged. The blade missed him, but the haft burned his side, almost knocking him from the ramp. The Hussir recovered like lightning, poised the spear again. It was too close for Alan to use the bow, and he had no time to pick up a spear.

Mara leaped on the Hussir's back, locking her legs around its body and grappling its spear arm with both her hands. Before it could shake her off, Alan wrested the spear from the Hussir's hand and dispatched it.

The other guards were coming up from all directions. Arrows rang against the sides of the Star Tower as the two humans ducked inside.

There was a light inside the Star Tower, a softer light than the gas lamps but more effective. They were inside a small chamber, from which another door led to the interior of the tower.

The door, swung back against the wall on its hinges, was two feet thick and its diameter was greater than the height of a man. Both of them together were unable to move it.

Arrows were coming through the door. Alan had left the guards' weapons outside. In a moment the Hussirs would gain courage to rush the ramp.

Alan looked around in desperation for a weapon. The metal walls were bare except for some handrails and a panel from which projected three metal sticks. Alan wrenched at one, trying to pull it loose for a club. It pulled down and there was a hissing sound in the room, but it would not come loose. He tried a second, and again it swung down but stayed fast to the wall.

Mara shrieked bidden him, and he whirled.

The big door was closing, by itself, slowly, and outside the ramp was raising itself from the ground and sliding into the wall of the Star Tower below them. The few Hussirs who had ventured onto the end of the ramp were falling from it to the ground, like ants.

The door closed with a clang of finality. The hissing in the room went on for a moment, then stopped. It was as still as death in the Star Tower.

They went through the inner door, timidly, holding hands. They were in a curved corridor. The other side of the corridor was a blank wall. They followed the corridor all the way around the Star Tower, back to the door, without finding an entrance through that inner wall.

But there was a ladder that went upward. They climbed it, Alan first, then Mara, They were in another corridor, and another ladder went upward.

Up and up they climbed, past level after level, the blank inner wall gave way to spacious rooms, in which was strange furnitare. Some were compartmented, and on the compartment doors for three levels, red crosses were painted.

Both of them were bathed with perspiration when they reached the room with the windows. And there here were no more ladders.

"Mara, were at the top of the Star Tower!" exclaimed Alan.

The room was one of the tower's heads. The dome was windows. But, though the windows faced upward, those around the lower periphery showed the lighted city of Falklyn spread below them. There was even one of them that showed a section of the park, and the park was right under them, but they knew it was the park because they could see the Hussirs scurrying about in the light of the two gas lamps that still burned beside the closed door of the Star Tower.

All the windows in the upper part of the dome opened on the stars.

The lower part of the walls was covered with strange wheels and metal sticks and diagrams and little shining circles of colored lights.

"We're in the top of the Star Tower!" shouted Alan in a triumphant frenzy, "I have the Silk and I shall sing the Song!"

VI

Alan raised his voice and the words reverberated back at them from the walls of the domed chamber.

"Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,
I can reach you, though you're jar.
Shiver, shiver, I'll find you,
Find a worm that's striped with red,
Feed it to the turtle shell,
Then go to sleep, JOT it all is well!"

Nothing happened.

Alan sang the second verse, and still nothing happened. "Do you suppose that if we went back out now the Hussirs would let all humans go free?" asked Mara doubtfully.

"That's silly," he said, staring at the window where an increasing number of Hussirs was crowding into the park. "It's a riddle. We have to do what it says."

"But how can we? What does it mean?"

"It has something to do with the Star Tower," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe the 'golden star' means the Star Tower, though I always thought it meant the Golden Star in the southern sky. Anyway we've reached the Star Tower, and it's silly to fritter about reaching a real star."

"Shut my mouth and find my head. How can you shut anyone's mouth before you find their head?"

"We had to shut the door to the Star Tower before we could climb to the top," she ventured.

"That's it!" he exclaimed "Now, let's find a worm that's striped with red!"

They looked all over the big room, in and under the strange crooked beds that would tilt forward to make chairs, behind the big, queer-looking objects that stood all over the floor. The bottom part of the walls had drawers and they pulled these out, one by one.

At last Mara dropped a little disc of metal and it popped in half on the floor. A flat spool fell out, and white tape unrolled from it in a tangle.

"Worm!" shouted Alan. "Find one striped with red!"

They popped open disc after metal disc and there it was: a tape crossed diagonally with red stripes. There was lettering on the metal discs and Mara spelled out the letters on this one.

"EMERGENCY. TERRA. AUTOMATIC BLASTDOWN"

Neither of them could figure out what that meant. So they looked for the "turtle shell" and of course that would be the transparent dome-shaped object that sat on a pedestal between two of the chair-beds.

It was an awkward job trying to feed the stripped worm to the turtle shell, for the only opening in the turtle shell was under it and to one side. But with Alan lying in one cushioned chair-bed and Mara lying in the other, and the two of them working together, they got the end of the worm into the turtle shell's mouth.

The turtle shell began eating the stripped worm with a clicking chatter that lasted only a moment before it was drowned in a great rumbling roar from far down in the bowels of the Star Tower.

Then the windows that looked down on the park blossomed into flame that was almost too bright for human eyes to bear, and the lights of Falklyn began to fall away in the other windows around the rim of the dome. There was a great pressure that pushed them mightily down into the cushions on which they lay, and forced their senses from them.

Many months later, they would remember the second verse of the song. They would go into one of the chambers marked with a cross, they would sting themselves with the metal strips, and run as fast as they could up the ramp, the arrow in their hand.

Find a worm that's striped with red,
Shut my mouth and find my head,
"Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,
We're in the top of the Star Tower!"

They would sing the second verse of the song. They would go into one of the chambers marked with a cross, they would sting themselves with the metal strips, and run as fast as they could up the ramp, the arrow in their hand.
Charlie Holmes lost touch with reality amid rending and shattering sounds that lingered dimly. Blackness engulfed him in a wave of agony.

He was not sure exactly when the possibility of opening his eyes occurred to him. Vaguely, he could sense—"remember" was too definable—much tugging and hauling upon his supine body. It doubtless seemed justifiable, but he flinched from recalling more clearly that which must have been so extremely unpleasant.

Gently, now, he tried rolling his head a few inches right, then left. When it hurt only one-tenth as much as he feared, he let his eyes open.

"Hel-lo!" rasped the bulbous creature squatting beside his pallet.

Charlie shut his eyes quickly, and very tightly.

"The crash!" gasped Charlie, sitting up abruptly.

He held his breath, awaiting the knifing pain it seemed natural to expect. When he felt none, he cautiously fingered his ribs, and then a horrid thought prompted him to wiggle his bare toes. Everything seemed to be in place.

"Where're I am I?" be inquired.

"You won't enjoy it!" he promised.

He cheerfully polished one horn with a clawed finger.

"For me a great amusement," grinned Kho, displaying hideous tusks. "Next time, I'll be a Venusian. You will lose again. Then we can visit other planets, and stars ... oh, we shall see a lot of each other!"

"Ah, yes. You have not been conscious for some time." His reddish host rippled upward to stand more or less erect upon three thick tentacles. "Even with us, memory is slow after shock. And you may be uneasy in the lighter gravity."

Light gravity! reflected Charlie. This can only mean—MARS! Sure! That must be it—i was piloting a rocket and cracked up somewhere on Mars.

He felt right to him. He decided that the rest of his memory would return.

"Are you able to rise?" asked the other, extending a helpful tentacle.

The Earthman managed to haul himself stiffly to his feet.

"Say, my name is Holmes," he introduced himself dizzily.

"I am Kho Theri. In your language, learned years since from other spacemen, I might say 'Fiery Canalman.'"

"Has to be Mars," muttered Charlie under his breath. "What a bump! When can you show me what's left of the ship?"

"The canals are low. You can feel the heat and dryness for yourself. The crowds are inflamed by temple prophecies. And then, your ship, flaming down from the skies—"

Kho snapped the tip of a tentacle at him.

"Canal gods!" croaked Charlie. "This can't be right! Aren't you civilized here? I can't be the only Earthman they've seen!"

"It is true that Earthmen are perfectly safe at most times."

"But the laws! The earth consul—!"

Kho snapped the tip of a tentacle at him again.

Kho reached out with one tentacle and wrapped six inches about the Earthman's wrist. When he plunged through the doorway, Charlie perforce went right with him.

Whipping around a corner of the hut, he had time for a quick squint at the chanters. Kho alone had looked weirdly alien. Two hundred like him—!

"The priestesses will lead the crowd here," predicted Kho. "They know I took an Earthman, and I fear they have finished with the others."

"Canal gods!" croaked Charlie. "This can't be right! Aren't you civilized here? I can't be the only Earthman they've seen!"

"I am Kho Theki. In your language, learned years since from other spacemen, I might say 'Fiery Canalman.'"

"It was a truck that hit you, Charles Holmes. You have no more sense than to be crossing the street with your nose in a magazine just purchased on the corner."

"I'm sorry you're in it, too," he panted.

"The crash!" gasped Charlie, sitting up abruptly.

"As do all you mortals—who finally have to lie in them," he rasped. "I will tell you now, since I can carry this episode little farther. You have never piloted a spaceship."

"The mob was dissolving into thin smoke, and the horizon was shrinking."

Kho himself was altering into something redder of skin but equipped with a normal number of limbs, discounting the barbed tail. The constant heat of the "desert" began, at last, to seem explicable.

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Charlie peeped warily, was trapped at it, and opened his eyes resolutely.

"'Where're I am I?' be inquired.

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"Oh ... no. Just ... I can't remember. The crash ... and then—!"

Charlie peeped warily, was trapped at it, and opened his eyes resolutely.
There are two basic kinds of fools--the ones who know they are fools, and the kind that, because they do not
know that, are utterly deadly menaces!

The mountain was spinning.

Not dizzily, not even rapidly, but very perceptibly, the great mass of jagged rock was turning on its axis.

Captain St. Simon scowled at it. "By damn, Jules," he said, "if you can see 'em spinning, it's too damn fast!" He
expected no answer, and got none.

He tapped the drive pedal gently with his right foot, his gaze shifting alternately from the instrument board to
the looming hulk of stone before him. As the little spacecraft moved in closer, he tapped the reverse pedal with his
left foot. He was now ten meters from the surface of the asteroid. It was moving, all right. "Well, Jules," he said in
his most commanding voice, "we'll see just how fast she's moving. Prepare to fire Torpedo Number One!"

"Yassuh, boss! Yassuh, Cap'n Sain' Simon, suh! All ready on the firin' line!"

He touched a button with his right thumb. The ship quivered almost imperceptibly as a jet of liquid leaped from
the gun mounted in the nose of the ship. At the same time, he hit the reverse pedal and backed the ship away from
the asteroid's surface. No point getting any more gunk on the hull than necessary.

The jet of liquid struck the surface of the rotating mountain and splashed, leaving a big splotch of silvery
glitter. Even in the vacuum of space, the silicone-based solvents of the paint vehicle took time to boil off.

"How's that for pinpoint accuracy, Jules?"

"Veddy good, M'lud. Top hole, if I may say so, m'lud."

"You may." He jockeyed the little spacecraft around until he was reasonably stationary with respect to the great
hunk of whirling rock and had the silver-white blotch centered on the crosshairs of the peeper in front of him. Then
he punched the button that started the timer and waited for the silver spot to come round again.

The asteroid was roughly spherical--which was unusual, but not remarkable. The radar gave him the distance
from the surface of the asteroid, and he measured the diameter and pumped it through the calculator. "Observe," he
said in a dry, didactic voice. "The diameter is on the order of five times ten to the fourteenth micromicrons." He kept
punching at the calculator. "If we assume a mean density of two point six six times ten to the minus thirty-sixth
metric tons per cubic micromicron, we attain a mean mass of some one point seven four times ten to the eleventh
kilograms." More punching, while he kept his eye on the meteorite, waiting for the spot to show up again. "And that,
my dear Jules, gives us a surface gravity of approximately two times ten to the minus sixth standard gees."

"Jawohl, Herr Oberstleutnant."

"Und zo, mine dear Chules, ve haff at least der grave zuspicion dot der surface gravity iss less dan der
zentrifugal force at der equator! Nein? Ja! Zo."

"Jawohl, Herr Konzertmeister."

Then there was a long, silent wait, while the asteroid went its leisurely way around its own axis.

"There it comes," said Captain St. Simon. He kept his eyes on the crosshair of the peeper, one hand over the
timer button. When the silver splotch drifted by the crosshair, he punched the stop button and looked at the
indicator.

"Sixteen minutes, forty seconds. How handy." He punched at the calculator again. "Ah! You see, Jules! Just as
we suspected! Negative gees at the surface, on the equator, comes to ten to the minus third standard gees--almost
exactly one centimeter per second squared. So?"

"Ah, so, honorabu copton! Is somesing rike five hundred times as great as gravitationar attraction, is not so?"

"Sukiyaki, my dear chap, sometimes your brilliance amazes me."

Well, at least it meant that there would be no loose rubble on the surface. It would have been tossed off long
ago by the centrifugal force, flying off on a tangent to become more of the tiny rubble of the belt. Perhaps "flying"
wasn't exactly the right word, though, when applied to a velocity of less than one centimeter per second. Drifting off,
then.

"What do you think, Jules?" said St. Simon.

"Waal, Ah reckon we can do it, cap'n. Ef'n we go to the one o' them thar poles ... well, let's see--" He leaned
over and pumped more figures into the calculator. "Ain't that purty! 'Cordin' ter this, that's a spot at each pole, 'bout
a meter in diameter, what the gee-pull is greater than the centry-foogle force!"

Captain St. Simon looked at the figures on the calculator. The forces, in any case, were negligibly small. On
Earth, where the surface gravity was ninety-eight per cent of a Standard Gee, St. Simon weighed close to two hundred pounds. Discounting the spin, he would weigh about four ten-thousandths of a pound on the asteroid he was inspecting. The spin at the equator would try to push him off with a force of about two tenths of a pound.

But a man who didn't take those forces into account could get himself killed in the Belt.

"Very well, Jules," he said, "we'll inspect the poles."

"Do you think they will welcome us in Kraukau, Herr Erzbischof?"

The area around the North Pole--defined as that pole from which the body appears to be spinning counterclockwise--looked more suitable for operations than the South Pole. Theoretically, St. Simon could have stopped the spin, but that would have required an energy expenditure of some twenty-three thousand kilowatt-hours in the first place, and it would have required an anchor to be set somewhere on the equator. Since his purpose in landing on the asteroid was to set just such an anchor, stopping the spin would be a waste of time and energy.

Captain St. Simon positioned his little spacecraft a couple of meters above the North Pole. It would take better than six minutes to fall that far, so he had plenty of time. "Perhaps a boarding party, Mr. Christian! On the double!"

"Aye, sir! On the double it is, sir!"

St. Simon pushed himself over to the locker, took out his vacuum suit, and climbed into it. After checking it thoroughly, he said: "Prepare to evacuate main control room, Mr. Christian!"

"Aye, aye, Sir! All prepared and ready. I hope."

Captain St. Simon looked around to make sure he hadn't left a bottle of coffee sitting somewhere. He'd done that once, and the stuff had boiled out all over everywhere when he pulled the air out of the little room. Nope, no coffee. No obstacles to turning on the pump. He thumbed the button, and the pumps started to whine. The whine built up to a crescendo, then began to die away until finally it could only be felt through the walls or floor. The air was gone.

Then he checked the manometer to make sure that most of the air had actually been pumped back into the reserve tanks. Satisfied, he touched the button that would open the door. There was a faint jar as the remaining wisps of air shot out into the vacuum of space.

St. Simon sat back down at the controls and carefully repositioned the ship. It was now less than a meter from the surface. He pushed himself over to the open door and looked out.

He clipped one end of his safety cable to the steel eye-bolt at the edge of the door. "Fasten on carefully, Jules," he said. "We don't want to lose anything."

"Like what, mon capitain?"

"Like this spaceship, mon petit tête de mouton."

"Ah, but no, my old and raw; we could not afford to lose the so-dear Nancy Bell, could we?"

The other end of the long cable was connected to the belt of the suit. Then St. Simon launched himself out the open door toward the surface of the planetoid. The ship began to drift--very slowly, but not so slowly as it had been falling--off in the other direction.

He had picked the spot he was aiming for. There was a jagged hunk of rock sticking out that looked as though it would make a good handhold. Right nearby, there was a fairly smooth spot that would do to brake his "fall". He struck it with his palm and took up the slight shock with his elbow while his other hand grasped the outcropping.

He had not pushed himself very hard. There is not much weathering on the surface of an asteroid. Meteorites soften the contours of the rock a little over the millions of millennia, but not much, since the debris in the Belt all has roughly the same velocity. Collisions do occur, but they aren't the violent smashes that make the brilliant meteor displays of Earth. (And there is still a standing argument among the men of the Belt as to whether that sort of action can be called "weathering"). Most of the collisions tend to cause fracturing of the surface, which results in jagged edges. A man in a vacuum suit does not push himself against a surface like that with any great velocity.

St. Simon knew to a nicety that he could propel himself against a bed of nails and broken glass at just the right velocity to be able to stop himself without so much as scratching his glove. And he could see that there was no ragged stuff on the spot he had selected. The slanting rays of the sun would have made them stand out in relief.

Now he was clinging to the surface of the mountain of rock like a bug on the side of a cliff. On a nickel-iron asteroid, he could have walked around on the surface, using the magnetic soles of his vacuum suit. But silicate rock is notably lacking in response to that attractive force. No soul, maybe.

But directly and indirectly, that lack of response to magnetic forces was the reason for St. Simon's crawling around on the surface of that asteroid. Directly, because there was no other way he could move about on a nonmetallic asteroid. Indirectly, because there was no way the big space tugs could get a grip on such an asteroid, either.
The nickel-iron brutes were a dead cinch to haul off to the smelters. All a space tug had to do was latch on to one of them with a magnetic grapple and start hauling. There was no such simple answer for the silicate rocks.

The nickel-iron asteroids were necessary. They supplied the building material and the major export of the Belt cities. They averaged around eighty to ninety per cent iron, anywhere from five to twenty per cent nickel, and perhaps half a per cent cobalt, with smatterings of phosphorous, sulfur, carbon, copper, and chromium. Necessary--but not sufficient.

The silicate rocks ran only about twenty-five per cent iron--in the form of nonmagnetic compounds. They averaged eighteen per cent silicon, fourteen per cent magnesium, between one and one point five per cent each of aluminum, nickel, and calcium, and good-sized dollops of sodium, chromium, phosphorous, manganese, cobalt, potassium, and titanium.

But more important than these, as far as the immediate needs of the Belt cities were concerned, was a big, whopping thirty-six per cent oxygen. In the Belt cities, they had soon learned that, physically speaking, the stuff of life was not bread. And no matter how carefully oxygen is conserved, no process is one hundred per cent efficient. There will be leakage into space, and that which is lost must be replaced.

There is plenty of oxygen locked up in those silicates; the problem is towing them to the processing plants where the stuff can be extracted.

Captain St. Simon's job was simple. All he had to do was sink an anchor into the asteroid so that the space tugs could get a grip on it. Once he had done that, the rest of the job was up to the tug crew.

He crawled across the face of the floating mountain. At the spot where the North Pole was, he braced himself and then took a quick look around at the Nancy Bell. She wasn't moving very fast, he had plenty of time. He took a steel piton out of his tool pack, transferred it to his left hand, and took out a hammer. Then, working carefully, he hammered the piton into a narrow cleft in the rock. Three more of the steel spikes were hammered into the surface, forming a rough quadrilateral around the Pole.

"That looks good enough to me, Jules," he said when he had finished. "Now that we have our little anchors, we can put the monster in."

Then he grabbed his safety line, and pulled himself back to the Nancy Bell.

* * * * *

The small craft had floated away from the asteroid a little, but not much. He repositioned it after he got the rocket drill out of the storage compartment.

"Make way for the stovepipe!" he said as he pushed the drill ahead of him, out the door. This time, he pulled himself back to his drilling site by means of a cable which he had attached to one of the pitons.

The setting up of the drill didn't take much time, but it was done with a great deal of care. He set the four-foot tube in the center of the quadrilateral formed by the pitons and braced it in position by attaching lines to the eyes on a detachable collar that encircled the drill. Once the drill started working, it wouldn't need bracing, but until it did, it had to be held down.

All the time he worked, he kept his eyes on his lines and on his ship. The planetoid was turning under him, which made the ship appear to be circling slowly around his worksite. He had to make sure that his lines didn't get tangled or twisted while he was working.

As he set up the bracing on the six-inch diameter drill, he sang a song that Kipling might have been startled to recognize:

"To the tables down at Mory's, To the place where Louie dwells, Where it's always double drill and no canteen, Sit the Whiffenpoofs assembled, With their glasses raised on high, And they'll get a swig in Hell from Gunga Din."

When the drill was firmly based on the surface of the planetoid, St. Simon hauled his way back to his ship along his safety line. Inside, he sat down in the control chair and backed well away from the slowly spinning hunk of rock. Now there was only one thin pair of wires stretching between his ship and the drill on the asteroid.

When he was a good fifty meters away, he took one last look to make sure everything was as it should be.

"Stand by for a broadside!"

"Standing by, sir!"

"You may fire when ready, Gridley!"

"Aye, sir! Rockets away!" His forefinger descended on a button which sent a pulse of current through the pair of wires that trailed out the open door to the drill fifty meters away.

A flare of light appeared on the top of the drill. Almost immediately, it developed into a tongue of rocket flame. Then a glow appeared at the base of the drill and flame began to billow out from beneath the tube. The drill began to sink into the surface, and the planetoid began to move ever so slowly.

The drill was essentially a pair of opposed rockets. The upper one, which tried to push the drill into the surface of the planetoid, developed nearly forty per cent more thrust than the lower one. Thus, the lower one, which was
trying to push the drill off the rock, was outmatched. It had to back up, if possible. And it was certainly possible; the exhaust flame of the lower rocket easily burrowed a hole that the rocket could back into, while the silicate rock boiled and vaporized in order to get out of the way.

Soon there was no sign of the drill body itself. There was only a small volcano, spewing up gas and liquid from a hole in the rock. On the surface of a good-sized planet, the drill would have built up a little volcanic cone around the lip of the hole, but building a cone like that requires enough gravity to pull the hot matter back to the edge of the hole.

The fireworks didn't last long. The drill wasn't built to go in too deep. A drill of that type could be built which would burrow its way right through a small planetoid, but that was hardly necessary for planting an anchor. Ten meters was quite enough.

Now came the hard work.

On the outside of the Nancy Bell, locked into place, was a specially-treated nickel-steel eye-bolt—thirty feet long and eight inches in diameter. There had been ten of them, just as there had been ten drills in the storage locker. Now the last drill had been used, and there was but one eye-bolt left. The Nancy Bell would have to go back for more supplies after this job.

The anchor bolts had a mass of four metric tons each. Maneuvering them around, even when they were practically weightless, was no easy job.

St. Simon again matched the velocity of the Nancy Bell with that of the planetoid, which had been accelerated by the drill's action. He positioned the ship above the hole which had been drilled into the huge rock. Not directly above it—rocket drills had been known to show spurts of life after they were supposed to be dead. St. Simon had timed the drill, and it had apparently behaved as it should, but there was no need to take chances.

"Fire brigade, stand by!"
"Fire brigade standing by, sir!"
A nozzle came out of the nose of the Nancy Bell and peeped over the rim of the freshly-drilled hole.
"Ready! Aim! Squirt!"
A jet of kerosene-like fluosilicone oil shot down the shaft. When it had finished its work, there was little possibility that anything could happen at the bottom. Any unburned rocket fuel would have a hard time catching fire with that stuff soaking into it.

"Ready to lower the boom, Mr. Christian!" bellowed St. Simon.
"Aye, sir! Ready, sir!"
"Lower away!"
His fingers played rapidly over the control board.

Outside the ship, the lower end of the great eye-bolt was released from its clamp, and a small piston gave it a little shove. In a long, slow, graceful arc, it swung away from the hull, swiveling around the pivot clamp that held the eye. The braking effect of the pivot clamp was precisely set to stop the eye-bolt when it was at right angles to the hull. Moving carefully, St. Simon maneuvered the ship until the far end of the bolt was directly over the shaft. Then he nudged the Nancy Bell sideways, pushing the bolt down into the planetoid. It grated a couple of times, but between the power of the ship and the mass of the planetoid, there was enough pressure to push it past the obstacles. The rocket drill and the eye-bolt had been designed to work together; the hole made by the first was only a trifle larger than the second. The anchor settled firmly into place.

St. Simon released the clamps that held the eye-bolt to the hull of the ship, and backed away again. As he did, a power cord unreeled, for the eye-bolt was still connected to the vessel electrically.

Several meters away, St. Simon pushed another button. There was no sound, but his practiced eye saw the eye of the anchor quiver. A small explosive charge, set in the buried end of the anchor, had detonated, expanding the far end of the bolt, wedging it firmly in the hole. At the same time, a piston had been forced up a small shaft in the center of the bolt, forcing a catalyst to mix with a fast-setting resin, and extruding the mixture out through half a dozen holes in the side of the bolt. When the stuff set, the anchor was locked securely to the sides of the shaft and thus to the planetoid itself.

St. Simon waited for a few minutes to make sure the resin had set completely. Then he clambered outside again and attached a heavy towing cable to the eye of the anchor, which projected above the surface of the asteroid. Back inside the ship again, he slowly applied power. The cable straightened and pulled at the anchor as the Nancy Bell tried to get away from the asteroid.

"Jules, old bunion," he said as he watched the needle of the tension gauge, "we have set her well."
"Yes, m'lud. So it would appear, m'lud."
St. Simon cut the power. "Very good, Jules. Now we shall see if the beeper is functioning as it should." He
flipped a switch that turned on the finder pickup, then turned the selector to his own frequency band.

"Beep! said the radio importantly. Beep!

The explosion had also triggered on a small but powerful transmitter built into the anchor. The tugs would be able to find the planetoid by following the beeps.

"Ah, Jules! Success!"

"Yes, m'lud. Success. For the tenth time in a row, this trip. And how many trips does this make?"

"Ah, but who's counting? Think of the money!"

"And the monotony, m'lud. To say nothing of molasses, muchness, and other things that begin with an M."

"Quite so, Jules; quite so. Well, let's detach the towing cable and be on our way."

"Whither, m'lud, Vesta?"

"I rather thought Pallas this time, old thimble."

"Still, m'lud, Vesta--"

"Pallas, Jules."

"Vesta?"

"Hum, hi, ho," said Captain St. Simon thoughtfully. "Pallas?"

The argument continued while the tow cable was detached from the freshly-placed anchor, and while the air was being let back into the control chamber, and while St. Simon divested himself of his suit. Actually, although he would like to go to Vesta, it was out of the question. Energywise and timewise, Pallas was much closer.

He settled back in the bucket seat and shot toward Pallas.

* * * * *

Mr. Edway Tarnhorst was from San Pedro, Greater Los Angeles, California, Earth. He was a businessman of executive rank, and was fairly rich. In his left lapel was the Magistral Knight's Cross of the Sovereign Hierosolymitan Order of Malta, reproduced in miniature. In his wallet was a card identifying him as a Representative of the Constituency of Southern California to the Supreme Congress of the People of the United Nations of Earth. He was just past his fifty-third birthday, and his lean, ascetic face and graying hair gave him a look of saintly wisdom. Aside from the eight-pointed cross in his lapel, the only ornamentation or jewelry he wore consisted of a small, exquisitely thin gold watch on his left wrist, and, on the ring finger of his left hand, a gold signet ring set with a single, flat, unfaceted diamond which was delicately engraved with the Tarnhorst coat of arms. His clothing was quietly but impressively expensive, and under Earth gravity would probably have draped impeccably, but it tended to fluff oddly away from his body under a gee-pull only a twentieth of Earth's.

He sat in his chair with both feet planted firmly on the metal floor, and his hands gripping the armrests as though he were afraid he might float off toward the ceiling if he let go. But only his body betrayed his unease; his face was impassive and calm.

The man sitting next to him looked a great deal more comfortable. This was Mr. Peter Danley, who was twenty years younger than Mr. Tarnhorst and looked it. Instead of the Earth-cut clothing that the older man was wearing, he was wearing the close-fitting tights that were the common dress of the Belt cities. His hair was cropped close, and the fine blond strands made a sort of golden halo about his head when the light from the panels overhead shone on them. His eyes were pale blue, and the lashes and eyebrows were so light as to be almost invisible. That effect, combined with his thin-lined, almost lipless mouth, gave his face a rather expressionless expression. He carried himself like a man who was used to low-gravity or null-gravity conditions, but he talked like an Earthman, not a Belt man. The identification card in his belt explained that; he was a pilot on the Earth-Moon shuttle service. In the eyes of anyone from the Belt cities, he was still an Earthman, not a true spaceman. He was looked upon in the same way that the captain of a transatlantic liner might have looked upon the skipper of the Staten Island ferry two centuries before. The very fact that he was seated in a chair gave away his Earth habits.

The third man was standing, leaning at a slight angle, so that his back touched the wall behind him. He was not tall--five nine--and his face and body were thin. His tanned skin seemed to be stretched tightly over this scanty padding, and in places the bones appeared to be trying to poke their way through to the surface. His ears were small and lay nearly flat against his head, and the hair on his skull was so sparse that the tanned scalp could be easily seen beneath it, although there was no actual bald spot anywhere. Only his large, luminous brown eyes showed that Nature had not skimped on everything when he was formed. His name was lettered neatly on the outside of the door to the office: Georges Alhamid. In spite of the French spelling, he pronounced the name "George," in the English manner.

He had welcomed the two Earthmen into his office, smiling the automatic smile of the diplomat as he welcomed them to Pallas. As soon as they were comfortably seated--though perhaps that word did not exactly apply to Edway Tarnhorst--Georges Alhamid said:

"Now, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"
He asked it as though he were completely unaware of what had brought the two men to Pallas.

Tarnhorst looked as though he were privately astonished that his host could speak grammatically. "Mr. Alhamid," he began, "I don't know whether you're aware that the industrial death rate here in the Belt has been the subject of a great deal of discussion in both industrial and governmental circles on Earth." It was a half question, and he let it hang in the air, waiting to see whether he got an answer.

"Certainly my office has received a great deal of correspondence on the subject," Alhamid said. His voice sounded as though Tarnhorst had mentioned nothing more serious than a commercial deal. Important, but nothing to get into a heavy sweat over.

Tarnhorst nodded and then held his head very still. His actions betrayed the fact that he was not used to the messages his semicircular canals were sending his brain when he moved his head under low gee.

"Exactly," he said after a moment's pause. "I have 'stat copies of a part of that correspondence. To be specific, the correspondence between your office and the Workers' Union Safety Control Board, and between your office and the Workingman's Compensation Insurance Corporation."

"I see. Well, then, you're fully aware of what our trouble is, Mr. Tarnhorst. I'm glad to see that an official of the insurance company is taking an interest in our troubles."

Tarnhorst's head twitched, as though he were going to shake his head and had thought better of it a fraction of a second too late. It didn't matter. The fluid in his inner ears sloshed anyway.

"I am not here in my capacity as an officer of the Workingman's Compensation Insurance Corporation," he said carefully. "I am here as a representative of the People's Congress."

Alhamid's face showed a mild surprise which he did not feel. "I'm honored, of course, Mr. Tarnhorst," he said, "but you must understand that I am not an official of the government of Pallas."

Tarnhorst's ascetic face betrayed nothing. "Since you have no unified government out here," he said, "I cannot, of course, presume to deal with you in a governmental capacity. I have spoken to the Governor of Pallas, however, and he assures me that you are the man to speak to."

"If it's about the industrial death rate," Alhamid agreed, "then he's perfectly correct. But if you're here as a governmental representative of Earth, I don't understand--"

"Please, Mr. Alhamid," Tarnhorst interrupted with a touch of irritation in his voice. "This is not my first trip to the Belt, nor my first attempt to deal with the official workings of the Confederated Cities."

Alhamid nodded gently. It was, as a matter of fact, Mr. Tarnhorst's second trip beyond the Martian orbit, the first having taken place some three years before. But the complaint was common enough; Earth, with its strong centralized government, simply could not understand the functioning of the Belt Confederacy. A man like Tarnhorst apparently couldn't distinguish between government and business. Knowing that, Alhamid could confidently predict what the general sense of Tarnhorst's next sentence would be.

"I am well aware," said Tarnhorst, "that the Belt Companies not only have the various governors under their collective thumb, but have thus far prevented the formation of any kind of centralized government. Let us not quibble, Mr. Alhamid; the Belt Companies run the Belt, and that means that I must deal with officials of those companies--such as yourself."

Alhamid felt it necessary to make a mild speech in rebuttal. "I cannot agree with you, Mr. Tarnhorst. I have nothing to do with the government of Pallas or any of the other asteroids. I am neither an elected nor an appointed official of any government. Nor, for that matter, am I an advisor in either an official or unofficial capacity to any government. I do not make the laws designed to keep the peace, nor do I enforce them, except in so far as I am a registered voter and therefore have some voice in those laws in that respect. Nor, again, do I serve any judicial function in any Belt government, except inasmuch as I may be called upon for jury duty."

"I am a business executive, Mr. Tarnhorst. Nothing more. If you have governmental problems to discuss, then I can't help you, since I'm not authorized to make any decisions for any government."

Edway Tarnhorst closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his thin nose between thumb and forefinger. "I understand that. I understand that perfectly. But out here, the Companies have taken over certain functions of government, shall we say?"

"Shall we say, rather, that on Earth the government has usurped certain functions which rightfully belong to private enterprise?" Alhamid said gently. "Historically, I think, that is the correct view."

Tarnhorst opened his eyes and smiled. "You may be quite correct. Historically speaking, perhaps, the Earth government has usurped the functions that rightfully belong to kings, dictators, and warlords. To say nothing of local satraps and petty chieftains. Hn-m-m. Perhaps we should return to that? Perhaps we should return to the human suffering that was endemic in those times?"

"You might try it," said Alhamid with a straight face. "Say, one year out of every ten. It would give the people something to look forward to with anticipation and to look back upon with nostalgia." Then he changed his tone. "If
you wish to debate theories of government, Mr. Tarnhorst, possibly we could get up a couple of teams. Make a public affair of it. It could be taped and televised here and on Earth, and we could charge royalties on each--"

Peter Danley's blond, blank face became suddenly animated. He looked as though he were trying to suppress a laugh. He almost succeeded. It came out as a cough.

* * * * *

At the same time, Tarnhorst interrupted Alhamid. "You have made your point, Mr. Alhamid," he said in a brittle voice. "Permit me to make mine. I have come to discuss business with you. But, as a member of the Congressional Committee for Industrial Welfare, I am also in search of facts. Proper legislation requires facts, and legislation passed by the Congress will depend to a great extent upon the report on my findings here."

"I understand," said Alhamid. "I'll certainly be happy to provide you with whatever data you want--with the exception of data on industrial processes, of course. That's not mine to give. But anything else--" He gestured with one hand, opening it palm upwards, as though dispensing a gift.

"I'm not interested in industrial secrets," said Tarnhorst, somewhat mollified. "It's a matter of the welfare of your workers. We feel that we should do something to help. As you know, there have been protests from the Worker's Union Safety Control Board and from the Workingman's Compensation Insurance Corporation."

Alhamid nodded. "I know. The insurance company is complaining about the high rate of claims for deaths. They've threatened to raise our premium rates."

"Considering the expense, don't you, as a businessman, think that a fair thing to do?"

"No," Alhamid said. "I have pointed out to them that the total amount of the claims is far less per capita than, for instance, the Steel Construction Workers' Union of Earth. Granted, there are more death claims, but these are more than compensated for by the fact that the claims for disability and hospitalization are almost negligible."

"That's another thing we don't understand," Tarnhorst said carefully. "It appears that not only are the safety precautions insufficient, but the post-accident care is ... er ... inefficient."

"I assure you that what post-accident care there is," Alhamid said, "is quite efficient. But there is a high mortality rate because of the very nature of the job. Do you know anything about anchor-placing, Mr. Tarnhorst?"

"Very little," Tarnhorst admitted. "That is one of the things I am here to get information on. You used the phrase 'what post-accident care there is'--just how do you mean that?"

"Mr. Tarnhorst, when a man is out in space, completely surrounded by a hard vacuum, any accident is very likely to be fatal. On Earth, if a man sticks his thumb in a punch press, he loses his thumb. Out here, if a man's thumb is crushed off while he's in space, he loses his air and his life long before he can bleed to death. Anything that disables a man in space is deadly ninety-nine times out of a hundred.

"I can give you a parallel case. In the early days of oil drilling, wells occasionally caught fire. One of the ways to put them out was to literally blow them out with a charge of nitroglycerine. Naturally, the nitroglycerine had to be transported from where it was made to where it was to be used. Sensibly enough, it was not transported in tank-car lots; it was carried in small special containers by a single man in an automobile, who used the back roads and avoided traffic and stayed away from thickly populated areas--which was possible in those days. In many places these carriers were required to paint their cars red, and have the words Danger Nitroglycerine painted on the vehicle in yellow.

"Now, the interesting thing about that situation is that, whereas insurance companies in those days were reluctant to give policies to those men, even at astronomical premium rates, disability insurance cost practically nothing--provided the insured would allow the insertion of a clause that restricted the covered period to those times when he was actually engaged in transporting nitroglycerine. You can see why."

"I am not familiar with explosives," Tarnhorst said. "I take it that the substance is ... er ... easily detonated?"

"That's right," said Alhamid. "It's not only sensitive, but it's unreliable. You might actually drop a jar of the stuff and do nothing but shatter the jar. Another jar, apparently exactly similar, might go off because it got jiggled by a seismic wave from a passing truck half a mile away. But the latter was a great deal more likely than the former."

"Very well," said Tarnhorst after a moment, "I accept that analogy. I'd like to know more about the work itself. What does the job entail, exactly? What safety precautions are taken?"

It required the better part of three hours to explain exactly what an anchor setter did and how he did it--and what safety precautions were being taken. Through it all, Peter Danley just sat there, listening, saying nothing.

Finally, Edway Tarnhorst said: "Well, thank you very much for your information, Mr. Alhamid. I'd like to think this over. May I see you in the morning?"

"Certainly, sir. You're welcome at any time."

"Thank you." The two Earthmen rose from their seats--Tarnhorst carefully, Danley with the ease of long practice. "Would nine in the morning be convenient?"

"Quite convenient. I'll expect you."
Danley glided over to the door and held it open for Tarnhorst. He was wearing magnetic glide-shoes, the standard footwear of the Belt, which had three ball-bearings in the forward part of the sole, allowing the foot to move smoothly in any direction, while the rubber heel could be brought down to act as a brake when necessary. He didn't handle them with the adeptness of a Belt man, but he wasn't too awkward. Tarnhorst was wearing plain magnetic-soled boots—the lift-'em-up-and-lay-'em-down type. He had no intention of having his dignity compromised by shoes that might treacherously scoot out from under him.

As soon as the door had closed behind them, Georges Alhamid picked up the telephone on his desk and punched a number.

When a woman's voice answered at the other end, he said: "Miss Lehman, this is Mr. Alhamid. I'd like to speak to the governor." There was a pause. Then:

"George? Larry here."

Alhamid leaned back comfortably against the wall. "I just saw your guests, Larry. I spent damn near three hours explaining why it was necessary to put anchors in rocks, how it was done, and why it was dangerous."

"Did you convince him? Tarnhorst, I mean."

"I doubt it. Oh, I don't mean he thinks I'm lying or anything like that. He's too sharp for that. But he is convinced that we're negligent, that we're a bunch of barbarians who care nothing about human life."

"You've got to unconvince him, George," the governor said worriedly. "The Belt still isn't self-sufficient enough to be able to afford an Earth embargo. They can hold out longer than we can."

"I know," Alhamid said. "Give us another generation, and we can tell the World Welfare State where to head in—but right now, things are touchy, and you and I are in the big fat middle of it." He paused, rubbing thoughtfully at his lean blade of a nose with a bony forefinger. "Larry, what did you think of that blond nonentity Tarnhorst brought with him?"

"He's not a nonentity," the governor objected gently. "He just looks it. He's Tarnhorst's 'expert' on space industry, if you want my opinion. Did he say much of anything while he was with you?"

"Hardly anything."

"Same here. I have a feeling that his job is to evaluate every word you say and report his evaluation to Tarnhorst. You'll have to be careful."

"I agree," Alhamid said. "But he complicates things. I have a feeling that if I tell Tarnhorst a straight story he'll believe it. He seems to be a pretty shrewd judge. But Danley just might be the case of the man who is dangerous because of his little learning. He obviously knows a devil of a lot more about operations in space than Tarnhorst does, and he's evidently a hand-picked man, so that Tarnhorst will value his opinion. But it's evident that Danley doesn't know anything about space by our standards. Put him out on a boat as an anchor man, and he'd be lucky if he set a single anchor."

"Well, there's not much chance of that. How do you mean, he's dangerous?"

"I'll give you a 'frinstance. Suppose you've got a complex circuit using alternatic current, and you're trying to explain to a reasonably intelligent man how it works and what it does. If he doesn't know anything about electricity, he mightn't understand the explanation, but he'll believe that you're telling him the truth even if he doesn't understand it. But if he knows the basic theory of direct currents, you're likely to find yourself in trouble because he'll know just enough to see that what you're telling him doesn't jibe with what he already knows. Volts times amperes equal watts, as far as he's concerned, and the term 'power factor' does nothing but confuse him. He knows that copper is a conductor, so he can't see how a current could be cut off by a choke coil. He knows that a current can't pass through an insulator, so a condenser obviously can't be what you say it is. Mentally, he tags you as a liar, and he begins to try to dig in to see how your gadget really works."

"Hm-m-m. I see what you mean. Bad." He snorted. "Blast Earthmen, anyway! Have you ever been there?"

"Earth? Nope. By careful self-restraint, I've managed to forego that pleasure so far, Larry. Why?"

"Brrr! It's the feel of the place that I can't stand. I don't mean the constant high-gee; I take my daily exercise spin in the centrifuge just like anyone else, and you soon get used to the steady pull on Earth. I mean the constant, oppressive psychic tension, if you see what I mean. The feeling that everyone hates and distrusts everyone else. The curious impression of fear underneath every word and action."

"I'm older than you are, George, and I've lived with a kind of fear all my life--just as you and everyone else in the Belt has. A single mistake can kill out here, and the fear that it will be some fool who makes a mistake that will kill hundreds is always with us. We've learned to live with that kind of fear; we've learned to take steps to prevent any idiot from throwing the wrong switch that would shut down a power plant or open an air lock at the wrong time."

"But the fear on Earth is different. It's the fear that everyone else is out to get you, the fear that someone will
stick a figurative knife in your back and reduce you to the basic subsistence level. And that fear is solidly based, believe me. The only way to climb up from basic subsistence is to climb over everyone else, to knock aside those in your way, to get rid of whoever is occupying the position you want. And once you get there, the only way you can hold your position is to make sure that nobody below you gets too big for his britches. The rule is: Pull down those above you, hold down those below you.

"I've seen it, George. The big cities are packed with people whose sole ambition in life is to badger their local welfare worker out of another check--they need new clothes, they need a new bed, they need a new table, they need more food for the new baby, they need this, they need that. All they ever do is need! But, of course, they're far to aristocratic to work.

"Those who do have ambition have to become politicians--in the worst sense of the word. They have to gain some measure of control over the dispersal of largesse to the mob; they have to get themselves into a position where they can give away other people's money, so that they can get their cut, too.

"And even then, the man who gets to be a big shot doesn't dare show it. Take a look at Tarnhorst. He's probably one of the best of a bad lot. He has his fingers in a lot of business pies which make him money, and he's in a high enough position in the government to enable him to keep some of his money. But his clothing is only a little bit better than the average, just as the man who is on basic subsistence wears clothes that are only a little bit worse than the average. That diamond ring of his is a real diamond, but you can buy imitations that can't be told from the real thing except by an expert, so his diamond doesn't offend anyone by being ostentatious. And it's unfaceted, to eliminate offensive flash.

"All the color has gone out of life on Earth, George. Women held out longer than men did, but now no man or woman would be caught wearing a bright-colored suit. You don't see any reds or yellows or blues or greens or oranges--only grays and browns and black.

"It's not for me, George. I'd much rather live in fear of the few fools who might pull a stupid trick that would kill me than live in the constant fear of everyone around me, who all want to destroy me deliberately."

"I know what you mean," said Alhamid, "but I think you've put the wrong label on what you're calling 'fear'; there's a difference between fear and having a healthy respect for something that is dangerous but not malignant. That vacuum out there isn't out to 'get' anybody. The only people it kills are the fools who have no respect for it and the neurotics who think that it wants to murder them. You're neither, and I know it."

The governor laughed. "That's the advantage we have over Earthmen, George. We went through the same school of hard knocks together--all of us. And we know how we stack up against each other."

"True," Alhamid said darkly, "but how long will that hold if Tarnhorst closes the school down?"

"That's what you've got to prevent," said the governor flatly. "If you need help, yell."

"I will," Alhamid said. "Very loudly." He hung up, wishing he knew what Tarnhorst--and Danley--had in mind.

"The trouble with these people, Danley," said Edway Tarnhorst, "is that they have no respect whatever for human dignity. They have a tendency to overlook the basic rights of the individual."

"They're certainly--different," Peter Danley said.

Tarnhorst juggled himself up and down on the easy-chair in which he was seated, as though he could hardly believe that he had weight again. He hated low gee. It made him feel awkward and undignified. The only thing that reminded him that this was not "real" gravity was the faint, but all-pervasive hum of the huge engines that drove the big centrifuge. The rooms had cost more, but they were well worth it, as far as Tarnhorst was concerned.

"How do you mean, 'different?'" he asked almost absently, settling himself comfortably into the cushions.

"I don't know exactly. There's a hardness, a toughness--I can't quite put my finger on it, but it's in the way they act, the way they talk."

"Surely you'd noticed that before?" Tarnhorst asked in mild surprise. "You've met these Belt men on Luna."

"And their women," Danley said with a nod. "But the impact is somewhat more pronounced on their own home ground--seeing them en masse."

"Their women!" Tarnhorst said, caught by the phrase. "Fah! Bright-colored birds! Giggling children! And no more morals than a common house-cat!"

"Oh, they're not as bad as all that," Danley objected. "Their clothing is a little bright, I'll admit, and they laugh and kid around a lot, but I wouldn't say that their morals were any worse than those of a girl from New York or London."

"Arrogance is the word," said Tarnhorst. "Arrogance. Like the way that Alhamid kept standing all the time we were talking, towering over us that way."

"Just habit," Danley said. "When you don't weigh more than six or seven pounds, there's not much point in sitting down. Besides, it leaves them on their feet in case of emergency."
"He could have sat down out of politeness," Tarnhorst said. "But no. They try to put on an air of superiority that is offensive to human dignity." He leaned back in his chair, stretched out his legs, and crossed his ankles. "However, attitude itself needn't concern us until it translates itself into anti-social behavior. What cannot be tolerated is this callous attitude toward the dignity and well-being of the workers out here. What did you think of Alhamid's explanation of this anchor-setting business?"

Danley hesitated. "It sounded straightforward enough, as far as it went."

"You think he's concealing something, then?"

"I don't know. I don't have all the information." He frowned, putting furrows between his almost invisible blond brows. "I know that neither government business nor insurance business are my specialty, but I would like to know a little more about the background before I render any decision."

"Hm-m-m. Well." Tarnhorst frowned in thought for a moment, then came to a decision. "I can't give you the detailed data, of course; that would be a violation of the People's Mutual Welfare Code. But I can give you the general story."

"I just want to know what sort of thing to look for," Danley said.

"Certainly. Certainly. Well." Tarnhorst paused to collect his thoughts, then launched into his speech. "It has now been over eighty years since the first colonists came out here to the Belt. At first, the ties with Earth were quite strong, naturally. Only a few actually intended to stay out there the rest of their lives; most of them intended to make themselves a nice little nest egg, come back home, and retire. At the same time, the World State was slowly evolving from its original loosely tied group of independent nations toward what it is today.

"The people who came out here were mostly misfits, sociologically speaking," He smiled sardonically. "They haven't changed much.

"At any rate, as I said, they were strongly tied to Earth. There was the matter of food, air, and equipment, all of which had to be shipped out from Earth to begin with. Only the tremendous supply of metal--almost free for the taking--made such a venture commercially possible. Within twenty-five years, however, the various industrial concerns that managed the Belt mining had become self-supporting. The robot scoopers which are used to mine methane and ammonia from Jupiter's atmosphere gave them plenty of organic raw material. Now they grow plants of all kinds and even raise food animals.

"They began, as every misfit does, to complain about the taxes the government put on their incomes. The government, in my opinion, made an error back then. They wanted to keep people out in the Belt, since the mines on Earth were not only rapidly being depleted, but the mining sites were needed for living space. Besides, asteroid metals were cheaper than metals mined on Earth. To induce the colonists to remain in the Belt, no income tax was levied; the income tax was replaced by an eighty per cent tax on the savings accumulated when the colonist returned to Earth to retire.

"They resented even that. It was explained to them that the asteroids were, after all, natural resources, and that they had no moral right to make a large profit and deprive others of their fair share of the income from a natural resource, but they insisted that they had earned it and had a right to keep it.

"In other words, the then government bribed them to stay out here, and the bribe was more effective than they had intended."

"So they stayed out here and kept their money," Danley said.

"Exactly. At that time, if you will recall, there was a great deal of agitation against colonialism--there had been for a long time, as a matter of fact. That agitation was directed against certain industrialist robber-baron nations who had enslaved the populace of parts of Asia and Africa solely to produce wealth, and not for the benefit of the people themselves. But the Belt operators took advantage of the anticolonialism of the times and declared that the Belt cities were, and by right ought to be, free and independent political entities. It was a ridiculous assumption, of course, but since the various Belt cities were, at that time, under the nominal control of three or four of the larger nations, the political picture required that they be allowed to declare themselves independent. It was not anticipated at the time that they would be so resistant toward the World Government."

He smiled slightly. "Of course, by refusing to send representatives to the People's Congress, they have, in effect, cut themselves off from any voice in human government."

Then he shrugged. "At the moment, that is neither here nor there. What interests us at the moment is the death rate curve of the anchor-sinkers or whatever they are. Did you know that it is practically impossible for anyone to get a job out there in the Belt unless he has had experience in the anchor-setting field?"

"No," Danley admitted.

"It's true. For every other job, they want only men with space experience. And by 'space experience' they mean anchor-setting, because that's the only job a man can get without previous space experience. They spend six months in a special school, learning to do the work, according to our friend, Mr. Georges Alhamid. Then they are sent out to
set anchors. Small ones, at first, in rocks only a few meters in diameter—then larger ones. After a year or so at that
type of work, they can apply for more lucrative positions.

"I see nothing intrinsically wrong in that, I will admit, but the indications are that the schooling, which should
have been getting more efficient over the years, has evidently been getting more lax. The death rate has gone up."

"Just a minute," Danley interrupted. "Do you mean that a man has to have what they call 'space experience'
before he can get any kind of job?"

Tarnhorst shook his head and was pleased to find that no nausea resulted. "No, of course not. Clerical jobs,
teaching jobs, and the like don't require that sort of training. But there's very little chance for advancement unless
you're one of the elite. A physician, for example, wouldn't have many patients unless he had had 'space experience';
he wouldn't be allowed to own or drive a space boat, and he wouldn't be allowed to go anywhere near what are
called 'critical areas'—such as air locks, power plants, or heavy industry installations."

"It sounds to me as though they have a very strong union," said Danley.

"If you want to call it that, yes," Tarnhorst said. "Anything that has anything to do with operations in space
requires that sort of experience—and there are very few jobs out here that can avoid having anything to do with
space. Space is only a few kilometers away." The expression on his face showed that he didn't much care for the
thought.

"I don't see that that's so bad," Danley said. "Going out there isn't something for the unexperienced. A man who
doesn't know what he's doing can get himself killed easily, and, what's worse, he's likely to take others with him."

"You speak, of course, from experience," Tarnhorst said with no trace of sarcasm. "I accept that. By not
allowing inexperienced persons in critical areas, the Belt Companies are, at least indirectly, looking out for the
welfare of the people. But we mustn't delude ourselves into thinking that that is their prime objective. These Belt
Companies are no better than the so-called 'industrial giants' of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The
government here is farcical. The sole job is to prevent crime and to adjudicate small civil cases. Every other function
of proper government—the organization of industry, the regulation of standards the subsidizing of research, the
control of prices, and so on—are left to the Belt Companies or to the people. The Belt Cities are no more than what
used to be called 'company towns'."

"I understand that," Danley said. "But they seem to function fairly smoothly."

Tarnhorst eyed him. "If, by, 'smoothly functioning', you mean the denial of the common rights of human
freedom and dignity yes. Oh, they give their sop to such basic human needs as the right of every individual to be
respected—and only because Earth has put pressure on them. Otherwise, people who, through no fault of their own,
were unable to work or get 'space experience' would be unable to get jobs and would be looked down upon as
pariahs."

"You mean there are people here who have no jobs? I wouldn't think that unemployment would be a problem
out here."

"It isn't," said Tarnhorst, "yet. But there are always those unfortunates who are psychologically incapable of
work, and society must provide for them. The Belt Cities provide for a basic education, of course. As long as a
person is going to school, he is given a stipend. But a person who has neither the ability to work nor the ability to
study is an outcast, even though he is provided for by the companies. He is forced to do something to earn what
should be his by right; he is given menial and degrading tasks to do. We would like to put a stop to that sort of thing,
but we ... ah ... have no ... ah ... means of doing so." He paused, as though considering whether he had said too
much.

"The problem at hand," he went on hurriedly, "is the death curve. When this technique for taking the rocks to
the smelters was being worked out, the death rate was—as you might imagine—quite high. The Belt Companies had
already been operating out here for a long time before the stony meteorites were mined commercially. At first, the
big thing was nickel-iron. That's what they came here to get in the beginning. That's where most of the money still is.
But the stony asteroids provide them with their oxygen.

"This anchor-setting technique was worked out at a time when the Belt Companies were trying to find ways to
make the Belt self-sufficient. After they got the technique worked out so that it operated smoothly, the death rate
dropped 'way down. It stayed down for a little while, and then began to rise again. It has nearly reached an all-time
high. Obviously, something is wrong, and we have to find out what it is."

Danley scratched ruminatively behind his right ear and wished he'd had the opportunity to study history. He
had been vaguely aware of the broad outlines, but the details had never been brought to his attention before.
"Suppose Alhamid is trying to hide something," he said after a moment. "What would it be, do you think?"

Tarnhorst shrugged and spread his hands. "What could it be but some sort of money-saving scheme? Inferior
materials being used at a critical spot, perhaps. Skimping on quality or quantity. Somehow, somehow, they are
shaving costs at the risk of the workers' lives. We have to find out what it is."
Peter Danley nodded. You don't mean "we," Danley thought to himself. I am the one who's going to have to go out there and find it, while you sit here safe. He felt that there was a pretty good chance that these Belt operators might kill him to keep him from finding out what it was they were saving money on.

Aloud, he said: "I'll do what I can, Mr. Tarnhorst."

Tarnhorst smiled. "I'm certain you will. That's why I needed someone who knows more about this business than I."

"And when we do find it--what then?"

"Then? Why, then we will force them to make the proper changes or there will be trouble."

Georges Alhamid heard the whole conversation early the next morning. The governor himself brought the recording over to his office.

"Do you think he knew he was being overheard?"

The governor shrugged. "Who knows. He waltzed all around what he was trying to say, but that may have been just native caution. Or he may not want Danley to know what's on his mind."

"How could he bring Danley out here without telling him anything beforehand?" Alhamid asked thoughtfully.

"Is Danley really that ignorant, or was the whole conversation for our ears?"

"I'm inclined to think that Danley really didn't know. Remember, George, the best way to hold down the ones below you is to keep them from gaining any knowledge, to keep data out of their hands--except for the carefully doctored data you want them to have."

"I know," Alhamid said. "History isn't exactly a popular subject on Earth." He tapped his fingers gently on the case of the playback and looked at it as if he were trying to read the minds of the persons who had spoken the words he had just heard.

"I really think he believed that his nullifying equipment was doing its job," the governor continued. "He wouldn't have any way of knowing we could counteract it."

Alhamid shrugged. "It doesn't matter much. We still have to assume that he's primarily out to bring the Belt Cities under Earth control. To do that, all he'd have to do is find something that could be built up into a scandal on Earth."

"Not, all, George," the governor said. "It would take a lot more than that alone. But it would certainly be a start in the right direction."

"One thing we do know," Alhamid said, "is that nobody on Earth will allow any action against the Belt unless popular sentiment is definitely against us. As long as we are apparently right-thinking people, we're all right. I wonder why Tarnhorst is so anxious to get us under the thumb of the People's Congress? Is it purely that half-baked idealism of his?"

"Mostly. He has the notion that everybody has a right to be accorded the respect of his fellow man, and that that right is something that every person is automatically given at birth, not something he has to earn. What gave him his particular gripe against us, I don't know, but he's been out to get us ever since his trip here three years ago."

"You know, Larry," Alhamid said slowly, "I'm not quite sure which is harder to understand: How a whole civilization could believe that sort of thing, or how a single intelligent man could."

"It's a positive feedback," the governor said. "That sort of thing has wrecked civilizations before and will do it again. Let's not let it wreck ours. Are you ready for the conference with our friend now?"

Georges Alhamid looked at the clock on the wall. "Ready as I'll ever be. You'd better scram, Larry. We mustn't give Mr. Tarnhorst the impression that there's some sort of collusion between business and government out there in the Belt."

"Heaven forfend! I'll get."

When he left, the governor took the playback with him. The recording would have to be filed in the special secret files.

Captain St. Simon eased his spaceboat down to the surface of Pallas and threw on the magnetic anchor which held the little craft solidly to the metal surface of the landing field. The traffic around Pallas was fairly heavy this time of year, since the planetoid was on the same side of the sun as Earth, and the big cargo haulers were moving in and out, loading refined metals and raw materials, unloading manufactured goods from Earth. He'd had to wait several minutes in the traffic pattern before being given clearance for anchoring.

He was already dressed in his vacuum suit, and the cabin of the boat was exhausted of its air. He checked his control board, making sure every switch and dial was in the proper position. Only then did he open the door and step out to the gray surface of the landing field. His suitcase—a spherical, sealed container that the Belt men jokingly referred to as a "bomb"—went with him. He locked the door of his boat and walked down the yellow-painted safety
lane toward the nearest air lock leading into the interior of the planetoid.

He lifted his feet and set them down with precision—nobody but a fool wears glide boots on the outside. He kept his eyes moving—up and around, on both sides, above, and behind. The yellow path was supposed to be a safety lane, but there was no need of taking the chance of having an out-of-control ship come sliding in on him. Of course, if it was coming in really fast, he'd have no chance to move; he might not even see it at all. But why get slugged by a slow one?

He waited outside the air-lock door for the green light to come on. There were several other space-suited figures around him, but he didn't recognize any of them. He hummed softly to himself.

The green light came on, and the door of the air lock slid open. The small crowd trooped inside, and, after a minute, the door slid shut again. As the elevator dropped, St. Simon heard the familiar whoosh as the air came rushing in. By the time it had reached the lower level, the elevator was up to pressure.

* * * * *

On Earth, there might have been a sign in such an elevator, reading: DO NOT REMOVE VACUUM SUITS IN ELEVATOR. There was no need for it here; every man there knew how to handle himself in an air lock. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have been there.

After he had stepped out of the elevator, along with the others, and the door had closed behind him, St. Simon carefully opened the cracking valve on his helmet. There was a faint hiss of incoming air, adjusting the slight pressure differential. He took off his helmet, tucked it under his arm, and headed for the check-in station.

He was walking down the corridor toward the checker's office when a hand clapped him on the shoulder. "Bless me if it isn't St. Simon the Silent! Long time no, if you'll pardon the cliché, see!"

St. Simon turned, grinning. He had recognized the voice. "Hi, Kerry. Good to see you."

"Good to see me? Forsooth! Od's bodkins! Hast turned liar on top of everything else, Good Saint? Good to see me, indeed! 'From such a face and form as mine, the noblest sentiments sound like the black utterances of a depraved imagination.' No, dear old holy pillar-sitter, no indeed! It may be a pleasure to hear my mellifluous voice--a pleasure I often indulge in, myself--but it couldn't possibly be a pleasure to see me!" And all the while, St. Simon was being pummeled heartily on the shoulder, while his hand was pumped as though the other man was expecting to strike oil at any moment.

His assailant was not a handsome man. Years before, a rare, fast-moving meteor had punched its way through his helmet and taken part of his face with it. He had managed to get back to his ship and pump air in before he lost consciousness. He had had to stay conscious, because the only thing that held the air in his helmet had been his hand pressed over the quarter-inch hole. Even so, the drop in pressure had done its damage. The surgeons had done their best to repair the smashed face, but Kerry Brand's face hadn't been much to look at to begin with. And the mottled purple of the distended veins and capillaries did little to improve his looks.

But his ruined face was a badge of honor, and Kerry Brand knew the fact as well as anyone.

Like St. Simon, Captain Brand was a professional anchor-setter. Most of the men who put in the necessary two years went on to better jobs after they had the required space experience. But there were some who liked the job and stuck with it. It was only these men--the real experts among the anchor-setting fraternity--who rated the title of "Captain". They were free-lancers who ran things pretty much their own way.

"Just going to the checker?" St. Simon asked.

Kerry Brand shook his head. "I've already checked in, old sanctus. And I'll give you three and one-seventh guesses who got a blue ticket."

St. Simon said nothing, but he pointed a finger at Brand's chest.

"A mild surmise, but a true one," said Brand. "You are, indeed, gazung upon Professor Kerry Brand, B.A., M.A., Ph.D.--that is to say, Borer of Asteroids, Master of Anchors, and Planetoid-hauler De-luxe. No, no; don't look sorry for me. Somebody has to teach the tadpoles How To Survive In Space If You're Not Too Stupid To Live--a subject upon which I am an expert."

"On Being Too Stupid To Live?" St. Simon asked gently.

"A touch! A distinct touch! You are developing a certain unexpected vein of pawky humor, Watson, against which I must learn to guard myself." He looked at the watch on his wrist. "Why don't you go ahead and check in, and then we'll go pub-crawling. I have it on good authority that a few thousand gallons of Danish ale were piped aboard Pallas yesterday, and you and I should do our best to reduce the surplus."

"Sounds good to me," said St. Simon agreeably. They started on toward the checker's office.

"Consider, my dear St. Simon," said Brand, "how fortunate we are to be living in an age and a society where the dictum, 'Those who can, do; those who can't, teach,' no longer holds true. It means that we weary, work-hardened experts are called in every so often, handed our little blue ticket, and given six months off--with pay--if we will only do the younger generation the favor of pounding a modicum of knowledge into their heads. During that
time, if we are very careful, we can try to prevent our muscles from going to flab and our brains from corroding with ennui, so that when we again debark into the infinite sea of emptiness which surrounds us to pursue our chosen profession, we don't get killed on the first try. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Cheer up," said St. Simon. "Teaching isn't such a bad lot. And, after all, you do get paid for it."

"And at a salary! A Pooh-Bah paid for his services! I a salaried minion! But I do it! It revolts me, but I do it!"

The short, balding man behind the checker's desk looked up as the two men approached. "Hello, captain," he said as St. Simon stepped up to the desk.

"How are you, Mr. Murtaugh?" St. Simon said politely. He handed over his log book. "There's the data on my last ten. I'll be staying here for a few days, so there's no need to rush the refill requisition. Any calls for me?"

The checker put the log book in the duplicator. "I'll see if there are, captain." He went over to the autofile and punched St. Simon's serial number.

Very few people write to an anchor man. Since he is free to check in and reload at any of the major Belt Cities, and since, in his search for asteroids, his erratic orbit is likely to take him anywhere, it might be months or years before a written letter caught up with him. On the other hand, a message could be beamed to every city, and he could pick it up wherever he was. It cost money, but it was sure.

"One call," the checker said. He handed St. Simon a message slip.

It was unimportant. Just a note from a girl on Vesta. He promised himself that he'd make his next break at Vesta, come what may. He stuck the flimsy in his pocket, and waited while the checker went through the routine of recording his log and making out a pay voucher.

There was no small talk between himself and the checker. Mr. Murtaugh had not elected to take the schooling necessary to qualify for other than a small desk job. He had no space experience. Unless and until he did, there would be an invisible, but nonetheless real barrier between himself and any spaceman. It was not that St. Simon looked down on the man, exactly; it was simply that Murtaugh had not proved himself, and, therefore, there was no way of knowing whether he could be trusted or not. And since trust is a positive quality, lack of it can only mean mistrust.

Murtaugh handed Captain St. Simon an envelope. "That's it, captain. Thank you."

St. Simon opened the envelope, took out his check--and a blue ticket.

Kerry Brand broke into a guffaw.

* * * * *

When the phone on his desk rang, Georges Alhamid scooped it up and identified himself.

"This is Larry, George," said the governor's voice. "How are things so far?"

"So far, so good," Alhamid said. "For the past week, Mr. Peter Danley has been working his head off, under the tutelage of two of the toughest, smartest anchor men in the business. But you should have seen the looks on their faces when I told them they were going to have an Earthman for a pupil."

The governor laughed. "I'll bet! How's he coming along?"

"He's learning. How are you doing with your pet?"

"I think I'm softening him, George. I found out what it was that got his goat three years ago."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. On Ceres, where he went three years ago, he was treated as if he weren't as good as a Belt man."

Alhamid frowned. "Someone was disrespectful?"

"No--that is, not exactly. But he was treated as if we didn't trust his judgment, as though we were a little bit afraid of him."

"Oh-ho! I see what you mean."

"Sure. We treated him just as we would anyone who hasn't proved himself. And that meant we were treating him the same way we treated our own 'lower classes', as he thought of them. I had Governor Holger get his Ceres detectives to trace down everything that happened. You can read the transcript if you want. There's nothing particularly exciting in it, but you can see the pattern if you know what to look for."

"I'm not even certain it was fully conscious on his part; I'm not sure he knew why he disliked us. All he was convinced of was that we were arrogant and thought we were better than he is. It's kind of hard for us to see that a person would be that deeply hurt by seeing the plain truth that someone else is obviously better at something than he is, but you've got to remember that an Earthman is brought up to believe that every person is just exactly as good as every other--and no better. A man may have a skill that you don't have, but that doesn't make him superior--oh, my, no!"

"Anyway, I started out by apologizing for our habit of standing up all the time. I managed to plant the idea in his mind that the only thing that made him think we felt superior was that habit. I've even got him to the point where he's standing up all the time, too. Makes him feel very superior. He's learned the native customs."
"I get you," Alhamid said. "I probably contributed to that inferiority feeling of his myself."

" Didn't we all? Anyway, the next step was to take him around and introduce him to some of the execs in the government and in a couple of the Companies--I briefed 'em beforehand. Friendly chats--that sort of thing. I think we're going to have to learn the ancient art of diplomacy out here if we're going to survive, George."

"The crowning glory came this afternoon. You should have been there."

"I was up to here in work, Larry. I just couldn't take the time off to attend a club luncheon. Did the great man give his speech?"

"Did he? I should hope to crack my helmet he did! We must all pull together, George, did you know that? We must care for the widow and the orphan--and the needy, George, the needy. We must be sure to provide the fools, the idiots, the malingerers, the moral degenerates, and such useful, lovable beings as that with the necessities and the luxuries of life. We must see to it that they are respected and permitted to have their dignity. We must see to it that the dear little things are permitted the rights of a human being to hold his head up and spit in your eye if he wishes. We must see to it that they be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the Earth."

"They've already done that," Alhamid said caustically. "And they can have it. Let's just see that they don't replenish the Belt. So what happened?"

"Why, George, you'll never realize how much we appreciated that speech. We gave him a three-minute rising ovation. I think he was surprised to see that we could stand for three minutes under a one-gee pull in the centrifuge. And you should have seen the smiles on our faces, George."

"I hope nobody broke out laughing."

"We managed to restrain ourselves," the governor said.

"What's next on the agenda?"

"Well, it'll be tricky, but I think I can pull it off. I'm going to take him around and show him that we do take care of the widow and the orphan, and hope that he assumes we are as solicitous toward the rest of his motley crew. Wish me luck."

"Good luck. You may need it."

"Same to you. Take care of Danley."

"Don't worry. He's in good hands. See you, Larry."

"Right."

* * * * *

There were three space-suited men on the bleak rocky ground near the north pole of Pallas, a training area of several square miles known as the North Forty. Their helmets gleamed in the bright, hard light from a sun that looked uncomfortably small to an Earthman's eyes. Two of the men were standing, facing each other some fifteen feet apart. The third, attached to them by safety lines, was hanging face down above the surface, rising slowly, like a balloon that has almost more weight than it can lift.

"No, no, no, Mr. Danley! You are not crawling, Mr. Danley, you are climbing! Do you understand that? Climbing! You have to climb an asteroid, just as you would climb a cliff on Earth. You have to hold on every second of the time, or you will fall off!" St. Simon's voice sounded harsh in Danley's earphones, and he felt irritatingly helpless poised floatingly above the ground that way.

His instructors were well anchored by metal eyes set into the rocky surface for just that purpose. Although Pallas was mostly nickel-iron, this end of it was stony, which was why it had been selected as a training ground.

"What do you do now? If this were a small rock, you'd be drifting a long ways away by now. Think, Mr. Danley, think."

"Then shut up and let me think!" Danley snarled.

"If small things distract you from thinking about the vital necessity of saving your own life, Mr. Danley, you would not live long in the Belt."

Danley reached out an arm to see if he could touch the ground. When he had pushed himself upwards with a thrust of his knee, he hadn't given himself too hard a shove. He had reached the apex of his slow flight, and was drifting downward again. He grasped a jutting rock and pulled himself back to the surface.

"Very good, Mr. Danley--but that wouldn't work on a small rock. You took too long. What would you have done on a rock with a millionth of a gee of pull?"

Danley was silent.

"Well?" St. Simon barked. "What would you do?"

"I ... I don't know," Danley admitted.

"Ye gods and little fishhooks!" This was Kerry Brand's voice. It was supposed to be St. Simon's turn to give the verbal instructions, but Brand allowed himself an occasional remark when it was appropriate.

St. Simon's voice was bitingly sweet. "What do you think those safety lines are for, Mr. Danley? Do you think
they are for decorative purposes?"

"Well ... I thought I was supposed to think of some other way. I mean, that's so obvious--"

"Mr. Danley," St. Simon said with sudden patience, "we are not here to give you riddles to solve. We're here to teach you how to stay alive in the Belt. And one of the first rules you must learn is that you will never leave your boat without a safety line. Never!

"An anchor man, Mr. Danley, is called that for more than one reason. You cannot anchor your boat to a rock unless there is an eye-bolt set in it. And if it already has an eye-bolt, you would have no purpose on that rock. In a way, you will be the anchor of your boat, since you will be tied to it by your safety line. If the boat drifts too far from your rock while you are working, it will pull you off the surface, since it has more mass than you do. That shouldn't be allowed to happen, but, if it does, you are still with your boat, rather than deserted on a rock for the rest of your life--which wouldn't be very long. When the power unit in your suit ran out of energy, it would stop breaking your exhaled carbon dioxide down into carbon and oxygen, and you would suffocate. Even with emergency tanks of oxygen, you would soon find yourself freezing to death. That sun up there isn't very warm, Mr. Danley."

Peter Danley was silent, but it was an effort to remain so. He wanted to remind St. Simon that he, Danley, had been a spaceman for nearly fifteen years. But he was also aware that he was learning things that weren't taught at Earthside schools. Most of his professional life had been spent aboard big, comfortable ships that made the short Earth-Luna hop. He could probably count the total hours he had spent in a spacesuit on the fingers of his two hands.

"All right, Mr. Danley; let's begin again. Climb along the surface. Use toeholds, handholds, and fingerholds. Feel your way along. Find those little crevices that will give you a grip. It doesn't take much. You're a lot better off than a mountain climber on Earth because you don't have to fight your weight. You have only your mass to worry about. That's it. Fine. Very good, Mr. Danley."

* * * * *

And, later:

"Now, Mr. Danley," said Captain Brand, "you are at the end of your tether, so to speak."

The three men were in a space boat, several hundred miles from Pallas. Or, rather, two of them were in the boat, standing at the open door. Peter Danley was far out from it, at the end of his safety line.

"How far are you from us, Mr. Danley?" Brand asked.

"Three hundred meters, Captain Brand," Danley said promptly.

"Very good. How do you know?"

"I am at the end of my safety line, which is three hundred meters long when fully extended."

"Your memory is excellent, Mr. Danley. Now, how will you get back to the boat?"

"Pull myself hand over hand along the line."

"Think, Mr. Danley! Think!"

"Uh. Oh. Well, I wouldn't keep pulling. I'd just give myself a tug and then coast in, taking up the line slowly as I went."

"Excellent! What would happen if you, as you put it, pulled yourself in hand over hand, as if you were climbing a rope on Earth?"

"I would accelerate too much," Danley said. "I'd gain too much momentum and probably bash my brains out against the boat. And I'd have no way to stop myself."

"Bully for you, Mr. Danley! Now see if you can put into action that which you have so succinctly put into words. Come back to the boat. Gently the first time. We'll have plenty of practice, so that you can get the feel of the muscle pull that will give you a maximum of velocity with a minimum of impact at this end. Gently, now."

* * * * *

Still later:

"Judgment, Mr. Danley!" St. Simon cautioned. "You have to use judgment! A space boat is not an automobile. There is no friction out here to slow it to a stop. Your accelerator is just exactly that--an accelerator. Taking your foot off it won't slow you down a bit; you've got to use your reverse."

Peter Danley was at the controls of the boat. There were tiny beads of perspiration on his forehead. Over a kilometer away was a good-sized hunk of rock; his instructors wouldn't let him get any closer. They wanted to be sure that they could take over before the boat struck the rock, just in case Danley should freeze to the accelerator a little too long.

He wasn't used to this sort of thing. He was used to a taped acceleration-deceleration program which lifted a big ship, aimed it, and went through the trip all automatically. All he had ever had to do was drop it the last few hundred feet to a landing field.

"Keep your eyes moving," St. Simon said. "Your radar can give you data that you need, just remember that it
can't think for you."

Your right foot controls your forward acceleration.
Your left foot controls your reverse acceleration.
They can't be pushed down together; when one goes down, the other goes up. Balance one against the other.
Turning your wheel controls the roll of the boat.
Pulling your wheel toward you, or pushing it away, controls the pitch.
Shifting the wheel left, or right, controls the yaw.
The instructions had been pounded into his head until each one seemed to ring like a separate little bell. The
problem was coordinating his body to act on those instructions.

One of the radar dials told him how far he was from the rock. Another told him his radial velocity relative to it.
A third told him his angular velocity.

"Come to a dead stop exactly one thousand meters from the surface, Mr. Danley," St. Simon ordered.
Danley worked the controls until both his velocity meters read zero, and the distance meter read exactly one
kilometer.

"Very good, Mr. Danley. Now assume that the surface of your rock is at nine hundred ninety-five meters. Bring
your boat to a dead stop exactly fifty centimeters from that surface."
Danley worked the controls again. He grinned with satisfaction when the distance meter showed nine nine five
point five on the nose.

Captain St. Simon sighed deeply. "Mr. Danley, do you feel a little shaken up? Banged around a little? Do you
feel as though you'd just gotten a bone-rattling shock?"

"Uh ... no."

"You should. You slammed this boat a good two feet into the surface of that rock before you backed out again."
His voice changed tone. "Dammit, Mr. Danley, when I say 'surface at nine nine five', I mean surface!"

* * * * *

Edway Tarnhorst had been dictating notes for his reports into his recorder, and was rather tired, so when he
asked Peter Danley what he had learned, he was rather irritated when the blond man closed his blue eyes and
repeated, parrotlike:

"Due to the lack of a water-oxygen atmosphere, many minerals are found in the asteroids which are unknown
on Earth. Among the more important of these are: Oldhamite (CaS); Daubréelite (FECr{2}S{4}); Schreibersite and
Rhabdite (Fe{3}Ni{3}P); Lawrencite (FeCl{2}); and Taenite, an alloy of iron containing--"

"That's not precisely the sort of thing I meant," Tarnhorst interrupted testily.

Danley smiled. "I know. I'm sorry. That's my lesson for tomorrow."

"So I gathered. May I sit down?" There were only two chairs in the room. Danley was occupying one, and a
pile of books was occupying the other.

Danley quickly got to his feet and began putting the books on his desk. "Certainly, Mr. Tarnhorst. Sit down."

Tarnhorst lowered himself into the newly emptied chair. "I apologize for interrupting your studies," he said. "I
realize how important they are. But there are a few points I'd like to discuss with you."

"Certainly." Danley seated himself and looked at the older man expectantly. "The nullifiers are on," he said.

"Of course," Tarnhorst said absently. Then, changing his manner, he said abruptly: "Have you found anything
yet?"

Danley shook his head. "No. It looks to me as though they've done everything possible to make sure that these
men get the best equipment and the best training. The training instructors have been through the whole affair
themselves--they know the ropes. The equipment, as far as I can tell, is top grade stuff. From what I have seen so
far, the Company isn't stinting on the equipment or the training."

Tarnhorst nodded. "After nearly three months of investigation, I have come to the same conclusion myself. The
records show that expenditures on equipment has been steadily increasing. The equipment they have now, I
understand, is almost failure-proof?" He looked questioningly at Danley.

Danley nodded. "Apparently. Certainly no one is killed because of equipment failure. It's the finest stuff I've
ever seen."

"And yet," Tarnhorst said, "their books show that they are constantly seeking to improve it."

"I don't suppose there is any chance of juggling the books on you, is there?"

Tarnhorst smiled a superior smile. "Hardly. In the first place, I know bookkeeping. In the second, it would be
impossible to whip up a complete set of balancing books--covering a period of nearly eighty years--overnight.

"I agree," Danley said. "I don't think they set up a special training course just for me overnight, either. I've seen
classes on Vesta, Juno, and Eros--and they're all the same. There aren't any fancy false fronts to fool us, Mr.
Tarnhorst: I've looked very closely."
"Have you talked to the men?"
"Yes. They have no complaints."

Again Tarnhorst nodded. "I have found the same thing. They all insist that if a man gets killed in space, it's not the fault of anyone but himself. Or, as it may be, an act of God."

"One of my instructors ran into an act of God some years ago," Danley said. "You've met him. Brand--the one with the scarred face." He explained to Tarnhorst what had caused Brand's disfigurement. "But he survived," he finished, "because he kept his wits about him even after he was hit."

"Commendable; very commendable," Tarnhorst said. "If he'd been an excitable fool, he'd have died."

"True. But what I was trying to point out was that it wasn't equipment failure that caused the accident."

"No. You're quite right." Tarnhorst was silent for a moment, then he looked into Danley's eyes. "Do you think you could take on a job as anchor man now?"

"I don't know," said Danley evenly. "But I'm going to find out tomorrow."

* * * * *

Peter Danley took his final examination the following day. All by himself, he went through the procedure of positioning his ship, setting up a rocket drill, firing it, and setting in an anchor. It was only a small rock, nine meters through, but the job was almost the same as with the big ones. Not far away, Captain St. Simon watched the Earthman's procedure through a pair of high-powered field glasses. He breathed a deep sigh of relief when the job was done.

"Jules," he said softly, "I am sure glad that man didn't hurt himself any."

"Yes, suh! We'd of sho' been in trouble if he'd of killed hiself!"

"We will have to tell Captain Brand that our pupil has done pretty well for such a small amount of schooling."

"I think that would be proper, m'lud."

"And we will also have to tell Captain Brand that this boy wouldn't last a month. He wouldn't come back from his first trip."

There was no answer to that.

* * * * *

Three days later, amid a cloud of generally satisfied feelings, Edway Tarnhorst and Peter Danley took the ship back to Earth.

"I cannot, of course, give you a copy of my report," Tarnhorst had told Georges Alhamid. "That is for the eyes of the Committee only. However, I may say that I do not find the Belt Companies or the governments of the Belt Cities at fault. Do you want to know my personal opinion?"

"I would appreciate it, Mr. Tarnhorst," Georges had said.

"Carelessness. Just plain carelessness on the part of the workers. That is what has caused your rise in death rates. You people out here in the Belt have become too used to being in space. Familiarity breeds contempt, Mr. Alhamid.

"Steps must be taken to curb that carelessness. I suggest a publicity campaign of some kind. The people must be thoroughly indoctrinated in safety procedures and warned against carelessness. Just a few months of schooling isn't enough, Mr. Alhamid. You've got to start pounding it into their heads early.

"If you don't--" He shook his head. (He had grown used to doing so in low gravity by now.) "If the death rate isn't cut down, we shall have to raise the premium rates, and I don't know what will happen on the floor of the People's Congress. However, I think I can guarantee six months to a year before any steps are taken. That will give you time to launch your safety campaign. I'm certain that as soon as this carelessness is curbed, the claims will drop down to their former low point."

"We'll certainly try that," Alhamid had said heartily. "Thank you very much, Mr. Tarnhorst."

When they had finally gone, Alhamid spoke to the governor.

"That's that, Larry. You can bring it up at the next meeting of the Board of Governors. Get some kind of publicity campaign going. Plug safety. Tell 'em carelessness is bad. It can't hurt anything and actually might help, who knows?"

"What are you going to do at your end?"

"What we should have done long ago: finance the insurance ourselves. For the next couple of years, we'll only make death claims to Earth for a part of the total. We'll pay off the rest ourselves. Then we'll tell 'em we've brought the cost down so much that we can afford to do our own insurance financing.

"We let this insurance thing ride too long, and it has damn near got us in a jam. We needed the income from Earth. We still could use it, but we need our independence more."

"I second the motion," the governor said fervently. "Look, suppose you come over to my place tonight, and we'll work out the details of this report. O.K.? Say at nine?"
"Fine, Larry. I'll see you then."

Alhamid went back to his office. He was met at the door by his secretary, who handed him a sealed envelope.

"The Earthman left this here for you. He said you'd know what to do with it."

Alhamid took the envelope and looked at the name on the outside. "Which Earthman?" he asked.

"The young one," she said, "the blond one."

"It isn't even addressed to me," Alhamid said with a note of puzzled speculation in his voice.

"No. I noticed that. I told him he could send it straight to the school, but he said you would know how to handle it."

Alhamid looked at the envelope again, and his eyes narrowed a little. "Call Captain St. Simon, will you? Tell him I would like to have him come to my office. Don't mention this letter; I don't want it breezed all over Pallas."

It was nearly twenty minutes before St. Simon showed up. Alhamid handed him the envelope. "You have a message from your star pupil. For some reason, he wanted me to deliver it to you. I have a hunch you'll know what that reason is after you read it." He grinned. "I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me when you find out. This Mr. Danley has worried me all along."

St. Simon scowled at the envelope, then ripped off one end and took out the typed sheets. He read them carefully, then handed them over to Alhamid. "You'd better read this yourself, George."

Georges Alhamid took the pages and began to read.

Dear Captain St. Simon:

I am addressing this to you rather than anyone else because I think you will understand more than anyone else. Captain Brand is a fine person, but I have never felt very much at ease with him. (I won't go into the psychological reasons that may exist, other than admit that my reasons are purely emotional. I don't honestly know how much they are based on his disfigurement.) Mr. Alhamid is almost a stranger to me. You are the only Belt man I feel I know well.

First, I want to say that I honestly enjoyed our three months together. There were times when I could have cheerfully bashed your head in, I'll admit, but the experience has left me feeling more like a real human being, more like a person in my own right, than I have ever felt before in my life. Believe me, I appreciate it deeply. I know now that I can do things on my own without being dependent on the support of a team or a committee, and for that I am grateful.

Tarnhorst has heard my report and accepted it. His report to the People's Congress will lay the entire blame for the death rate rise on individual carelessness rather than on any fault of management.

I think, in the main, I am justified in making such a report to Tarnhorst, although I am fully aware that it is incomplete. I know that if I had told him the whole truth there would be a ruckus kicked up on Earth that would cause more trouble in the Belt than I'd care to think about. I'm sure you're as aware of the political situation as I am.

You see, I know that anchor-setting could be made a great deal safer. I know that machines could be developed which would make the job so nearly automatic that the operator would never be exposed to any more danger than he would be in a ship on the Earth-Luna run. Perhaps that's a little exaggerated, but not much.

What puzzled me was: Why? Why shouldn't the Companies build these machines if they were more efficient? Why should every Belt man defend the system as it was? Why should men risk their necks when they could demand better equipment? (I don't mean that the equipment presently used is poor; I just mean that full mechanization would do away with the present type of equipment and replace it with a different type.)

Going through your course of instruction gave me the answer to that, even though I didn't take the full treatment.

All my life, I've belonged to an organization of some kind--the team, the crew, whatever it might be. But the Team was everything, and I was recognized only as a member of the Team. I was a replaceable plug-in unit, not an individual in my own right. I don't know that I can explain the difference exactly, but it seems to me that the Team is something outside of which the individual has no existence, while the men of the Belt can form a team because they know that each member is self-sufficient in his own right.

On Earth, we all depend on the Team, and, in the long run, that means that we are depending on each other--but none of us feels he can depend on himself. Every man hopes that, as a member of the Team, he will be saved from his own errors, his own failures. But he knows that everyone else is doing the same thing, and, deep down inside, he knows that they are not deserving of his reliance. So he puts his reliance in the Team, as if that were some sort of separate entity in itself, and had magical, infallible powers that were greater than the aggregate of the individuals that composed it.

In a way, this is certainly so, since teamwork can accomplish things that mobs cannot do. But the Team is a failure if each member assumes that he, himself, is helpless and can do nothing, but that the Team will do it for him.

Men who have gone through the Belt training program, men who have "space experience," as you so
euphemistically put it, are men who can form a real team, one that will get things done because each man knows he can rely on the others, not only as a team, but as individuals. But to mechanize the anchor-setting phase would destroy all that completely.

I don't want to see that destroyed, because I have felt what it is to be a part of the Belt team, even though only a small and unreliable part. Actually, I know I was not and could never be a real member of that team, but I was and am proud to have scrimmaged with the team, and I'm glad to be able to sit on the side-lines and cheer even if I can't carry the ball. (It just occurred to me that those metaphors might be a little cloudy to you, since you don't have football in the Belt, but I think you see what I mean.) I imagine that most of the men who have no "space experience" feel the same way. They know they'd never make a go of it out in space, but they're happy to be water boys.

I wish I could stay in the Belt. I'm enough of a spaceman to appreciate what it really is to be a member of a space society. But I also know that I'd never last. I'm not fitted for it, really. I've had a small taste of it, but I know I couldn't take a full dose. I've worked hard for the influence and security I have in my job, and I couldn't give it up. Maybe this brands me as a coward in your eyes, and maybe I am a coward, but that's the way I'm built. I hope you'll take that into account when you think of me.

At any rate, I have done what I have done. On Earth, there are men who envy you and hate you, and there will be others who will try to destroy you, but I have done what I could to give you a chance to gain the strength you need to resist the encroachment of Earth's sickness.

I have a feeling that Tarnhorst saw your greatness, too, although he'd never admit it, even to himself. Certainly something changed him during the last months, even though he doesn't realize it. He came out wanting to help--and by that, he meant help the common people against the "tyranny" of the Companies. He still wants to help the common people, but now he wants to do it through the Companies. The change is so subtle that he doesn't think he's changed at all, but I can see it.

I don't deserve any thanks for what I have done. All I have done is repay you in the only way I knew how for what you have done for me. I may never see you again, captain, but I will always remember you. Please convey my warmest regards to Captain Brand and to Mr. Alhamid.

Sincerely,

Peter Danley

* * * * *

Georges Alhamid handed the letter back to St. Simon. "There's your star pupil," he said gently.

St. Simon nodded. "The wise fool. The guy who's got sense enough to know that he isn't competent to do the job."

"Did you notice that he waltzed all around the real reason for the anchor-setting program without quite hitting it?"

St. Simon smiled humorlessly. "Sure. Notice the wording of the letter. He still thinks in terms of the Team, even when he's trying not to. He thinks we do this just to train men to have a real good Team Spirit. He can't see that that is only a very useful by-product."

"How could he think otherwise?" Alhamid asked. "To him, or to Tarnhorst, the notion of deliberately tailoring a program so that it would kill off the fools and the incompetents, setting up a program that will deliberately destroy the men who are dangerous to society, would be horrifying. They would accuse us of being soulless butchers who had no respect for the dignity of the human soul."

"We're not butchering anybody," St. Simon objected. "Nobody is forced to die. We're not running people into gas chambers or anything like that."

"No; of course not. But would you expect an Earthman like Tarnhorst to see the difference? How could we explain to him that we have no objection to fools other than that we object to putting them in positions where they can harm others by their foolishness? Would you expect him to understand that we must have a method of eliminating those who are neither competent enough to be trusted with the lives of others nor wise enough to see that they are not competent? How would you tell him that the reason we send men out alone is so that if he destroys anyone by his foolishness--after we have taught him everything we know in the best way we know how--he will only destroy himself?"

"I wouldn't even try," St. Simon said. "There's an old saying that neither money, education, liquor, nor women ever made a fool of a man, they just give a born fool a chance to display his foolishness. Space ought to be added to that list."

"Did you notice something else about that letter?" Alhamid asked. "I mean, the very fact that he wrote a letter instead of telling you personally?"

"Sure. He didn't trust me. He was afraid I, or someone else, would dispose of him if we knew he knew our
"I think that's it," Alhamid agreed. "He wanted to be safely away first."

"Killing him would have brought down the biggest investigation the Earth Congress has launched since the crack-up of the Earth-Luna ship thirty years ago. Does he think we are fools?"

"You can't blame him. He's been brought up that way, and three months of training isn't going to change him."

St. Simon frowned. "Suppose he changes his mind? Suppose he tells Tarnhorst what he thinks?"

"He won't. He's told his lie, and now he'll have to stick by it or lose his precious security. If he couldn't trade that for freedom, he sure isn't going to throw it away." Alhamid grinned. "But can you imagine a guy thinking that anchor setting could be completely mechanized?"

St. Simon grinned back. "I guess I'm not a very good teacher after all. I told him and told him and told him for three solid months that the job required judgment, but it evidently didn't sink in. He's got the heart of a romantic and the soul of an Earthman--a very bad combination."

"He has my sympathy," Alhamid said with feeling. "Now, about you. Your blue ticket still has three months to run, but I can't give you a class if you're only going to run through the first half of the course with them, and I don't have any more Earthmen for you to give special tutoring to. You have three choices: You can loaf with pay for three months; you can go back to space and get double pay for three months; or you can take a regular six-month class and get double pay for the last three months. Which'll it be?"

St. Simon grinned widely. "I'm going to loaf until I get sick of it, then I'll go back to space and collect double pay for what's left of the three months. First off, I'm going to take a run over to Vesta. After that, who knows?"

"I thought so. Most of you guys would stay out there forever if you didn't have to come back for supplies."

St. Simon shook his head. "Nope. Not true. A man's got to come back every so often and get his feet on the ground. If you stay out there too long, you get to talking to yourself."

* * * * *

An hour later, the spaceboat Nancy Bell lifted from the surface of Pallas and shot toward Vesta.

"Jules, old cobblestone, we have just saved civilization."

"Jawohl, Herr Hassenpfefferesser! Und now ve go to find das Mädchen, nicht war?"

"Herr Professor Hassenpfefferesser to you, my boy."

And then, all alone in his spaceboat, Captain Jules St. Simon burst into song:

"Oh, I'm the cook and the captain, too, And the men of the Nancy's brig; The bosun tight, and the midshipmite, And the crew of the captain's gig!"

And the Nancy Bell sped on toward Vesta and a rendezvous with Eros.
CHAPTER I
Off to the Rendezvous

Though it is seldom nowadays that Earthmen hear mention of Hawk Carse, there are still places in the universe
where his name retains all its old magic. These are the lonely outposts of the farthest planets, and here when the
outlanders gather to yarn the idle hours away their tales conjure up from the past that raw, lusty period before the
patrol-ships came, and the slender adventurer, gray-eyed and with queer bangs of hair obscuring his forehead, whose
steely will, phenomenal ray-gun draw and reckless space-ship maneuverings combined to make him the period's
most colorful figure. These qualities of his live again in the outlanders' reminiscences and also of course his score of
blood-feuds and the one great feud that shook whole worlds in its final terrible settling--the feud of Hawk Carse and
Dr. Ku Sui.

Again and again the paths of the adventurer and the sinister, brilliant Eurasian crossed, and each crossing
makes a rich tale. Time after time Ku Sui, through his several bands of space-pirates, his individual agents and his
ambitious web of power insidiously weaving over the universe, whipped his tentacles after the Hawk, and always
the tentacles coiled back, repulsed and bloody. An almost typical episode is in the affair which followed what has
been called the Exploit of the Hawk and the Kite.

It will be remembered--as related in "Hawk Carse"[1]--that Dr. Ku laid a most ingenious trap for Carse on the
latter's ranch on Iapetus, eighth satellite of Saturn. Judd the Kite, pirate and scavenger, was the Eurasian's tool in this
plot, which started with a raid on the ranch. The fracas which followed the Hawk's escape from the trap was bloody
and grim enough, and resulted in the erasure of Judd and all his men save one; but the important thing to the
following affair was that Judd's ship, the Scorpion, fell into Carse's hands with one prisoner and the ship's log,
containing the space coordinates for a prearranged assignation of Judd with Ku Sui.

[1] See the November, 1931, issue of Astounding Stories.

All other projects were postponed by the Hawk at this opportunity to meet Dr. Ku face to face. The trail of the
Eurasian was the guiding trail of his life, and swiftly he moved along it.

There was work to be done before he could set out. Three men had emerged alive from the clash between the
Hawk and the Kite: Carse himself, Friday, his gigantic negro companion in adventure, and a bearded half-caste
called Sako, sole survivor of Judd's crew. Aided sullenly by this man, they first cleaned up the ravaged ranch,
burying the bodies of the dead, repairing fences and generally bringing order out of confusion. Then, under Carse's
instructions, Friday and the captive brigand tooled the adventurer's own ship, the Star Devil, well into the near-by
jungle, while the Hawk returned to the Scorpion.

He went into her control cabin, opened her log book and once more scanned what interested him there. The
notation ran:

"E.D. (Earth Date) 16 January, E.T. (Earth Time) 2:40 P.M. Meeting ordered by Ku Sui, for purpose of
delivering the skeleton and clothing of Carse to him, at N.S. (New System) X-33.7; Y-241.3; Z-92.8 on E.D. 24
January, E.T. 10:20 P.M. Note: the ship is to stand by at complete stop, the radio's receiver open to Ku Sui's private
wave (D37, X1293, R3) for further instructions."

He mulled over it, slowly stroking his flaxen bangs. It was a chance, and a good one. Judd's ship would keep
that rendezvous, but it would sheathe the talons of the Hawk. This time a trap would be laid for Ku Sui.

* * * * *

The plan was simple enough, on the face of it, but the Eurasian was a master of cunning as well as a master of
science, and high peril attended any matching of wits with him. Carse closed the log, his face bleak, his mind made
up. A shuffle of feet brought his gaze up to the port-lock entrance.

Friday, stripped to shorts, a sweat-glistening ebony giant, stood there. Shaking the drops of steaming
perspiration from his face, he reported:

"All finished, suh--got the Star Devil in the jungle where you said to hide her. An' now what? You still figurin'
on keepin' that date with Dr. Ku in this ship?"

Carse nodded, absently.

"Then where'll we pick up a crew, suh? Porno? It's the nearest port, I reckon."

"I'm not taking any crew, Eclipse."
Friday gaped in surprise at his master, then found words:
"No crew, suh? Against Ku Sui? We'll be throwin' our lives----"
"I've lost enough men in the last two days," Carse cut in shortly. "And this meeting with Dr. Ku is a highly
personal affair. You and I and Sako can run the ship; we've got to." One of the man's rare smiles relaxed his face.
"Of course," he murmured, "I'm risking your life, Eclipse. Perhaps I'd better leave you somewhere?"
"Say!" bellowed the negro indignantly.
The Hawk's smile broadened at the spontaneous exclamation of loyalty.
"Very well, then," he said. "Now send Sako to me, and prepare ship for casting off."

But as Friday went aft on a final thorough inspection of all mechanisms, he muttered over and over, "Two of
us--against Ku Sui! Two of us!" and he was still very much disturbed when, after Carse had had a few crisp words
with the captive Sako, telling him that he would be free but watched and that it would be wise if he confined himself
to his duties, the order came through to the engine room:
"Break ground!"

Gently the brigand ship Scorpion stirred. Then, in response to the delicate incline of her space-stick, she lifted
sweetly from the crust of Iapetus and at ever-increasing speed burned through the satellite's atmosphere toward the
limitless dark leagues beyond.

The Hawk was on the trail!

Carse took the first watch himself. Except for occasional glances at the banks of instruments, the screens and
celestial charts, he spent his time in deep thought, turning over in his mind the several variations of situation his
dangerous rendezvous might take.

First, how would Ku Sui contact the Scorpion? Any of three ways, he reasoned: come aboard from his own
craft accompanied by some of his men; stay behind and send some men over to receive the remains of the Hawk--for
either of which variations he was prepared; or, a third, and more dangerous, direct that the remains of Carse be
brought over to his ship, without showing himself or any of his crew.

Whatever variations their contacting took, there was another consideration, Carse's celestial charts revealed,
and that was the proximity of the rendezvous to Jupiter's Satellite III, less than three hundred thousand miles.
Satellite III harbored Port o' Porno, main refuge and home of the scavengers, the hi-jackers, and out-and-out pirates
of space, so many of whom were under Ku Sui's thumb. Several brigand ships were sure to be somewhere in the
vicinity, and one might easily intrude, destroying the hairbreadth balance in Carse's favor....

There was peril on every side. The Hawk considered that it would be wise to make provision against the odds
proving too great. So, his gray eyes reflective, he strode to the Scorpion's radio panel and a moment later was saying
over and over in a toneless voice:
"XX-1 calling XX-2--XX-1 calling XX-2--XX-1 calling XX-2...."

After a full two minutes there was still no answer from the loudspeaker. He kept calling: "XX-1 calling XX-2--
XX-1 calling XX-2--XX-1 calling XX-2----"

He broke off as words in English came softly from the loudspeaker:
"XX-2 answering XX-1. Do you hear me?"
"Yes. Give me protected connection. Highly important no outsider overhears."
"All right," the gentle voice answered. "Protected. Go ahead, old man."
The Hawk relaxed and his face softened. "How are you, Eliot?" he asked almost tenderly.
"Just fine, Carse," came in the clear, cultured voice of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, probably the greatest
scientific mind in the solar system, Ku Sui being the only possible exception. He spoke now from his secret
laboratory on Jupiter's Satellite III, near Porno, this transcendent genius who, with Friday, was one of Carse's two
trusted comrades-in-arms. "I've been expecting you," he went on. "Has something happened?"

"I'm concerned with Ku Sui again," the Hawk told him swiftly. "Please excuse me; I have to be brief. I can't
take any chances of his hearing any of this." He related the events of the last two days: Judd's attack on the Iapetus
ranch, the subsequent fight and outcome, and finally his present position and intention of keeping the rendezvous.
"The odds are pretty heavily against me, M. S.," he went on. "It would be stupid not to admit that I may not come
out of this affair alive--and that's why I'm calling. My affairs, of course, are in your hands. You know where my
storerooms and papers are. Sell my trading posts and ranches; Hartz of Newark-on-Venus is the best man to deal
through. But I'd advise you to keep for yourself that information on the Pool of Radium. Look into it sometime. I'm
in Judd's ship, the Scorpion; our Star Devil's on Iapetus, hidden in the jungle near the ranch. That's all, I think."
"Carse, I should be with you!"

"No, M. S.--couldn't risk it. You're too valuable a man. But don't worry, you know my luck. I'll very likely be
down to see you after this meeting, and perhaps with a visitor who will enable you once again to return to an
honorable position on Earth. Where will you be?"

"In eight Earth days? Let's make it Porno, at the house you know. I'll come in for some supplies and wait for
you."

"Good," the Hawk said shortly. "Good-by, M. S."

He paused, his hand on the switch. There came a parting wish:

"Good luck, old fellow. Get him! Get him!"

The Master Scientist's voice trembled at the end. Through Ku Sui he had lost honor, position, home—all good
things a man on Earth may have; through Ku Sui he, the gentlest of men, was regarded by Earthlings as a black
murderer and there was a price on his head. Hawk Carse did not miss the trembling in his voice. As he switched off,
the adventurer's eyes went bleak as the loneliest deeps of space....

CHAPTER II
The Coming of Ku Sui

Straight through the vast cold reaches that stretched between one mighty planet and another the Scorpion
arrowed, Carse and Friday standing watch and watch, Sako always on duty with the latter. Behind, Saturn's rings
melted smaller, and ahead a dusky speck grew against the vault of space until the red belts and one great seething
 crimson spot that marked it as Jupiter stood out plainly. By degrees, then, the ship's course was altered as Carse
checked his calculations and made minor corrections in speed and direction. So they neared the rendezvous. And a
puzzled furrow grew on Friday's brow.

What was bothering his master? Instead of becoming more impassive and coldly emotionless as the distance
shortened, he showed distinct signs of worry. This might be natural in most men, but it was unusual in the Hawk.
Often the negro found him abstractedly smoothing his bangs of hair, pacing the length of the control cabin, glancing,
plainly worried, at the visi-screen. What special thing was wrong? Friday wondered again and again--and then, in a
flash, he knew.

"Why--how we goin' to see Dr. Ku?" he burst out. "Didn't that Judd say somethin'----"

The Hawk nodded. "That's just the problem, Eclipse. For you'll remember Judd said that Ku Sui 'comes out of
darkness, out of empty space.' That might mean invisibility or the Fourth Dimension—and God help us if he's solved
the problem of dimensional traveling. I don't know--but it's something I can't well prepare against." He fell to
musing again, utterly lost in thought.

* * * * *

A day and a half later found Friday genuinely worried—an unusual state for the always cheerful black. The
laugh wrinkles of his face were re-twisted into lines of anxiety which gave his face a most solemn and lugubrious
expression. From time to time he grasped the butt of his ray-gun with a grip that would have pulped an orange;
occasionally his rolling brown eyes sought the gray ones of the Hawk, only to return as by a magnet to the visi-
screen, whose five adjoining squares mirrored the whole sweep of space around them.

Jupiter now filled one side of the forward observation window. It was a vast, red-belted disk, an eye-thrilling
spectacle at their distance, roughly a million miles. Against it were poised two small pale globes, the larger of which
was Satellite III. Several hours before, when they had been closer to the satellite, Carse had scrutinized it through the
electroscope and made out above its surface a silver dot which was a space-ship. It was bound inward toward Port o'
Porno, and might well have been one of Ku Sui's. But the Scorpion, slowing down for her rendezvous, had attracted
no attention and had passed undisturbed.

Now she hung motionless—that is, motionless with respect to the sun. Only the whisper of the air-renewing
machinery disturbed the tension in her control cabin where the three men stood waiting, glancing back and forth
from the visi-screen to the Earth clock and its calendar attachment. The date the clock showed was 24 January, the
time, 10:21 P. M. Dr. Ku Sui was one minute late.

Sako, the captive, was sullen and restless, and made furtive glances at the Hawk, who stood detached, arms
hanging carelessly at his sides, gray eyes half closed, giving in his attitude no hint of the strain the others were
feeling. But his attitude of being relaxed and off his guard was deceptive—as Sako found out. Suddenly his left hand
seemed to disappear; there was a hiss, an arrowing streak of spitting orange light; and Sako was gaping foolishly at
the arm he had stealthily raised to one of the radio switches. A smoking sear had appeared as if by magic across it.

Hawk Carse sheathed his gun. "I would advise you to try no more obvious tricks," he said coldly. "Cutting in
our microphone is too simple a way to give warning to Dr. Ku Sui. Move away from there. And don't forget your
lines when Dr. Ku calls. You will never act a part before a more critical and deadly audience."

Sako mumbled something and rubbed his arm. A pitying smile came to Friday's face as he comprehended what
had happened. "You damned fool!" he said.

* * * * *
It was 10:22 P.M. Still, in the visi-screen, no other ship. Nothing but the giant planet, the smaller satellites poised against it, and the deep star-spangled curtain of black space all around.

They had carefully followed the instructions in the log. They were at the exact place noted there: checked and double-checked. The radio receiver was tuned to the wave-length given in the log. But of Ku Sui, nothing.

And yet, in a way, he was with them. His enigmatic personality, his seldom-seen figure was very present in their minds, and with it were overtones of all the diabolic cunning and suave ironic cruelty that men always associated with him. "He comes out of darkness, out of empty space...." Friday licked his lips. He was not built for mental strain: his lips kept drying and his tongue was as leather.

A little sputtering sound tingled the nerves of the three waiting men, and as one their eyes went to the radio loudspeaker. A contact question was being asked in the usual way:

"Are you there, Judd? Are you there, Judd? Are you there, Judd?"

The voice was not that of Ku Sui. It was a dead voice, toneless, emotionless, mechanical.

"Are you there, Judd?" it went on, over and over.

"The mike switch, Friday," the Hawk said, and then was at Sako's side, his ray-gun transfixing the man with its threatening angle. "Play your part well," was the whisper from his lips.

The switch went over with a click. Trembling, Sako faced the microphone.

"This is Sako," he said.

"Sako?" the dead voice asked. "I want Judd. Where is Judd?"

"Judd is dead. The trap failed, and there was a fight on Iapetus. Judd was killed by Carse, and most of the others. Only two of us are left, but we have Carse and the negro, prisoners, alive. What are your instructions?"

A half minute went by, and the three men hardly breathed.

"How do we know you are Sako?" said the voice at last. "Give the recognition."

"The insignia of Dr. Ku Sui?"

"Yes. It is----"

Carse's ray-gun prodded the stomach of the sweating Sako.

"An asteroid," he said hastily, "in the center of a circle of the ten planets."

The unseen speaker was quiet. Evidently he was conferring with someone else, probably Ku Sui.

"All right," his toneless voice came back at last. "You will remain motionless in your present position, keeping your radio receiver open for further instructions. We are approaching and will be with you in thirty minutes."

Carse motioned to Friday to switch off the mike. Sako sank limply into a chair, soaked with perspiration.

"Now we must wait again," the Hawk murmured, crossing his arms and scanning the visi-screen.

They had heard from Ku Sui, but that had not answered the old tormenting question of how he would come. It was more puzzling than ever. The visi-screen showed nothing, and it should have shown the Eurasian's decelerating ship even at twice thirty minutes' time away. They looked upon the same vista of Jupiter and his satellites, framed in eternal blackness; there was no characteristic steely dot of an approaching ship to give Carse the enemy's position and enable him to shape his plan of reception definitely.

Twenty minutes went by. The strain the Hawk was under showed only in his pulling at the bangs of flaxen hair that covered his forehead as far as the eyebrows. He had, from Judd's words, expected a mystery in Ku Sui's approach. There was nothing to do but wait; he had made what few plans and preparations he could in advance.

Friday broke the tense silence in the control cabin. "He's got to be somewhere!" he exploded. "It isn't natural for the screen not to show nothin'! Isn't there somethin' we can do?"

The Hawk was surprisingly patient. "I'm afraid not," he said. "It's invisibility he's using, or else the fourth dimension, as Judd said. But we've got one good chance. He'll send more instructions by radio, and surely, after that, his ship will appear----"

A new voice, bland and unctuous, spoke in the control cabin from behind the three men.

"Not necessarily, my honored friend Carse," it said. "You will observe there is no need for a ship to appear."

Ku Sui had come.

CHAPTER III

The Wave of a Handkerchief

He stood smiling in the door-frame leading aft to the rear entrance port. There was all grace in his posture, in the easy angle at which one arm rested against the side bulkhead, in the casual way in which he held the ray-gun that bored straight at Carse. Height and strength he had, and a perfectly proportioned figure. Beauty, too, of face, with skin of clearest saffron, soft, sensitive mouth and ascetic cheeks. His hair was fine and black, and swept straightly back from the high narrow forehead where lived his tremendous intelligence.

It was his eyes that gave him away, his eyes of rare green that from a distance looked black. Slanting, veiled,
unreadable beneath the lowered silky lashes, there was the soul of a tiger in their sinister depths. It was his eyes that his victims remembered....

"So you have arrived, Dr. Ku," whispered Hawk Carse, and for a second he too smiled, with eyes as bleak and hard as frosty chilled steel. Their glances met and held--the cold, hard, honest rapier; the subtle perfumed poison. The other men in the cabin were forgotten; the feeling was between these two. Strikingly contrasted they stood there: Carse, in rough blue denim trousers, faded work-shirt, open at the neck, old-fashioned rubber shoes and battered skipper's cap askew on his flaxen hair; Ku Sui, suavely impeccable in high-collared green silk blouse, full-length trousers of the same material, and red slippers, to match the wide sash which revealed the slender lines of his waist. A perfume hung about the man, the indescribable odor of tsin-tsin flowers from the humid jungles of Venus.

"You see I meet you halfway, my friend," the Eurasian said with delicate mock courtesy. "A surpassing pleasure I have anticipated for a long time. No, no! I see that already I shall have to ask you a small favor. A thousand pardons: it's my deplorable ability to read your mind that requires me to ask it. Your so justly famed speed on the draw might possibly overcome this advantage"--he raised his ray-gun slightly--"and, though I know you would not kill me--save in the direst emergency, since you wish to take me a living prisoner--I would find it most distressing to have to carry for the rest of my life a flaw on my body. So, may I request you to withdraw your ray-guns with two fingertips and put them on the floor? Observe--your fingertips. Will you be so kind?"

The Hawk looked at him for a minute. Then silently he obeyed. He knew that the Eurasian would have no compunctions about shooting him down in cold blood; but, on the other hand, even as the man had said, he could not kill Ku Sui, but had to capture him, in order to take him to Earth to confess to crimes now blamed on Eliot Leithgow. "Do as he says, Friday," he instructed the still staring negro; and, like a man in a trance, Friday obeyed.

"Thank you," the Eurasian said. "It was a most friendly thing to do." He paused. "I suppose you are wondering how I arrived here, and why you did not see me come. Well, I shall certainly tell you, in return for your favor. But first--ah, friend Carse--your gesture! A reminder, I assume."

Slowly the Hawk was stroking the bangs of hair which had been trained to obscure his forehead. There was no emotion on his chilly face as he answered, no slightest sign of feeling unless it were a slight trembling of the left eyelid--significant enough to those who could read it.

"Yes," he whispered, "a reminder. I do not like to wear my hair like this, Ku Sui, and I want you to know that I've not forgotten; that, though I'm now in your power, there'll be a day----"

"But you wouldn't threaten your host!" the other said with mock surprise. "And surely you wouldn't threaten me, of all men. Must I point out how useless it has always been for you to match yourself, merely a skilful gunman, against me, against a brain?"

"Usually," the cold whisper came back, "the brain has failed in the traps it has laid for the gunman."

"Only because of the mistakes of its agents. Unfortunately for you, the brain is dealing with you directly this time, my friend. It's quite a different matter. But this small talk--although you honor----"

"Of course you intend to kill me," said the Hawk. "But when?"

Dr. Ku gestured deprecatingly. "You insist on introducing these unpleasant topics! But to relieve your mind, I've not yet decided how I can entertain you most suitably. I have come primarily to ask you one trifling thing."

"And that is?"

"The whereabouts of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow."

Hawk Carse smiled. "Your conceit lends you an extraordinary optimism, Dr. Ku."

"Not unfounded, I am sure. I desire very much to meet our old friend Leithgow again: his is the only other brain in this universe at all comparable to mine. And did I tell you that I always get what I desire? Well, will you give me this information? Of course, there are ways...."

For a moment he waited.

The Hawk only looked at him.

"Always in character," the Eurasian said regretfully. "Very well." He turned his head and took in Friday and Sako, standing near-by. "You are Sako?" he asked the latter. "It is most unfortunate that you had to deceive me a little while ago. We shall have to see what to do about it. Later. For the present, move farther back, out of the way. So. You, black one, next to my friend Carse: we must be moving along. So."

Ku Sui surveyed then with inscrutable eyes. Gracefully, he drew close.

Carse missed not a move. He watched the Eurasian draw, from one of the long sleeves of his blouse, a square of lustrous black silk.

"This bears my personal insignia, you see," he murmured. "You will remember it." And he languidly waved it just under their eyes.
Friday stared at it; Carse too, wonderingly. He saw embroidered in yellow on the black a familiar insignia composed of an asteroid in the circle of ten planets. And then alarm lit his brain and he grimaced. There was a strange odor in his nostrils and it came from the square of silk.

"Characteristic, Dr. Ku," he said. "Quite characteristic."

The Eurasian smiled. An expression of stupid amazement came over Friday's face. The design of asteroid and planets wavered into a blur as the Hawk fought unconsciousness; a short, harsh sound came from his lips; he lurched uncertainly. The negro crumpled up and stretched out on the deck. Carse's desire to sleep grew overpowering. Once more, as from a distance, he glimpsed Ku Sui's smile. He tried to back to the wall; made it; then a heavy thump suggested to his dimming mind that he had collapsed to the deck. He was asleep at once....

CHAPTER IV
Soil

Hawk Carse awoke with a slight feeling of nausea, and the smell of the drug faint in his nostrils. He found he was lying on the floor of a large, square cell whose walls and ceiling were of some burnished brown metal and which was bare of any kind of furnishing. In one wall was a tightly closed door, also of metal and studded by the knob of a lock. Barred slits, high in opposite walls, gave ventilation; a single tube set in the ceiling provided illumination.

He was not bound. He sat up and regarded the outflung figure of Friday, lying to one side. "Something in his look seemed to reach the giant negro, for, as he watched, the man's eyelids flickered, and a sigh escaped his full lips. He stared up at Carse, recognition, followed by gladness, flooding his eyes. The Hawk smiled also. There were close bonds between these two.

"Lord, I'm sure thankful to be with you, suh!" said the negro with relief. His eyes rolled as he took in the cabinlike cell. "Hmff--nice homey little place," he remarked. "Where do you reckon we are, suh?"

"I think we're at last at that place we have searched so long for--Ku Sui's headquarters, his own spaceship."

It will be remembered by those who have read their history that the Eurasian's actual base of operations was for a long time the greatest of the mysteries that enveloped him. Half a dozen times had the Hawk and his comrade in arms, Eliot Leithgow, hunted for it with all their separate skill of adventurer and scientist, and, although they had twice found the man himself, always they had failed to find his actual retreat.

For those who are unacquainted with the histories of that raw period a hundred years ago, it will be impossible to understand the spell of fear which accompanied mention of Dr. Ku throughout the universe--a fear engendered chiefly by the man's unpredictable comings and goings, thanks to his secret hiding place. Those who were as close to him as henchmen could be--which was not very close--only added to the general mystery of the whereabouts of the base by their sincerely offered but utterly contradictory notions and data. One thing all agreed on: the outlaw's lair was a place most frightening.

Therefore it can be understood why, on hearing the Hawk's opinion, Friday's face fell somewhat.

"Guess that means we're finished, suh," he opined moodily.

"But what good'll that do us, suh, if we take what we've learned to where it won't help anybody, least of all us? An' what chance we got against Ku Sui now, when we're prisoners? Why, he's a magician; it ain't natural, what he does. Lands in our ship plop right out of empty space! Puts us out with a wave of his handkerchief!" With final misery in his voice he added: "We're sunk, suh. This time we surely are."

Carse smiled at his emotional friend. "All you need is a good fight, Eclipse. It's thinking that disintegrates your morale; you should never try to think. Why--there was an anesthetic on that handkerchief! Simple enough; I might have expected it. As for his getting into our ship, he entered from behind, through the after port-lock, while we were looking for his ship on the visi-screen. I don't understand yet why we could not see his craft. It's too much to suppose he could make it invisible. Paint, perhaps, or camouflage. He might have a way of preventing, from a distance, the registering of his ship on our screen. Oh, he's dangerous, clever, deep--but somewhere, there'll be a loophole. Somewhere. There always is." His tone changed, and he snapped: "Now be quiet. I want to think."

His face stiffened into a cold, calm mask, but behind his gray eyes lay anything but calmness. Ku Sui's easy
assumption that the information as to Eliot Leithgow's whereabouts would be forthcoming from his lips, puzzled
him, brought real anxiety. Torture would probably not be able to force his tongue to betray his friend, but there were
perhaps other means. Of these he had a vague and ominous apprehension. Dr. Ku was preeminently a specialist in
the human brain; he had implied his will to have that information. Suppose he should use something it was
impossible to fight against?

And he alone, Hawk Carse, brought the responsibility. He had asked Leithgow where he would be, and he
remembered well the place agreed upon. He dared not lose the battle of wits he knew was coming!...

His eyes shot to the door. It was opening. In a moment Ku Sui stood revealed there, and behind him, in the
 corridoar, were three other figures, their yellow coolie faces strangely dumb and lifeless above the tasteful gray
smocks which extended a little below their belted waists. Each bore embroidered on his chest the planetary insignia
of Ku Sui in yellow, and each was armed with two ray-guns.

"I must ask forgiveness, my friend, for these retainers who accompany me," the Eurasian began suavely.
"Please don't let them disturb you, however; they are more robots than men, obeying only my words. A little
adjustment of the brain, you understand. I have brought them only for your protection; for you would find it would
result most unpleasantly to make a break for freedom."

"Of course, you're not the one who wants protection!" sneered Friday, with devastating sarcasm. "Or else you'd
'a' brought a whole army!"

But the negro paled a little when the Oriental's green tiger eyes caught him full. It was with a physical shock--
such was the power of the man--that he received the soft-spoken reply:

"Yours is a most subtle and entertaining wit, black one; I am overcome with the honor and pleasure of having
you for my guest. But perhaps--may I suggest?--that you save your humor for a more suitable occasion. I would like
to make the last few hours of your visit as pleasant as possible."

He turned to Hawk Carse. "I have thought that an inspection of this, my home in space, would intrigue you
more than anything else my poor hospitality affords. May I do you the honor, my friend?"

"You are too good to me," the Hawk replied frostily. "I will duplicate your kindness some day."

The Eurasian bowed. "After you," he said, and waited until Friday and the Hawk passed first through the door.
Close after them came the three automatons of yellow men.

The passageway was square, plain and bare, and spaced at intervals by other closed doors. "Storerooms in this
wing," the Eurasian explained as they progressed. He stopped in front of one of the doors and pressed a button
beside it. It slid noiselessly open, revealing, not another room, but a short metal spider ladder. Up this they climbed,
one of the guards going first in the half darkness; then a trap-door above opened to douse them with warm ruddy
light. They stepped out.

And the scene that met them took them completely off guard. Friday gasped, and Carse so far lost his habitual
poise as to stare in wonder.

Soil! And a great glassy dome!

Not a space-ship, this realm of Ku Sui. Soil--soil with a whole settlement built upon it! Hard, grayish soil, and
on it several buildings of the familiar burnished metal. And overhead, cupping the entire outlay, arched a great
hemisphere of what resembled glass, ribbed with silvery supporting beams and struts: an enormous bowl, turned
down, and on its other side the glorious vista of space.

Straight above hung the red-belted disk of Jupiter, with the pale globes of Satellites II and III wheeling close,
and all of them were of the same relative size they had appeared when last seen from the Scorpion!

Dr. Ku smiled unctuously at the puzzlement that showed on the faces of his captives.

"Have you noticed," he asked, "that you are still in the neighborhood of the spot in space where we had our
rendezvous? But this isn't another of Jupiter's satellites. Ah, no. This is my own world--my own personally
controlled little world!"

"Snakes of the Santo!" Friday gasped, the whites of his eyes showing all around. "Then we must be on an
asteroid!"

They were. From the far side of the dome ahead of them the asteroid stretched back hard and sharp in Jupiter's
ruddy light against the backdrop of black space. It was a craggy, uneven body, seemingly about twenty miles in
length, pinched in the middle and thus shaped roughly like a peanut shell. One end had been leveled off to
accommodate the dome with its cradled buildings; outside the dome all was untouched. The landscape was a
gargantuan jumble of coarse, hard, sharp rocks which had crystallized into a maze of hollows, crevices, long crazy
splits and jagged out-thrusting lumps of boulders. Without an atmosphere, with but the feeblest of gravities and
utterly without any form of life--save for that within the dome built upon it--it was simply a typical small asteroid, of
which race only the largest are globe-shaped.

"Once," the Eurasian went on softly as they took all this in, "this world of mine circled with its thousands of fellows between Mars and Jupiter. I picked it from the rest because of certain mineral qualities, and had this air-containing dome constructed on it, and these buildings inside the dome. Then, with batteries of gravity-plates inserted precisely in the asteroid's center of gravity, I nullified the gravitational pull of Mars and Jupiter, wrenched it from its age-old orbit and swung it free into space. An achievement that would command the respect even of Eliot Leithgow, I think. So now you see, Carse; now you know. This is my secret base, this my hidden laboratory. I take it always with me, and I travel where I will."

The Hawk nodded coldly his acceptance of the astounding fact; he was too busy to make comment. He was observing the buildings, the nature of them, the exits from the dome, how they could best be reached.

* * * * *

They stood on the roof of the largest and central building, a low metal structure with four wings, crossing at right angles to make the figure of a great plus mark. The hub was probably Dr. Ku's chief laboratory, Carse conjectured. On each side stood other buildings, low, long, like barracks, with figures of coolies moving in and out. Workshops, living quarters, power-rooms, he supposed: power-rooms certainly, for a soft hum filled the air.

There were two great port-locks at ground level in the dome, one on each side, each sizable enough to admit the largest space-ship and each flanked by a smaller, man-sized lock. To reach them...

"And over there," Dr. Ku's voice broke in, "you see your borrowed ship, the Scorpion. But please don't let it tempt you to cut short your visit with me, my friend. It would avail you nothing even if you reached her, for it requires a secret combination to open the port-locks, and my servants' brains have been so altered that they are physically incapable of divulging it to you. And of course I have offensive rays and other devices hidden about--just in case. All rather hopeless, isn't it? But surely interesting.

"Let us go: I have more. Below, in my main laboratory in the center of this building, there's something far more interesting, and it concerns you, Carse, and me, and also Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow." He let the words sink in. "Will you follow me?"

And so they went below again, down the spider ladder into the corridor. There was nothing else to do: the guards, ever watchful, pressed close behind. But a tattoo of alarm was beating in Hawk Carse's brain. Eliot Leithgow again--the hint of something ominous to be aimed at him, Carse, for the extraction of information he alone possessed: the whereabouts of his elderly friend the Master Scientist.

CHAPTER V
The Color-Storm

The corridor was stopped by a heavy metal door. As the small party approached, it swung inward in two halves, and a figure clad in a white surgeon's smock emerged. He was a white man, tall, with highly intelligent face but eyes strangely dull and lifeless, like those of the coolie-guards. His gaze rested on Ku Sui, and the Eurasian asked him:

"Is it ready?"

"Yes, lord,"--tonelessly.

"Through here, then, my friends." The door opened and closed behind them as they stepped inside. "This is my main laboratory. And there, friend Carse, is the object which is to concern us."

With one glance the adventurer took in the laboratory. It was a great room, a perfect circle in shape, with doors opening into the four wings of the building. The walls were lined with strange, complicated machines, whose purpose he could not even guess at; in one place there was a table strewn with tangled shapes of wire, rows of odd-bulging tubes and other apparatus; and conspicuous by one door was an ordinary operating table, with light dome overhead. A tall wide screen placed a few feet out from the wall hid something bulky from view. Carse noted all these things; then his gaze went back to the object in the middle of the floor which Ku Sui had indicated.

It was, primarily, a chair, within a suspended framework of steely bars, themselves the foundation for a network of fine-drawn colored wires. Shimmering, like the gossamer threads of a spider's spinning, they wove upward, around and over the chair, so that he who sat there would be completely surrounded by the gleaming mesh.

Within the whole hung a plain square boxlike device, attached to the chair and so placed that it would be directly in front of the eyes of anyone sitting there. Ropes were reeved through pulleys in the ceiling, for raising the wire-ball device to permit entrance. And standing ready around it, were four men in surgeons' smocks--white men with intelligent faces and dull, lifeless eyes.

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The Hawk knew the answer to the question he curtly asked. "Its purpose, Dr. Ku?"

"That," came the suave reply, "it will be your pleasure to discover for yourself. I can promise you some novel sensations. Nothing harmful, though, however much they may tire you. Now!" He gave a sign; one of his assistants touched a switch. The wire ball rose, leaving the central seat free for entrance. "All is ready. May I ask you to
Hawk Carse faced his old foe. There was stillness in the laboratory then as his bleak gray eyes met and held for long seconds Ku Sui's enigmatic green-black ones.

"If I don't?"

For answer the Eurasian gestured apologetically to his guards.

"I see," Carse whispered. There was nothing to be done. Three coolies, each with ray-guns at the ready; four white assistants... No hope. No chance for anything. He looked at the negro. "Don't move, Friday," he warned him. "They'll only shoot; it can do no good. Eight to two are big odds when the two are unarmed."

He turned and faced the Eurasian, holding him with his eyes. "Ku Sui," he said, clipping the words, "you have said that this would not permanently harm me, and, although I know you for the most deadly, vicious egomaniac in the solar system, I am believing you. I do not know you for a liar.... I will enter."

The faint smile on the Oriental's face did not alter one bit at this. Carse stepped to the metal seat and sat down.

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The web of shimmering wires descended, cupping him completely. Through them he saw Ku Sui go to a switchboard adjoining and study the indicators, finally placing one hand on a black-knobbed switch and with the other drawing from some recess a little cone, trailing a wire, like a microphone. A breathless silence hung over the laboratory. The white-clad figures stood like statues, dumb, unfeeling, emotionless. The watching negro trembled, his mouth half open, his brow already bedewed with perspiration. But the only sign of strain or tension that showed in the slender flaxen-haired man sitting in the wire ball in the center of the laboratory, came when he licked his dry lips.

Then Dr. Ku Sui pulled the switch down, and there surged out a low-throated murmur of power. And immediately the ball of wire came to life. The fine, crisscrossing wires disappeared, and in their stead was color, every color in the spectrum. Like waves rhythmically rising and falling, the tinted brilliances dissolved back and forth through each other; and the reflected light, caroming off the surfaces of the instruments and tables and walls, so filled the laboratory that the group of men surrounding the fire-ball were like resplendent figures out of another universe.

Ku Sui pressed a button, and the side of the boxlike device nearest Hawk Carse's eyes assumed transparency and started to glow. Beautiful colors began to float over its face, colors never still but constantly weaving and clouding into an infinity of combinations and designs. Eyes staring wide, as if unable to close them to the brilliant kaleidoscopic procession, the adventurer looked on.

* * * * *

Friday knew that his master at that moment was impotent to move, even to shut his eyes, and, with a wild notion that he was being electrocuted, he made a rash rush to destroy the device and free him. He learned discretion when two ray-streaks pronged before him and forced him back; and thereafter he was given the undivided attention of two guards.

From the outside, through the ball of color, Carse was a ghostlike figure. Rigid and quivering, he sat in the chair and watched the color-maelstrom. His face was contorted; his cheek muscles stood out weltlike in his sweat-glistening skin; his eyes, which he could not close, throbbed with agony. But yet he was conscious; yet he still could will.

He defended his secret as best he could. Obviously this machine was being used to force from his mind the knowledge of Eliot Leithgow's whereabouts, and therefore he attempted to seal his mind. He fastened it on something definite--on Iapetus, satellite of Saturn, and his ranch there--and barred every other thought from his head. Mechanically he repeated to himself: "Iapetus, Iapetus--my ranch on Iapetus--Iapetus, Iapetus." Hundreds of times.... Hours.... Days....

The blinding waves of color rioted about him, submerged him, fatigued him. He had a strong impulse to sleep, but he resisted it.

Days seemed to pass.... Years.... Eons. All this.... Continued without change.... To the end of the world....

Dimly he knew that the color-storm was working on him; sensed danger when a great drowsiness stole over him; but he fought it off, his brain beating out hundreds of times more: "Iapetus, Iapetus--I have a ranch there--Iapetus, Iapetus."

Then came excruciating pain!

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An electric shock suddenly speared him. His nerves seemed to curl up, and for a second his mind was thoroughly disorganized before it again took up the drone about Iapetus. Recovery ... dullness ... a kind of peace--and again the shock leaped through him. It was followed by a question from afar off:

"Where is Eliot Leithgow?"
Somehow the question meant a great deal and should not be answered....

Again the stab of agony. Again the voice:

"Where is Eliot Leithgow?"

Again the shock, and again the voice. Alternating, over and over. He could brace himself against the shock, but the voice could in no way be avoided. It was everywhere about him, over, around, under him; he began to see it. Desperately he forced his brain on the path it must not leave. He had forgotten years ago why, but knew there must be some good reason.

"Iapetus, Iapetus--I have a ranch there--Iapetus, Iapetus--Where is Eliot Leithgow?--Iapetus, Iapetus--I have a ranch there--Where is Eliot Leithgow?--I have a ranch there--a ranch there--Iapetus, a ranch--Where is Eliot Leithgow?--Where is Eliot Leithgow?--Where is Eliot Leithgow?"

After two hours and ten minutes the Hawk crumpled.

He was quite delirious at the time. The combined effect of the pain, the physical and nervous exhaustion of the shocks and light, the endlessly repeated question, his own close concentration on his Iapetus ranch--these were too much for any human body to stand against. He lost his grip on his mind, lost the fine control that had never been lost before, the control about which he was so vain. And the lump of flesh that was Hawk Carse gave the information that was tearing wildly at its prison.

A stammering voice came from the heart of the color-sphere:

"Port o' Porno, Satellite III--Port o' Porno, Satellite III--Port o' Porno Sat----"

Dr. Ku Sui interrupted him; leaned forward.

"The house is number----?"

"574--574--574----"

"Ah!" breathed the Eurasian. "Port o' Porno! So near!"

Ku Sui returned the switch and pressed one of the buttons. The pool of colors faded; the laboratory returned to comparative dimness. The machine in its center seemed but a great web of wire.

Slumped in the seat within it was a slender figure, his flaxen head bowed over on his chest, his eyes closed, and sweat still trickling down his unconscious brow.

And lying on the floor was another unconscious figure.

Friday had fainted.

CHAPTER VI

Port o' Porno

The pirate port of Porno is of course dead now, replaced by the clean lawfulness of Port Midway, but a hundred years ago, in the days before the patrol-ships came, she roared her bawdy song through the farthest reaches of the solar system. For crack merchant ships and dingy space trading tramps alike, she was haven; drink and drugs, women and diversions unspeakable lured to her space ports the cream and scum, adventures and riffraff of half a dozen worlds. Sailors and pirates paid off at her and stayed as long as their wages lasted in the Street of the Sailors; not a few remained permanently, their bodies flung to the beasts of the savage jungle that rimmed the port. There only the cunning and strong could live. Ray-guns were the surest law. Modern scientific progress stood side by side with murderous lawlessness as old as man himself.

The hell town had grown with the strides of a giant, rising rapidly from a muddy street of tio shacks to a small cosmopolis. She was essentially a place of contrasts. Two of the big Earth companies had modern space-ship hangars there, well-lighted, well-equipped, but under their very noses was a festering welter of dark, rutted byways extending all the way to the comparative orderliness of the short, narrow Street of the Merchants, itself flanked by the drunken bedlam of the Street of the Sailors. It can be understood why these men who flew, who needed a whole solar system for elbow room, disdained setting to order the measly few acres of dirt they stopped at, but it is a mystery why, when used to living through vast leagues of space, they endured such narrow streets and cluttered houses. Probably, tired from their long cramped cruises, impatient for their fling, they just didn't care a whoop.

The whole jumble that was this famous space port rested in the heart of Satellite III's primeval jungle.

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Tall electric-wired fences girdled Port o' Porno to keep the jungle back. It was equivalent to a death sentence to pass unarmed outside them; the monstrous shapes that lived and fought in the jungle's swampy gloom saw to that. Hideous nightmare shapes they were, some reptilian and comparable only to the giants that roamed Earth in her prehistoric ages. Eating, fighting, breeding in the humid gloominess of the vegetation shrouded swamps, their bellows and roars sometimes at night thundered right through Porno, a reminder of Nature yet untamed. Occasionally, in the berserk ecstasy of the mating season, they hurled their house-high bodies at the guarding fences; and then there was panic in the town, and many lives ripped out before a barrage of rays drove the monsters back.

They were not the only inhabitants native to Satellite III. Deep underground, seldom seen by men, lived a race
of man-mole creatures, half human in intelligence, blind from their unlit habitat, but larger than a man and stronger; fiercer, too, when cornered. Their numbers no one knew, but their bored tunnels, it had been found, constituted a lower layer of life over the whole satellite.

Probably more vicious than these native "Three's" of Porno were the visiting bipeds, man himself, who thronged the kantrans—which may be defined as dives for the purveying of all entertainments. In them were a score of snares for the buccaneer with money in his pocket and dope in his blood. The open doors on the Street of the Sailors were all loud-speakers of drunken oaths and laughter, pierced now and then by a scream or cry as someone in the sweating press of bodies inside knew rage or fear.

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One interplanetarily notorious kantran made a feature of swinging its attractions aloft in gilded cages, where all of them, young and old, pale and painted, giant and dwarf, ogled the arrested passers-by and invited sampling of their wares.

Of all kinds and conditions of men were these passers-by. Earthling sailors, white, negro, Chinese and Eurasian, most of them in the drab blue of space-ship crews, but each with a ray-gun strapped to his waist; short, thin-faced Venusians, shifty-eyed, cunning, with the planet's universal weapon, the skewer-blade, sheathed at their sides; tall, sweaty Martians, powerful brutes, wearing the air-rarifying mask that was necessary for them in Satellite III's Earthlike atmosphere. Business men and sight-seers, except the most bold, were apt to stay in their houses after their first visit to the Street of the Sailors. Each face on the street or in the kantrans that lined it bore the mark of drink, or the contemptuous, insolent expression bred by Porno's favorite drug, isuan.

Around Porno was the constant threat of savage life; below it were half-human savagery and mystery; above, in the very shadow of their mighty engines of space, were the most vicious animals of all--degraded men.

This was the Port o' Porno of a hundred years ago.

This was the Port o' Porno where Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow for very good reasons had told Hawk Carse he would meet him. 574. The house of his friend.

* * * * *

Night descended suddenly on the outlaw space-port that day the elderly exile waited in vain for his comrade in arms Hawk Carse to show up.

There were six hours when the blasting heat received by Satellite III from near-lying Jupiter would be gone, and in its place a warm, cloying tropical darkness, heavy with the odors of town and exotic products and the damp, lush vegetation of the impinging jungle. The night would be given over to carousing; for these six hours the Street of the Sailors came to life. It was a time to keep strictly in hiding.

In the middle of that night, when the pleasures of Porno were in full stride, there emerged suddenly, from one of the dark, crooked byways that angled off the Street of the Sailors, a squad of five men whose disciplined pace and regular formation were in marked contrast to the confusion around them. They were slant-eyed men, with smooth saffron faces, and strongly built, and they were armed, each one, with both a ray-gun and a two-foot black, pointed tube. But it was not their numbers, formation or weapons that caused the carousing crowd to fall silent and hastily get out of their path. It was, rather, the insignia embroidered on the breasts of the gray smocks they wore. The insignia represented an asteroid in a circle of the ten planets, and the Street of Sailors knew that sign and dreaded it.

The squad pressed along rapidly. A still-comely woman, new to Porno, plucked smirking at the leader's sleeve; but his pace did not slacken, and she fell back, puzzled and afraid because of her feeling of something lifeless, dumb, machinelike in the man. Ahead, an isuan-maddened Earthling fell foul of a Venusian; a circle cleared in the mob, a ray-gun spat and missed, and the Venusian closed, the gleam of a skewer-blade playing around him. This was combat; this was interesting; but none of the squad's five men gave the fight a glance, or even turned his head when, as they passed, the butchered Earthling coughed out his life.

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So they passed, and soon they were gone down another black-throated byway.

They padded noiselessly along in the darkness to turn again presently, pausing finally before a low, steel-walled house, typical of the strongholds of prudent merchants of the port. No lights were visible within it; all seemed asleep.

Silence filled the narrow street, and unrelieved darkness. Occasionally a desultory breeze brought sounds of a burst of revelry from the Street of the Sailors; once the ports of an outbound space-ship flashed overhead for an instant. But there was mainly silence and darkness, and in it the five men, parleying close together in toneless whispers.

After a little they separated. On cat's feet four of them stole around the sides of the house. The fifth, drawing the black, pointed tube from his slash, crept up to the front entrance-port and held the tip to it. Blue light sparkled fantastically, revealing his impassive face, outlining his crouching body. Then, quite suddenly, the port appeared to
melt inward, and he disappeared into the blackness of the interior.

Presently there came a stir of movement, a whisper, a rustle from inside. A challenge, shouts volleying forth, a scream, another, and the peculiar rattling sound that comes from a dying man's throat. Then again silence.

Five shadows melted from the front entrance-port. They were carrying something black and still and heavy between them.

The errand was done....

CHAPTER VII

The Coming of Leithgow

Hawk Carse awoke to the touch of a hand on his brow. He came very slowly to full consciousness. His pain was great.

His whole body was sore: every joint, every muscle in it ached; his brain was feverish, pumping turmoil. When he at length opened his eyes he found Friday's face bent close down, tender anxiety written large over it.

"You all right, suh? How do you feel now?"

A harsh sound came from the Hawk's throat. He pressed a hand to his throbbing temple and tried to collect his senses. Sitting up helped; he glanced around. They were back in the same cell, and they were alone. Then, shortly, he asked:

"Did I tell him?"

"About Mr. M. S., suh?"

"Of course, I can't quite remember--a bit blurred----"

"I guess you did, suh," Friday answered mournfully. "I didn't hear you, but Ku Sui said you told him where Master Leithgow is. But dog-gone--you couldn't help it!"

Carse forgot his pain as his brain straightened these words out into their overwhelming consequence, and something of its old familiar mold, hard and graven, emotionless, came back to his face. His eyes were bleak as he murmured:

"I couldn't help it--no. I really don't think it was possible. But I could have refused to get into the machine. I thought I could resist it. I took that risk, and failed." He stopped short. His body twitched with uncontrolled emotion, and in decency the negro turned his back on his master's anguish. A broken whisper reached him: "I have betrayed Leithgow."

* * * * *

For a short while neither man moved, or made any sound. Friday was a little afraid; he guessed what must be going on in Carse's mind, and had no idea what to expect. But the Hawk's next move was quite disciplined; he was himself again.

He got up and stretched his body, to limber its muscles. "How long have we been here?" he asked.

"Don't know suh; I was unconscious when they brought me here myself. But I guess not less'n six or eight hours."

"Unconscious?" asked the Hawk, surprised. "You fought, and they knocked you out?"

The big negro looked sheepish and scratched his woolly head.

"Well, no suh," he explained. "I was aimin' to butt in some, but they wouldn't let me."

"Then how did you get unconscious?"

Friday fidgeted. He was acutely embarrassed. "Don't know, suh, Dog-gone, I just can't figure it, unless I fainted."

"Oh." The Hawk smiled. "Fainted. Well so did I, I guess. I suppose," he went on seriously, "you couldn't tell whether the asteroid moved or not. I mean toward Satellite III."

Friday scratched his head again.

"I guess I can't, suh," he replied. "I haven't felt any movement."

"The door is locked?"

"Oh, yes, suh. Tight."

"Very well. Now please be silent. I want to think."

He went over and leaned against the far wall of the cell. His right hand rose to the bangs of flaxen hair and with a slow regular movement began to smooth them. Lost in thought he stood there, thinking through the situation in which he found himself.

He had expected, of course, to subject himself to great risk in keeping the rendezvous with Dr. Ku Sui, but he had never thought he would be endangering Eliot Leithgow also. It was torture to know he had put the gentle old scientist into the Eurasian's web.

That was it: if he could not somehow shear through that web, he must destroy Leithgow himself, and follow on after. The scientist would prefer it so. For whatever Dr. Ku's exact reason for wanting the Master Scientist was, it
was an ugly one: that it was worse than quick death, he knew full well.

Shear through the web. How? Where was the weak strand in Ku Sui’s cunningly laid plot? The Hawk visualized all he could of the asteroid’s mechanical details, and surveyed them painstakingly. Two great port-locks flanked by little ones; secret opening combinations—not much hope in that avenue. Judd’s ship, resting above: could he reach it, and raise it and douse the buildings with its rays? No; Dr. Ku had spoken of defense rays—they would certainly be far more powerful than the Scorpion’s. Then, somewhere there were the mighty gravity-plates batteries which motivated the asteroid and held it controlled in space. The dynamos. Two men, working swiftly, might wreak an unholy amount of damage in little time; in the resulting confusion anything might happen. If!

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Into the depths of his concentration came the odor of tsin-tsin flowers, followed by the familiar, silkie voice of his arch-enemy.

"I see you are deep in thought, my friend. I trust it indicates your complete recovery."

Dr. Ku Sui stood smiling in the doorway, his same bodyguard of three armed men behind him. His sardonic words brought no reply. He went on:

"I hope so. I have arranged, thanks to your kindness, a meeting with an old, dear friend of yours. An illustrious friend: he already honors my establishment with his presence. I have come to ask you to join us."

The Hawk’s gray eyes turned frigid: a lesser man would have blanched at the threat implied in his answer.

"God help you, Ku Sui."

The Eurasian turned it aside. "Always," he said, "God helps those who help themselves. But come with me, if you’ll be so kind. We are expected in the laboratory."

This exchange passed quickly. Friday was still grasping at its underlying meanings as they again filed down the short straight outside corridor. It brought a perverse satisfaction to see the coolie guards bearing their ray-guns unsheathed and ready. Ku Sui’s general attitude did not fool him. He knew that the man’s suave mockery and flowery courtesy were camouflage for a very real fear of the quick wits and brilliant, pointed action of his famous master, the Hawk.

Carse walked steadily enough, but every step he took beat in his mind like the accents of a dirge. For he had betrayed into the hands of the Eurasian his most loved and loyal friend. Betrayed him! Despically egotistical he had been in submitting to the chair, in not making one last wild break for freedom at that time. He had thought he could beat Ku Sui at his own game. Ku Sui, of all men!

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Unseen hands opened from the other side the metal laboratory door, they passed through and the close-fitting halves closed behind them. Ku Sui went to the main switchboard and Carse glanced rapidly around. Leithgow was not there. The wire-ball device was gone, but otherwise the details of the room were unchanged, even to the four white-clad assistants whose fine heads had eyes so lifeless and faces so expressionless. Emphasized, now, somehow, was the tall screen that hid something on one side of the room, and an intuition told the Hawk that what lay behind the screen was in some way connected with their fate.

He waited stolidly for what he knew was coming.

"Now," Dr. Ku murmured. He smiled at his two prisoners and pressed one of the switchboard’s array of buttons. A door opposite them swung open.

"Believe me, this is a pleasure," he said.

Flanked by two impressive slant-eyed guards, a frail figure in a rubber apron stood revealed.

Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow blinked as he looked about the laboratory. Helpless, pitifully alone he looked, with his small, slightly stooped body, his tragedy-aged, deeply-lined face. The blue veins showed under the transparent skin of his forehead; his light-blue eyes, set deep under snow-white eyebrows, darted from side to side, dazed by the light and perhaps still confused by the events which had snatched him so suddenly from his accustomed round and struck him with such numbing force. His years and frailty were obviously fitted rather to some seat of science in a university on Earth than the raw conditions of the frontiers of space.

Hawk Carse found words, but could not control his voice.

"This is the first time I’ve ever been sorry to see you, M. S.,” he said simply.

CHAPTER VIII

Dr. Ku Shows His Claws

The scientist brushed back his thinning white hair with a trembling hand. He knew that voice. He walked over and put his hands on his friend’s shoulders.

"Carse!” he exclaimed. “Thank God, you’re alive!”

"And you,” said the Hawk.

Ku Sui interrupted.
"I am most glad, honored Master Scientist," he said in the flowery Oriental fashion that he affected in his irony, "to welcome you here. For me it is a memorable occasion. Your presence graces my home, and, however unworthy, distinguishes me, rewarding as it does aspirations which I have long held. I am humbly confident that great achievements will result from your visit----"

Quickly Eliot Leithgow turned and looked squarely at him. There was no bending of spirit in the frail old man. "Yes," he said, "my visit. Your sickening verbal genuflections beautifully evade the details--the house of my friend raided at night; he, himself, unarmed, shot down in cold blood; his house gutted! You are admirably consistent, Dr. Ku. A brilliant stroke, typical of your best!"

Five faint lines appeared across the Eurasian's high, narrow brow. "What?" he exclaimed. "Is this true? My servitors must be reprimanded severely; and meanwhile I beg you not to hold their impetuousness against me."

* * * * *

Carse could stand it no longer. This suave mockery and the pathetic figure of his friend; the mention of raid and murder----

"It's all my fault," he blurted out. "I told him where you were. I thought-----"

"Oh, no!" Dr. Ku broke in, pleasantly protesting. "Captain Carse is gallant, but the responsibility's not his. I have a little machine--a trifle, but most ingenious at extracting secrets which persons attempt to hold from me. The Captain couldn't help himself, you see-----"

"It was not necessary to tell me that," said Leithgow.

"Of course," the Eurasian agreed and for the first time seriously; "but let me suggest that the end justifies the means. And that brings me to my point. Master Scientist, now you may know that I have for some time been working toward a mighty end. This end is now in sight, with you here, the final achievement can be attained. An achievement----" He paused, and the ecstasy of the inspired fanatic came to his eyes. Never before had the three men standing there so seen him. "I will explain."

His eyes changed, and imperiously he gave an order to his assistants. "A chair for Master Leithgow, and one for Carse. Place them there." Then, "Be seated," he invited them with a return of his usual seeming courtesy. "I'm sure you must be tired."

Slowly Eliot Leithgow lowered himself into the metal seat. Friday, ignored, shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The Hawk did not sit down until with old habit he had sized up the whole layout of laboratory, assistants and chances. The two chairs faced toward the high screen; to each side stood the five coolie-guards; mechanically alert as always; the four Caucasian assistants made a group of strange statues to the right.

Ku Sui took position, standing before the screen. Seldom did the cold, hard iron of the man show through the velvet of his manner as now.

"Yes," he said, "I will talk to you for a while; give you broad outline of my purpose. And when I have finished you will know just what I mean in but a few minutes. Right now, in this very laboratory, the fate of the
planets is being decided!"

Hawk Carse licked his dry lips.

"Big words!" he said.

"Easily proved, Captain Carse, as you'll see. What can restrain the man who can instantly command Earth's master-minds of scientific knowledge, the man who has both a considerable brain of his own to call on and the mightiest brains in existence, all coordinated for perfect, instant effectiveness. Why, with these brains working for him, he can become omnipotent; there can be but feeble resistance to his steps toward universal power! Only chance, unpredictable chance, always at work, always powerful, can defeat him--and my audacity allows me to disregard what I cannot anticipate."

"You talk riddles," answered Leithgow. "You do not explain your intended means. What you imply you can do with brains is utterly impossible."

"Impossible? Ever a foolish word, Master. You know that the brain has always been my special study. As much as ten years ago, I was universally recognized as the greatest expert in my specialty. But I tell you that my knowledge of the subject was as nothing then to what it is now. I have been very busy these last ten years. Look!"

With a graceful sweep of a hand he indicated the four coolie-guards and his four white-smocked assistants.

"These men of mine," he continued, "do they appear normal, would you say? Or, rather, mechanicalized; lacking in certain things and thereby gaining enormously in the values which can make them perfect servitors? I have removed from their minds certain superficial qualities of thought. The four men in white were, a few years ago, highly skilled surgeons, three of them brain specialists and noted for exceptional intellects and bold, pioneering thinking. I needed them and took them, diverting them from their natural state, in which they would have resisted me and refused my commands. Certain complicated adjustments on their brains--and now their brains are mine, all their separate skill at my command alone!"

* * * * *

Leithgow sat back suddenly, astonishment and horror on his face. His lips parted as if to speak, then closed tightly together again. At last he uttered one word.

"Murderer!"

Dr. Ku smiled. "In a sense, yes. But let me go on.

"The reshaping of these mentalities and of the mentalities of all my coolies, were achievements, and valuable ones; but I wanted more. I wanted much more. I wanted the great, important part of all Earth's scientific knowledge at my fingertips, under my control. I wanted the exceptional brains of Earth, the brains of rare genius, the brains that lived like lonely stars, infinitely removed from the common herd. And more than that, I wanted them always; I wanted them ageless. For I had to seal my power!"

The Eurasian's words were coming more rapidly now, though the man's thoughts and tone were still under control; and Carse, sitting there silently, felt that the climax was being reached; that soon something unthinkable, something of dread, would be revealed. The voice went on:

"These brains I wanted were not many--only six in all. Most of them you knew, Master Leithgow, these men who constituted the cream of Earth's scientific ability. Professor Estapp, the good-looking young American; Dr. Swanson, the Swede; Master Scientist Cram--the great English genius Cram, already legendary, the only other of that rank beside yourself; Professor Geinst, the hunchbacked, mysterious German; and Dr. Norman--Dr. Sir Charles Esme Norman, to give him his English title. I wanted these men, and I got them! All except you, the sixth!"

* * * * *

Again Dr. Ku Sui smiled in triumph. To Eliot Leithgow his smile was unspeakable.

"Yes," the elderly scientist cried out, "you got them, you murderer!"

"Oh, no, no, Master Leithgow, you are mistaken. I did not kill them. Why should I be stupid as to do that? To these men I wanted so badly? No, no. Because these five scientists disappeared from Earth suddenly, without trace, without hint of the manner of their going, the stupid Earthlings believe they were killed! Stupid Earthlings! Abducted, of course; but why assume they were killed? And why, of all people, decide that Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow had something to do with their disappearance? I confess to having planted that evidence pointing to you, but if they had the sense of a turnip they would know that you were incapable of squashing a flea, let alone destroying five eminent brothers in science! You, jealous, guilty of five crimes passionel! Pour le science! Credulous Earthlings! Incredible Earthlings! And here are you, a hunted man with a price on your head!

"So for ten years you have thought I murdered those five men? No, no. They were very much alive for eight years and very troublesome prisoners. It took me eight years to solve the problem I had set myself.

"You will meet them in a minute--the better part of them. You'll see for yourself that they are very usefully alive. For I succeeded completely with them. I have sealed my power!"

His silk pajamalike clothing rustled loud in the strained silence as he turned to the screen behind him. For some
obscure reason the perfume about him, flowers of tsin-tsin, seemed to grow in their nostrils. "Observe!" he said, and lifted it aside. An assistant threw a switch on a nearby panel. The unnatural quiet in the laboratory was resumed.

"The ultimate concentration of scientific knowledge and genius! The gateway to all power!"

CHAPTER IX
The Brain Speaks
A case lay revealed.

At first, while it was unlit, it seemed nothing more than that: a case like those glass-sided and glass-topped ones found in museums, a case perhaps three feet high, three feet deep and five feet in width. Under this glass upper part of the case was an enclosed section a little more than a foot in depth. The whole structure was supported at each corner by short strong metal legs. And that was all.

But, second by second, as the captives took in these details, a change came over the interior. No doubt it was the result of the increasing action of some electrical current loosed by the throwing of the switch; the whole insides of the glass case little by little lightened, until it became apparent it was full of a strange liquid that seemed of itself to have the property of glowing with soft light. As this light increased, a row of five shadowy bulks the size of footballs began to take form between what looked, from where the men sat, like a forest of fibers of silk.

In a few more seconds a miracle of complicated wiring came into visibility. The silk fibers were seen to be wires, threads of silver gossamer that interconnected the five emerging bulks in a maze of ordered complexity. Thousands interlaced the interior; hundreds were gathered in each of five close bunches that sprouted from the floor of the case and then spread, fanwise, to various groupings of delicate liquid-immersed instruments.

In several seconds more Eliot Leithgow and Hawk Carse were staring with horror at what the now brilliantly glowing liquid revealed the five shapes to be. As one man they rose, went to the cabinet and gazed with terrible fascination.

"Brains!" exclaimed Leithgow. "Human brains! But not alive--surely not alive!"

Five human brains lay all immersed in the glowing case, each resting in a shallow metal pan. There were pulsings in narrow gray tubes which led into their under-sides--theatrical evidence that the brains held imprisoned there were, as the Eurasian had said, alive--most strangely, unnaturally and horribly alive. Stark and cruelly naked they lay there, pulsing with life that should not have been.

"Yes, alive!" repeated Ku Sui. "And never to die while their needs are attended!"

One of his long artistic fingers tapped the glass before the central brain, which was set somewhat lower than the others. "This," he said, "is the master brain. It controls and coordinates the thoughts of the others, avoiding the useless, pursuing the relevant and retaining the valuable. It is by far the most important of the five, and is, of course the superior intellect. It is the keystone of my gateway to all power."

Eliot Leithgow's face was deathly white, but, as one in the grip of some devilish hypnotic fascination, he could not tear his eyes away from the revolting, amazing achievement of his brilliant enemy. The Eurasian with the cruelty of a cat picked that awful moment to add:

"This master brain is all that was best of Master Scientist Cram."

The frail old man took this statement like a blow.

"Oh, dear heaven--not Raymond Cram! Not Cram, the physicist, brought to this! Why, I knew him when----"

Ku Sui smiled and interrupted. "But you speak of him as if he were dead! He's not. He's very much alive, as you shall see. Possibly even happy--who knows? There is no good---- Keep back, Carse!"

His tiger's eyes had not missed the adventurer's slight crouch in preparation for a shove which might have toppled the case and ended the abominable servitude of its gruesome tenants. The Hawk was caught before he had well started; and had he not stopped his gathering muscles he would have been dead from the coolie-guards' rays by the time he touched the near side of the case.

He took his failure without comment; only stepped back, folded his arms and burned his enemy with the frigid glare of his eyes. The Eurasian continued as if nothing had happened, addressing himself chiefly to Leithgow.

"The others, too, you once knew; you are even charged with their murder. Let me introduce you once more to your old colleagues and friends. There, at the right, is the brain you once compared notes with in the person of Professor Estapp. Next to him is Dr. Swanson. To the left of Master Scientist Cram, is Professor Geinst, and this last is Dr. Sir Charles Esme Norman. Now think what this group represents!

"Estapp, Chemistry and Bio-Chemistry; Swanson, Psychology; Geinst, Astronomy; Norman, Mathematics. And Cram, the master brain, of course, Physics and Electricity, although his encyclopedic knowledge encompassed
every major subject, well fitting his brain for the position it holds. All this, gathered here in one! The five outstanding intellects of Earth, here gathered in one priceless instrument! Here are my advisors; here my trusty, never-tiring assistants. I have their help toward the solution of any problem; obtain from their individual and combined intelligences even those rare intuitions which I have found almost always precede brilliant discoveries.

"For they not only retain all they ever knew of science, but they can develop, even as brains in bodies can develop. Their knowledge does not become outmoded, if they are kept informed of the latest currents of scientific thought. From old knowledge and new they build their structures of logic once my command sets them on. Wills of their own they have none.

"I have not succeeded in all my secondary alterations, however. For one thing, I have been unable to deprive them altogether of the memory of what they formerly were; but it is a subdued memory, to them doubtless like a dream, familiar yet puzzling. Because of this I imagine they hate me--heartily!--yet they lack the will, the egocentricity which would enable them to refuse to answer my questions and do my work.

"Frankly, without them this whole structure"--his hands swept out widely--"my whole asteroidal kingdom, would have been impossible. Most of my problems in constructing it were solved here. And in the future other problems, far greater, will be solved here!"

* * * * *

Hawk Carse by now understood very well Dr. Ku Sui's purpose in bringing M. S. Leithgow to his laboratory, and was already goading his brain in search of a way out. Death was by all means preferable to what the Eurasian intended--death self-inflicted, and death that mutilated the brain--but there were no present chances that his searching mind could see.

If Leithgow suspected what was in store, his face gave no sign of it. He only said:

"Dr. Ku, of all the things you have ever done, this is the most heartless and most vile. I would have thought there was a limit in you somewhere, but this--this thing--this horrible life you have condemned these five men to----"

He could not continue. The Eurasian only smiled, and replied, with his always seeming courtesy:

"Your opinion is natural Master: I could expect no other. But when great ends are to be gained, he who would gain them must strip himself of those disturbing atavistic things we call the tender emotions. The pathway to power is not for those who wince at the sight of blood, who weep at the need for death. I hope, for special reasons, that you'll make an effort to understand this before we come to the phase which will follow my demonstration...."

"Now, please allow me to show you my coordinated brains in useful operation. Will you be seated again? You, too, Captain Carse."

* * * * *

It was Ku Sui's show: there was nothing for the two men but to obey. But they felt, both of them, a great unnaturalness in being seated for the demonstration to come.

"Thank you," the Eurasian said, and went to the panel flanking the case. There, he turned and remarked: "Before we begin, I must ask you to remember that the opinions of my brains may always be accepted as the probable truth, and always, absolutely, are they honest and without prejudice." He threw a small knife switch and again turned. Nothing seemed to happen.

"I have contrived, of course, an artificial way of communicating with my helpers. This inset grille here contains both microphone and speaker--ear and mouth.

"The ear picks up my words and transmits them to every brain. If I have asked a question, it is individually considered and the respective answers sent to the master brain; they are there coordinated and the result spoken to me by means of the mechanical mouth. When the opinions of the individual brains do not agree, the answer is in the form of a poll, often with brief mention of points pro and con. Sometimes their meditations take considerable time; but simple questions always bring a prompt and unanimous answer. Shall we try them now?"

The man's spectators did not answer; even the Hawk was for once in his life too overcome by conflicting feelings of horror and dread, and compelling morbid fascination. Dr. Ku paused dramatically, a slight smile on his enigmatic lips; then turned his head and spoke into the grille.

"Do you hear me?" he asked, easily and confidently.

The silence in the laboratory was for one brief moment almost overpowering. Then, from the grille, came a thin metallic voice. Inhuman, artificial, it sounded in the tense strain of the silent room, voice from the living dead that it was.

"I do," were its words.

"Strange," mused the Eurasian, half aloud, "that their collective answer is always given as 'I.' What obscure telescoping of egotisms can be the cause of that...."

He dropped the mood of wonder at once. "Tell me," he said, looking deliberately at Leithgow: "Would the brain of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow be more valuable in the position of the master brain than Cram's?"
A horrible eternity passed. Again came the inhuman voice:
"I have answered that question before. Yes."

Dr. Ku broke the stunned silence that followed this verdict.
"Don't forget that several ray-guns are centered on you, Carse," he remarked casually. "Others, black, are on you. Earthlings would no doubt consider your emotions very creditable; I only suggest that you keep them under control."

But the Hawk had given no slightest intimation that he might attempt anything. He sat quietly, a little tensely, his face an icy mask, only the freezing shock of his steady gray eyes betraying his emotion as they bore straight into those of the Eurasian. No man could meet such eyes for long, and even the tiger ones of Ku Sui the all-powerful went aside at the icy murder that showed there.

Friday still stood in back of the chairs where were seated his two friends. He was scared to death from the thing he had seen. His face was a sickly, ashy gray, and his eyes large round rolling white marbles; but at the slightest sign of a break he would have metamorphosed into a demon of destruction, however hopeless the try, with ray-guns covering him at all times. Such was his love and loyalty for his famous master.

Eliot Leithgow was a man resigned. His head sank down on his chest. Dr. Ku's next words, though aimed at him, did not seem to penetrate his consciousness.
"You see, Master Leithgow, I have no choice. My purposes are all-important; they always come first; they demand this substitution. Were your intellect of lesser stature, I would have no interest in you whatever. But as it is...." He shrugged.

Hawk Carse stood up.
The Eurasian's voice fell away. The ensuing silence gave an icy, clear-cut sharpness to the whisper that then cut through it from thin lips that barely moved:
"God help you, Ku Sui, if you do it. God help you."

Dr. Ku Sui smiled deprecatingly and again shrugged.
"I have told you before that God helps those who help themselves. I have always had splendid results from helping myself."

For a moment he looked away as he considered something in his mind. Then to his veiled eyes came the old mocking irony, and he said:
"I think perhaps you'd like to observe the operations, my friend, and I'm going to allow you to. Not here--no. I could never have you interrupting; the series of operations is of infinite delicacy and will require weeks. But I can make other arrangements; I can give you as good as ringside seats for each performance. A small visi-screen might be attached to one wall of your cell to enable you to see every detail of what transpires here." His tone suddenly stiffened. "I wouldn't, Carse!"

The Hawk relaxed from the brink on which he had wavered. A sudden mad rush--what else remained? What else? For an instant he had lost his head--one of the several times in his whole life. Just for an instant he had forgotten his phenomenal patience under torture, his own axiom that in every tight place there was a way out.
"That's much safer," said Ku Sui. "Perhaps you and the black had better return to your cell."

Certain little muscles in the Hawk's face were trembling as he turned to go, and his feet would not work well. The ray-guns of the coolie-guards covered his every move. Friday followed just behind.

As the adventurer came to the door he stopped and turned, and his eyes went back to those of the frail, elderly scientist.

The doomed man met the gray eyes and their agony with a smile.
"It's all right, old comrade," he said. "Just remember to destroy this hellish device, if you ever possibly can. My love to Sandra; and to her, and my dear ones on Earth, anything but the truth... Farewell."

Carse's fingernails bit each one into his palms. He hesitated; tried, but could not speak.
"All right, Carse--you may go."

The feelingless guards nudged white man and black out, and the door swung solidly closed behind them....

CHAPTER X

In the Visi-Screen

There were those among the few claiming to have any insight into the real Hawk Carse who declared that a month went out of his life for every minute he spent in the cell then. The story, of course, came trickling out through various unreliable sources; we who delve in the lore of the great adventurer have to thank for our authorities Sewell, the great historian of that generation--who personally traveled several million miles to get what meager facts the Hawk would divulge concerning his life and career--equally with Friday, who shared this particular adventure with
him. Friday's emotional eyes no doubt colored his memory of the scenes he passed through, and it is likely that the facts lost nothing in the simple dramatic way he would relate them.

But certainly the black was as fearful of his master during that period in the cell as he was of what he saw acted out on the screen.

We can picture him telling of the ordeal, his big eyes rolling and his deep rich voice trembling with the memories stamped forever in his brain; and picture too the men who, at one time or another, listened to him, fascinated, their mouths agape and a tickling down the length of their spines. It was probably only Friday's genius as a narrator which later caused some of his listeners to swear that new lines were grooved in Carse's face and a few flaxen hairs silvered by the minutes he spent watching Eliot Leithgow strapped down on that operating table, close to the beautiful surgeon fingers of Dr. Ku Sui.

But whether or not that period of torture really pierced through his iron emotional guard and set its mark on him permanently by aging him, it is impossible to say. However, there were deep things in Hawk Carse, and the deepest among them were the ties binding him to his friends; there was also that certain cold vanity; and considering these it is probable that he came very close indeed to the brink of some frightening emotional abyss, before which he had few shreds of mind and body-discipline left....

* * * * *

He reentered the cell like a ghost; he stood very still, his hands slowly clenching and unclenching behind his back, and his pale face inclined low, so that the chin rested on his chest. So he stood for some minutes, Friday not daring to disturb him, until the single door that gave entrance clicked in its lock and opened again. At this he raised his head. Five men came in, all coolies, three of whom had ray-guns which they kept scrupulously on the white man and black while the other two rigged up an apparatus well up on one of the cell walls. They remained wholly unaffected the several times their dull eyes met those of the Hawk. Perhaps, being mechanicalized humans, practically robots, they got no reaction from the icy gray eyes in his strained white face.

The device they attached was some two square feet of faintly gleaming screen, rimmed by metal and with little behind it other than two small enclosed tubes, a cuplike projector with wires looping several terminals on its exterior, and a length of black, rubberized cable, which last was passed through one of the five-inch ventilating slits high in the wall. Carse regarded it with his hard stare until the door clicked behind the coolies and they were once more alone. Then his head returned to its bowed position, and Friday approached the apparatus and began to examine it with the curiosity of the born mechanic he was.

"Let it be, Friday," the Hawk ordered tonelessly.

A dozen minutes passed in silence.

The silence was outward: there was no quiet in the adventurer's head. He could not stop the sharp remorseless voice which kept sounding in his brain. Its pitiless words flailed him unceasingly with their stinging taunts. "You--you whom they call the Hawk," it would say; "you, the infallible one--you, so recklessly, egotistically confident--you have brought this to pass! Not only have you allowed yourself to be trapped, but Eliot Leithgow! He is out there now; and soon his brain will be condemned forever to that which you have seen! The brain that trusted you! And you have brought this to pass! Yours the blame, the never-failing Hawk! All yours--yours--yours!"

A voice reached him from far away. A soft negro voice which said, timidly:

"They're beginning, suh. Captain Carse? On the screen, suh; they're beginning."

That was worse. The real ordeal was approaching. True, he might have thrown himself on the coolie-guards who had just left--but his death would not have helped old M. S.

Friday spoke again, and this time his words leaped roaring into Carse's ears. He raised his head and looked.

The tubes behind the screen were crackling, and the screen itself had come to life. He was looking at the laboratory. But the place was changed.

* * * * *

What had before been a wide circular room, with complicated machines and unnamed scientific apparatus following only its walls, so as to leave the center of its floor empty and free from obstructions, was now a place of deep shadow pierced by a broad cone of blinding white light which shafted down from some source overhead and threw into brilliant emphasis only the center of the room.

The light struck straight down upon an operating table. At its head stood a squat metal cylinder sprouting a long flexible tube which ended in a cone--no doubt the anesthetizing apparatus. A stepped-back tier of white metal drawers flanked one side of the table, upon its various upper surfaces an array of gleaming surgeon's tools. In neat squads they lay there: long thin knives with straight and curved cutting edges; handled wires, curved into hooks and eccentric corkscrew shapes; scalpels of different sizes; forceps, claspers, retractors, odd metal claws, circular saw-blades and a variety of other unclassified instruments. Sterilizers were convenient to one side, a thin wraith of steam drifting up from them into the source of the light.
Four men worked within the brilliant shaft of illumination—four white-clad figures, hands gloved and faces swathed in surgeons’ masks. Only their lifeless eyes were visible, concentrated on their tasks of preparation. Steam rose in increased mists as one figure lifted back the lid of a sterilizer and dropped in some gleaming instruments. The cloud swirled around his masked face and body with devilish infernalike effect.

All this in deadest silence. From the darkness came another figure, tall and commanding, a shape whose black silk garments struck a new note in the dazzling whiteness of the scene. He was pulling on operating gloves. His slanted eyes showed keen and watchful through the eyeholes of the mask he already wore, as he surveyed the preparations. Ominous Ku Sui looked, among his white-clad assistants.

The Eurasian seemed to give an order, and a white figure turned and glanced off into the surrounding darkness, raising one hand. A door showed in faint outline as it opened. Through the door two shadows moved, wheeling something long and flat between them.

They came into the light, two coolies, and wheeled their conveyance alongside the operating table. Then they turned into the darkness and were gone.

"Oh!" gasped Friday. "They've shaved off his head!"

* * * * *

The frail form of Eliot Leithgow, clad to the neck in loose white garments, showed clearly as he was lifted to the operating table. As Friday said, his hair was all gone—shaved off close—stunning verification of what was to happen. Awfully alone and helpless he looked, yet his face was calm and he lay there composed, watching his soulless inquisitors with keen blue eyes. But his expression altered when Dr. Ku appeared over him and felt and prodded his naked head.

"I can't stand this!"

It was a whisper of agony in the silence of the cell where the two men stood watching, a cry from the fiber of the Hawk’s innermost self. The path he left across the frontiers of space was primarily a lonely one; but Friday and Eliot Leithgow and two or three others were friends and very precious to him, and they received all the emotion in his tough, hard soul. Especially Leithgow—old, alone, dishonored on Earth, frail and nearing the end of the long years—he needed protection. He had trusted Carse.

Trusted him! And now this!

Ku Sui’s fingers were prodding Leithgow’s head like that of any dumb animal chosen as subject for experimentation. Prodding.... Feeling....

"I can't stand it!” the Hawk whispered again.

The mask on his face, that famous self-imposed mask that hid all emotion, had broken. Lines were there, deep with agony; tiny drops of sweat stood out all over. He saw Ku Sui pick up something and adjust it to his grip while looking down at the man who lay, now strapped on the table. He saw him nod curtly to an assistant; saw the anesthetic cylinder wheeled up a little closer, and the dials on it set to quivering....

His hands came up and covered his eyes. But only for a moment. He would not be able to keep his sight away. That was the exquisite torture the Eurasian had counted on: he well knew as he had arranged it that the adventurer would not be able to hold his eyes from the screen. Carse had to look!

He took away his hands and raised his eyes.

The screen was blank!

* * * * *

Friday looked up with a grin from where he was kneeling before the knob on the door of the cell. Carse saw that the knob was of metal, centered in an inset square of some dull fibrous composition.

"This door has an electric lock, suh,” the negro explained rapidly. "And things worked by electricity can often be short-circuited!"

Quickly and silently he had disconnected from the television projector the wire which led back through the ventilating slit in the wall, and now was holding its end with one hand while with the other he twisted out the screw which held in the knob. "Anyway, won't hurt to try," he said, removing the screw and laying it on the floor. In another second the knob lay beside it, and he was squinting into the hole where it had fitted.

"Be quick!” Carse whispered.

Friday did not answer. He was guessing at the location of the mechanism within, and trying to summon up all the knowledge he had of such things. After a moment he bent one of the live ends of the wire he was holding into a gentle curve and felt his way down within the lock with it, carefully keeping the other end clear of all contacts.

Seconds went by as his fingers delicately worked—seconds that told terribly on Hawk Carse. For the screen was blank and lifeless, and there was no way of knowing how far the work in the laboratory had meanwhile progressed. In his mind remained each detail of the scene as he had viewed it last: the strapped-down figure, the approaching anesthetic cylinder, the knives lying in readiness.... How was he to know if one of those instruments were not
already tinged with scarlet?

"Oh, be quick!" he cried again.

"If I can touch a live part of the lock's circuit," grunted Friday, absorbed, "there ought--to--be--trouble."

* * * * *

Suddenly currents clashed with a sputtering hiss, and a shower of sparks shot out of the knob-hole and were instantly gone. Short-circuited! It remained to be seen whether it had destroyed the mechanism of the lock. Friday dropped the hot, burned-through wire he was holding and reached for the knob, but the Hawk had leaped into life and was ahead of him.

In a moment the knob was in the door and its holding screw part-way in. Gently the Hawk tried the knob. It turned!

But they did not leave the cell--then. Ku Sui's voice was echoing through the room, more than a trace of irritation in its tone:

"Hawk Carse, you are beginning to annoy me--you and your too-clever black satellite."

Carse's eyes flashed to the ceiling. A small disklike object, almost unnoticeable, lay flat against it in one place.

"Yes," continued Ku Sui, "I can talk to you, hear you and see you. I believe you have succeeded in destroying the lock. So open it and glance into the corridor--and escape, if you still want to. I rather wish you'd try, for I'm extremely busy and must not be disturbed again."

Graven-faced, without comment Carse turned the knob and opened the door an inch. He peeped through, Friday doing so also over his head--peeped right into the muzzles of four ray-guns, held by an equal number of coolie-guards waiting there.

"So that's it," Friday said, dejectedly. "He saw me workin' on the lock an' sent those guards here at once. Or else had them there all the time."

* * * * *

The Hawk closed the door and considered what to do. Ku Sui's voice returned.

"Yes," it sounded metallically, "I've an assistant posted here who's watching every move you make. Don't, therefore, hope to surprise me by anything you may do.

"Now I am going to resume work. Reconnect the screen: I've had the burned-out fuse replaced. If you won't, I'll have it done for you--and have you so bound that you'll be forced to look at it.

"Don't tamper with any of my hearing and seeing mechanisms again, please. If you do, I will be forced to have you destroyed within five minutes.

"But--if you'd like to leave your cell, you have my full permission. You should find it easy, now that the lock is broken."

The voice said no more. Carse ordered Friday harshly:

"Reconnect the screen."

The negro hastened to obey. His master's gray eyes again fastened on the screen. Fiercely, for a moment, he smoothed his bangs.

The laboratory flashed into clear outline again. There was the shaft of white light; the operating table, full under it; the anesthetic cylinder, the banks of instruments, the sterilizers with their wisps of steam curling ceaselessly up. There were the efficient white-clad assistant-surgeons, their dull eyes showing through the holes in their masks. And there was the black figure of Ku Sui, an ironic smile on his lips, and before him the resigned and helpless form of Eliot Leithgow.

The Eurasian gestured. An assistant found the pulse in Leithgow's wrist, and another bent over him in such fashion that the prisoners could not see what he was doing. Ku Sui too bent over, something in his hands. The prelude to living death had begun....

* * * * *

At that moment Hawk Carse was a different man, recovered from the weakness that had made him cry out at his friend's imminent destruction a short time before. The old characteristic fierceness and recklessness had come back to him; he had decided on action--on probable death. "I've been too cautious!" he exclaimed violently in his thoughts.

"Friday!" he whispered sharply to the negro, going close.

"Yes, suh?"

"Four men outside--a sudden charge through that door when I nod. We'll die, too, by God! Willing?"

Friday was held by the man's iron will to succeed or die. Without hesitation he whispered back:

"Yes, suh!"

Their whispers had been low. Dr. Ku Sui had not been warned, for the screen still showed him bending over his victim.
"You'll open the door; you're nearest. I'll go through first," the Hawk murmured, and smiled at the loyalty behind the promptness of his man's grin of understanding.

Then both smiles faded. The muscles of the negro's huge body bunched in readiness for the signal as tensely he watched the flaxen-haired head close to him.

Suddenly it nodded.

The door swung wide and white man and black went charging out.

And immediately there burst in their ears the furious clanging of a general alarm bell, sounding throughout the whole building!

CHAPTER XI

Trapped in the Laboratory

In his carefully welded plot-chain, Ku Sui left one weak link, though he was not aware of it at the time. For it would not appear save by the testing of it, and he had not expected it to be tested. Carse acted recklessly; perhaps, if cold reason be applied to his move, senselessly. Dr. Ku had not thought he would dare make the break he did. But the adventurer did dare, and the loophole, the weak link, was exposed.

The Eurasian had a paranoic's vanity, and with it a lust accumulated over years to exact the most terrible vengeance he could from the adventurer who had frustrated his schemes time and time again. His arrangement for subtly forcing Carse to watch the operation was part of his vengeance; but he planned more. He wanted his old foe, broken by the living death of Eliot Leithgow, to die slowly later; wanted to crumple that will of steel utterly; wanted to watch and pleasantly mock him during the slow death agonies he had contrived for him. Therefore--and here lay the weak link--Dr. Ku left orders for Carse to be kept alive.

If he had not instructed his coolie-guards to wound, and not kill, in case of a break for freedom, Carse and Friday could never possibly have gained the corridor alive. The four waiting ray-guns would have burned out their lives within three seconds. But, as it was, the barrage of shots from the ray-guns was directed at their legs, with the intention of bringing them down—and their legs were moving very rapidly. And so, reckoning up the caliber of the two comrades, their wild fighting start, their fatalistic resolve to get as many as possible of the enemy before they died, the result of that first hectic scramble in the corridor was more or less inevitable.

* * * * *

With a savage war-whoop that rose, ear-shattering, above the clanging of the alarm bell, Friday flung his two hundred and twenty pounds of brawn and muscle after Carse into the thick of the guards, taking no more notice of the spitting streaks of orange light that laced past his legs than if they had been squirts from a water-pistol. The guards had been bunched well together, but they scattered like ten-pins when Carse, followed by the living thunderbolt of fighting negro, crashed into them. In that first charge three of them were knocked flat, their guns either dropping or twisting loose from their hands.

Immediately recovering, the Hawk darted at the fourth with the speed of a striking cobra; his wiry hands closed around the yellow throat: and two seconds later that coolie was no longer connected with the proceedings, a whacking head-thump being his passport into insensibility. Again Friday's exultant war-whoop bellowed out over the scene.

Carse pushed to his feet, his deadly fighting smile on his face, a ray-gun in his hand. He stooped and picked up another.

"Get to the Master!" roared Friday, an ebon god of war between two futilely attacking bodies. "I'm--followin'!"

In those red seconds, ultimate success was still too impossible a thing to even hope for. But they would at least try, then die like the men they were.

Hawk Carse sped on down the corridor, a deadly, smoothly-functioning fighting machine. And after him a few seconds later came leaping the negro, a whooping giant with a ray-gun in each hand and the light of battle flashing in his eyes. As his personal contribution to the fight he was leaving in the rear three sprawled bodies, two knocked cold and the third with a broken neck.

Their triumph had so far been a matter of but sixty seconds. The jangle of the alarm bell continued ominously. It summoned resistance, well-trained resistance; the defenses of the asteroid awoke to action. Doors spacing the corridor behind now began to open, releasing dozens of Orientals. Nor had these men heard Ku Sui's orders. They would shoot to kill!

* * * * *

Three peering faces suddenly were in Hawk Carse's line of vision ahead: three ray-guns were settling on him. His famous left hand, the gun-hand that was known and dreaded throughout space, moved with the eye-blinding speed that was necessary; his trigger finger bent only three times, but each of the pencil-thin streaks of orange that spat forth brought down a man, and he had struck without slackening his stride for an instant.

Twice more his ray-gun spoke, and then the goal, the entrance to the central laboratory, was just ahead. Carse
glanced back.

"Yes, suh!" a fierce voice yelled out to him. "Coming!"

Friday was bringing up the rear as fast as he could. He came sideways in a zigzag course ducking and whirling constantly, and in between firing promptly at any portions of enemy anatomies that dared project into the line of the corridor. The Hawk covered the last few yards of his retreat, and then they were together at the laboratory.

"The knob!" Carse ordered, spraying the corridor in general warning.

Friday tried it, but the door was locked. He hurled himself against it, but it did not budge.

How to get through? On the other side of the door was Leithgow, and probably Ku Sui; on this side they were trapped in a blind end. They could never make it back down that gauntlet and live, and anything like concerted action on the part of the yellows would do for them where they were.

That concerted action came at once. Seventy feet behind, a heavy shot-projector was pushed out on its little rollers from one of the doors. A hand reached out and whirled it so that its muzzle bore straight down the corridor at them. Carse shot at the hand, but the target was too small even for his fine eye, and he missed; Friday silenced an emboldened orange spot of light that was spitting streaks at them.

Hopeless! It looked like the end. Hawk Carse's face was in its old, emotionless mold as he waited, his gun sharp on the spot where the hand must reappear if they would fire the deadly projector. He had to get that hand--and any others that took its place. An almost impossible shot. He couldn't rush it and get it too. Not in time.

A moment passed. The hand flashed out; Carse shot and again missed. Then a narrow cone was along the corridor, a blinding orange streak. Instantly, with a rasp of thunder, it was gone, and the air was stifling.

The Hawk was untouched; Friday, too, he saw. The bolt had been taken by the door--and one of the door's two halves was ajar!

* * * * *

At once Hawk Carse acted. "Inside!" he yelled, then was through, the negro right behind. Carse's eyes swept the laboratory. It was a place of shadows, the sole light being a faint gleam from a tiny bulb-tipped surgical tool which glimmered weirdly from the bank of instruments waiting by the operating table. Carse saw no one.

"Hold the door!" he ordered. "I don't think it'll lock!"

Friday obeyed. He found the inner bolt melted and the lock inoperative; and, placing his forearms on either side of the middle crack of the door, he stood bracing it.

A furious pounding shook the door. A heavy pressure bent it inward.

"Quick!" the big black gasped. "Somethin' to wedge it!"

"A minute, Friday," the Hawk answered. "Hold it!"

He was already dragging a metal table there; and, upended under the knob, making an angle with the floor, it held stoutly closed the door, now thumping and quivering with blows given it from outside. The panting negro fell back from the door exhausted, but rose to help his master at the need for placing additional barricades.

That finished, the Hawk wheeled, and at once, pantherlike, ray-guns at the ready, stalked the room. There was no sign of the enemy. He approached the operating table.

A great relief flooded his grim face as he sighted Eliot Leithgow lying there, apparently untouched and still conscious. The elderly scientist was strapped down tight, but he was smiling.

"I knew you'd come, Carse, if you could," he said simply.

There was no time for visiting. "Where's Ku Sui?" the adventurer asked.

"Gone," Leithgow answered. "I heard a door open and close--which one I couldn't see. He went as soon as that bell began to ring. The assistants, too."

Through the shouts and batterings at the barricaded door came a new sound--from another direction. Like a streak the Hawk was at one of the three other doors, throwing its inside hand bolt; and by the time he had shot over the second, Friday had taken the cue and secured the remaining one.

The negro let out a vast breath. "Umpf!" he said. "I'll tell the universe that was close!"

* * * * *

Hawk Carse said nothing. With eyes ever-watchful for sign of a trick or a trap in the apparently deserted laboratory, he quickly unbuckled the bands that held Leithgow to the operating table. Friday lifted the scientist to the floor, where he stretched weakly.

The adventurer smiled faintly, then his eyes went cold and serious. Crisply he said:

"We came, yes--but now I think we're trapped. There'll be men outside each of these four doors. The bolts may hold them a while, but eventually they'll get through. We must look for further weapons. If only there were better light! Friday," he ordered, "look for a switch. Ah!"

With a thud and a booming reverberation a systematic battering had begun on the metal door through which they had entered. It quivered visibly and rang as the powerful blows from the other side bludgeoned into it, and
evenly spaced, shrewdly delivered at the vital middle point. Whrang, whrang--even strokes, ringing throughout the barred laboratory--whrang ... whrang....

And then a similar piece settled into clanging routine on another door; then on the remaining two. The bolts holding them jumped with each deafening thud. Friday scowled, forgot to search farther for the switch, took a few short, indecisive steps, and then stood still again, looking questioningly at his master. The Hawk stood silent also, smoothing the bangs of flaxen hair above one temple, his face knit in concentration.

He had been afraid they would use the great projector on the door, and had been somewhat cheered by the reflection that they dared not, for fear of destroying the contents of the laboratory, especially the irreplaceable brains. But this was worse; Ku Sui was without question directing their efforts now. And that being the case, he could expect to see one door after another battered down--and then a concerted, four-point rush which would end everything....

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Eliot Leithgow said the extraordinary thing that pointed a way out. "May I suggest," he said mildly, "that we try to get Dr. Ku Sui's brains to help us?"

"What do you mean?"

The older man smiled, a little sadly. "Those brains--they once were friends of mine. It's possible they'll answer our questions. It won't hurt to try. We'll ask them how it might be possible to get out."

Hawk Carse cried: "Eliot, you've got it! There is a chance!"

But the negro shivered. The brains stood for magic, for ghosts--for awful, unknown things he wanted nothing to do with.

Carse shoved back the screen concealing the infamous device.

"We know where this switch is, at least. If only the current's not been turned off!"

"Probably not," the Master Scientist said, out of his own technical thought-train.

Friday hung back, loath to be concerned. He looked askance at the thing, his open mouth a small round circle.

The Hawk was at the switch, but his hand hesitated. In spite of the emergency at the doors, in spite of his innate promptness of action, he hesitated. This thing he was about to do--this awful human mechanism before him--they were so weird and unnatural....

Then he heard a faint click inside the laboratory--in a place where no one should be. Instinctively he whirled and crouched--and an orange ray streaked over his head with its wicked spit of death. At once his own ray-gun was up and answering to the spot where the other bolt had started, and then he was flat on the floor and ceiling toward the wall opposite.

***

A high wide panel in the wall had slid open, with only the faint noise Carse had heard to mark its movement.

For just a few seconds it stayed open. The Hawk covered the last few feet in a desperate rush, but he reached it too late. It clicked shut in his face, and there was no hold for his hands when he tried to force it back.

Only a voice showed that someone was on the other side. In familiar, suave tones it said:

"Carse, I still will take you and Leithgow--alive. It would of course be idle to ask you to surrender, but that's not necessary, for you're trapped and can't possibly last another five minutes. I intrude only to warn you away from my synchronized brains. I will destroy without compunction anyone who meddles with them."

Dr. Ku's voice dropped away; the last words seemed to have come from below. Apparently he was descending by a stairway or hidden elevator.

"Without compunction!" Leithgow echoed with a bitter smile.

Carse ordered Friday curtly to watch the panel, then returned to Leithgow.

"Eliot," he said, "we've got to be quick."

And with his words the delicate, overstrained filament in the tiny instrument bulb gave out, and the laboratory was plunged into ultimate blackness....

CHAPTER XII
Out Under the Dome
Within the well of darkness rang the metallic reverberations from the battering on the four doors all around. The fluid nothingness was a place of fear. Its nerve-shattering, mind-confusing bedlam might have come from the fantastic anvils of some giant, malevolent blacksmith.

The Hawk's curt voice cut through imperatively:

"Keep your heads, We'll have a light in a second. Light of a sort."

He threw the switch by the side of the chamber of brains.

Seconds passed, and where was darkness grew a faint glow. The switch had operated; the current, probably from the device's own batteries, was there! Quickly and steadily the liquid within the case took on its self-originating
glow, until the midnight laboratory was faintly washed with the delicate rosy light. The wires emerged in their complexity as before, and then the brains, all gruesome and naked in their cradles of unnatural life.

Around the internally-lit case were the three besieged Earthlings, half in blackness, the light from the front making ghastly shadows on their faces. Acolites at some sorcerer's rite they looked, with the long inky patches that left them to dissolve formlessly against the far walls of the room.

Grotesque in the operating garments he wore, his bald head shining in the eerie light, Eliot Leithgow approached the microphone Dr. Ku had used to communicate with his pathetic subjects. He looked down at the brains, at the wires which threaded the pans they lay in, at the narrow gray tubes that pulsed with blood—or whatever might be the fluid used in its stead. All mechanical was the apparatus—all of metal and other cunningly fashioned man-made materials—all but the brains....

* * * * *

To the old Master Scientist there came a vision of five human figures, rising specterlike from the case they were entombed in; straight, proud young figures, two of them; two others old, like himself, and the fifth a gnarled hunchback. Very different were they, each from each other, but each face had its mark of genius; and each face, to Eliot Leithgow, was warm and smiling, for these five men were friends....

So he saw them in vision....

"Another switch has to be thrown to talk with them, Carse," he said. The Hawk indicated one inquiringly.

Leithgow nodded. "Yes. That was it." The switch went over.

He steadied himself and said into the speaking grille:

"I am Eliot Leithgow--Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow. Once you knew me. Professors Geinst, Estapp and Norman, Dr. Swanson and Master Scientist Cram--do you remember me? Do you remember how once we worked together; how, long ago on our Earth, we were friends? Do you remember your old colleague, Leithgow?"

He stopped, deeply shaken. In seconds his mind sped back through the years to those five men as he had last seen them—and to two women he had met, calm-faced as their husband-scientists.... God forbid those women should ever learn of this!

Carse watched his old comrade closely, fearful of the strain this was on him.

Then came a cold, thin, mechanical voice.

"Yes, Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow. I remember you well."

The scientist strove to keep level his voice as he continued:

"Two friends and I are trapped here. Dr. Ku Sui desires my brain. He wishes to add it to----" He stammered, halted; then burst out: "If it would help you in any way, I'd give it gladly! But it couldn't, I know; it would only aid his power-mad schemes. So my friends and I must escape. And we can see now no way!"

"You can hear that noise? It's very loud; men are outside each door, battering at them, and soon they must break through. How can we escape? Do you know of a way, out of your knowledge of conditions here? Will you tell me, old colleagues?"

He waited.

* * * * *

Fifty feet away from this scene, and missing almost all of it, was Friday. From his post at the panel he kept throwing fearful looks at the nearest door, which was shuddering and clanging and threatening any moment to be wrenched off its hinges. A good thing— he was thinking— that the doors were of stout metal. When one did go he would get five or six of the soulless devils before they brought him down.

Carse waited tensely for the response—if one there was to be. His ears were throbbing in unison with the regular crash of rams on metal, but his eyes never left the convoluted mounds of intelligent matter so fantastically featured by the internal radiance of the life-giving liquid. Impossible, it seemed, that thoughts were stirring inside those gruesome things....

"Please hurry!" he said in a low voice; and Leithgow repeated desperately:

"How can we escape? Please be quick!"

Then the miracle of mechanism and matter functioned and again gave forth the cold voice of the living dead.

"It is my disposition to help you, Eliot Leithgow. On a shelf under one of the tables in this room you will find a portable heat-ray. Melt a hole in the ceiling and go out through the roof."

"Then what can we do?"

"In lockers behind the table there are space-suits, hanging ready for emergencies. Don them and leave through one of the asteroid's port-locks."

"Ask if the ports are sealed," Carse interjected instantly.

Leithgow asked the question.

"Yes," replied the unhuman voice. "But twice four to the right will open any of them."
The Master Scientist wiped his brow. Though trembling under the strain of conversing with this machine on which his life depended, he did not overlook a single point.

"But the asteroid's gravital pull would hold us close to it," he said. "Is there a way of breaking free from it?"

"You'll find the space-suits are equipped with small generators and gravity-plates which I helped Ku Sui develop. The switch and main control are in the left-hand glove."

"Thank you! Oh, thank you! You give us a chance!" exclaimed old Leithgow.

He turned and looked for the Hawk, and found him already in the lockers and pulling out three space-suits. The clumsy, heavy cone of a portable heat-ray lay on the table ready to hand.

They had little time to waste. The torrid temperature of a new smell of burned metal around the door they had just entered told them as well as words that the large projector in the corridor was at last being used to bore a way in.

With surprising strength in one so slender, Carse lifted the ray and pointed it at an angle toward the middle of the ceiling. He pressed the control button, and a blinding stream of violet radiance splashed against the metal above. It hissed and sputtered where it touched; molten drops fell sizzling and splattering to the floor; then suddenly there was a flood of ruddy illumination, and the Hawk dropped the heat-ray, stepped forward and looked up.

Up through a neatly melted round hole, up at the great glasslike dome which arched over the whole settlement--up, past it, into the vast face of Jupiter, hanging out there oppressively near!

Friday, champing for action, left his post by the panel and dragged a long low cabinet to position under the hole. On top of it he placed the operating table, and, after he had tripped the table's small wheels, another table on top of that.

"You first, Eclipse!" his master rapped out as he finished. "I'll pass the suits to you; then swing Leithgow up."

The negro answered by acting. Swiftly he climbed the rude pile, and reached for the edge of the hole. It was still searingly hot, and he gasped with hurt as his palms and fingers clenched over it, but he did not let go. Levering himself rapidly up, he got a leg through and then his body. A second later he peered back in and lowered his hands down.

"No one up here yet!" he reported. "All right for the suits!"

Carse passed the three bulky suits to him, and also two extra ray-guns he had found in the locker.

"Now, Eliot--up!"

With the Hawk's help, Leithgow clambered onto the cabinet. He was just mounting the operating table when, from behind, came a thin, metallic voice:

"Master Leithgow--Eliot Leithgow--please, a favor?"

Leithgow turned and stared, then understood. It was the coordinated brains. They had forgotten to return the switches. And now the cold voice was speaking of its own accord; and somehow--though it might have been imagination entirely--there seemed to be a tinge of loneliness to the words that sounded from its speaker.

Instantly Leithgow got down and hurried over to the grille. Seconds were precious, but Carse and he were heavily obligated to the brains, and any request in reason had to be fulfilled.

"Yes. What can I possibly do?"

The lower hinge of one side of the barricaded door gave, burned out, and the door wrenched inward at a resumption of the battering. The other hinge still held, but it was bending with each mighty blow. Outwardly calm, Hawk Carse watched the weakening door, a gun in each hand.

"This," said the toneless voice: "Destroy me. Leave no slightest trace. I live in hell, and have no way to move.... There are old memories ... things that once were dear ... Earth ... my homes ... my lives there.... Eliot Leithgow, destroy me. But promise, on your honor as a Master Scientist, never to let a single word regarding my fate reach those on Earth who knew me, loved me...."

Leithgow looked at the Hawk. The adventurer nodded.

"I'll use the heat-ray," he said, with pity.

He ran and picked it up. But he had taken only one step in return when the second hinge of the yielding door wrenched free. An ear-piercing screech rent the bedlam--and the door fell, half twisting, to lie in the doorway. As if by a signal the crashing at the other doors stopped. In an extraordinary silence a mob of gray-smocked bodies pressed forward.

Orange streaks laced the dim laboratory. The Hawk shouted, "Up, Eliot! For God's sake, up!" as, with deadly effect, he poured his two ray-guns at the advancing men.

For a second, shaken by the terrible barrage, they fell back, leaving several sprawled bodies on the floor; but they came right back again.
Leithgow got safely to the top of the pile and was snatched out to temporary safety. Frantically Friday called down to his master; he seemed on the point of jumping down into the fight himself. But Hawk Carse had been party to a promise.

He was behind the structure of furniture under the hole he had made in the ceiling. With one gun he spat death at the coolies, while the other he emptied at the case of brains. Two stabbing streams of orange angled from him, one telling with awful effect on the men only two score feet away, and the other absolutely useless. All over the still-glowing case it spat its hits, but the glasslike substance resisted it completely, and remained unscathed.

Carse swore harshly. He hurled one empty gun at the case, turned with a last salvo of shots at the coolies, and then was up on the pile and leaping for Friday's hands.

They caught and gripped his, swung him once--twice--and hauled him swiftly out. But as the Hawk disappeared he shouted down the case:

"I'll be back!"

CHAPTER XIII
The Final Mystery

On the roof, Carse quickly scanned their situation. They were standing on the hub of the four-winged building. Far to the left was one set of the dome's great and small port-locks; exactly opposite was the other. Near the left hand ports; a little "north," lay the Scorpion. The whole area enclosed was a flat plain of gray soil.

Looming over the great transparent dome hung the flaming disk of Jupiter, so oppressively near that it seemed about to crash onto the asteroid. Its rays poured in a ruddy flood over the settlement, clearly illuminating each detail; and comparatively close against the face of the mighty planet they could see the whitish globe of Satellite III. It offered the nearest haven. They might arrive famished, but in the power-equipped space-suits which Friday was lugging they should be able to span the gap.

The Hawk nodded to the port-locks on the left.

"That one," he snapped. "We'll have two chances, the Scorpion and the port, but the port's safest; we could never get the whole ship underway and through the lock in time. To prevent pursuit, all we have to do is leave the lock open after us."

They hastened along the roof of the wing that ran that way. As yet there was no outside pursuit; most of the settlement's guards seemed to have been concentrated in the attack on the laboratory. But Carse knew it would only be a matter of seconds before coolies would emerge from half a dozen different points. He was trying to figure out which points they were likely to be when there passed, perilously close, the spit of an orange ray. He glanced back, to see the first of the crowd which had broken into the laboratory come clambering up through the roof. Then, as a second shot sizzled by, they arrived at the end of the wing.

* * * * *

Friday took the fifteen-foot drop without hesitation. Carse lowered Leithgow to him and then swung down himself. They panted forward again, over grayish, glittering soil.

Some three hundred yards of open space lay between them and the port-locks. Friday now led the way, weighted down under the heavy suits; the scientist came next and then the Hawk, his sole remaining gun replying at intervals to the ever-thickening barrage from behind. They had covered perhaps a half of that distance when the negro's steps suddenly faltered and he halted.

"Look there!" he groaned. "Cuttin' us off! We'll never make it, suh!"

Carse looked where he pointed, and saw a squad of half a dozen men emerging from a building well to their left. They were running at full speed for the lock, and, as Friday had said, it was obvious that they would get there first. He glanced quickly around. Pursuit from the laboratory in the rear was hot—and moreover three coolies were angling sharply out on each side, to outflank them! In a minute they would be surrounded! Unable to reach either the port or the ship!

And then came the crowning piece of ill-luck. Suddenly the Hawk winced; staggered; clapped a hand to his shoulder. A lucky shot from an enemy gun had caught him.

"You're hit!" cried Leithgow.

"It's nothing...."

* * * * *

The slender adventurer stood very still, thinking. He was trapped. But he was never more dangerous than when he was trapped.

Leithgow timidly ventured a suggestion.
"Why can't we put on our space-suits and rise up in the dome?"

Crisply the answer came back:
"Hard to maneuver laterally. Never get out ports. Sure death.... I have it!" he ended.
Tersely he gave the two men orders:

"We've a bare chance--if I'm lucky. Now listen, and obey me exactly. Put on your space-suits. Shut them tight. Lie flat. You, Friday, use your ray-guns and keep the guards from coming close. Wait here. Do absolutely nothing save keep them off. And keep your suits intact or you're dead!"

He grabbed one of the suits from Friday and crept toward the Scorpion on hands and knees. The three coolies from the pursuit at the rear had already cut him off from the ship. Friday could not control his alarm at this apparently crazy act. He called after:

"But you can't get to the ship through those guards! And if you did, you couldn't run it yourself--and pick us up!"

Carse turned, his face white with cold passion. "When will you learn to obey me implicitly?" he said harshly--and crept on.

Old Leithgow trusted his friend a little more. "Get your suit on, Friday," he said gently, and slipped into his own. The negro, ashamed, followed his example; then both were flat on the ground, back to back, sniping--Leithgow also--as best they could under such conditions at the groups of men who now were bellying ever nearer from three directions.

The Hawk's plan might well have appeared hair-brained to one who did not know the man, and what he was capable of accomplishing under pressure. The very first step in this plan required the destroying of the three outflanking guards between him and the space-ship.

* * * * *

As so often in the great adventurer's career, he was lucky. The unthinking have always admitted his luck, but never seen that he forced it--forced it by doing the unexpected--attacking when he was attacked. He was doing that now. The three coolie-guards in his way must have known who he was, so their alarm at finding themselves, the attackers, attacked, will account for their making a move of poor strategy. Instead of scattering and defending the open entrance-port of the space-ship from a short distance, they in their alarm made haste to get inside to defend it from there. The interior was the best place to defend the ship--if they had already been inside--for they could lie in the inner darkness and sweep the open port when the Hawk entered.

But to try to pass through the port--that was bad judgment. It was only necessary for Carse to hold bead on it and fire when they passed in line.

This was the present "luck" of the adventurer. He might have sniped the guards anyway, but he had it easier. From fifty yards away, prone and carefully sighting, he took the three lives that had been so viciously, so subversively altered by Ku Sui.

A moment later, the way cleared, he was inside the ship--and his space-suit lay on the ground outside.

* * * * *

Rapidly the three groups of guards closed in on Leithgow and Friday. The two men made their advance as uncomfortable as possible, but they could do no accurate shooting at such difficult targets as crawling men, from within the cramped interiors of their cumbersome suits. Not even Friday, who was a crack shot. They could not hold out long--nor did they expect to.

They had been too occupied to notice what had become of Carse. Within their suits all was silence; they heard neither their friend's shots as he struck down the three coolies nor their own. Quick glances at the ship's open port revealed no one; nothing. Probably, they thought, the Hawk was dead. Even if he were not, they would soon be. A matter of a minute. Maybe two. Their suits were still intact, but they could not remain so much longer. Ku Sui had this time ordered them destroyed.

And now half a dozen coolies were leaving the ring tightening around them and creeping to the Scorpion as additional guards....

It was then, in those last few seconds, with death staring them in the face, that Friday did a magnificent thing. It happened that Carse saw him do it as the adventurer jumped out of the Scorpion again and with frantic speed slipped into the space-suit he had left waiting. Friday stood straight up, a hundred feet from the enemy--a great bloated monster in his padded suit--and charged. Leithgow and the Hawk heard, by their suit helmet-radios, his battle yell of defiance, but the coolies did not. All silent, apparently, he rushed them--slowly, because of his hampering suit--his ray-gun spitting orange contempt--and other pencils of fiery death passing him narrowly by.

And then, while he still charged, the rays stopped stabbing past him, and he saw the faces of the coolie-guards turn upward. So surprised was the expression on their faces, that he turned and looked too--and saw the Scorpion, her entrance ports still open, forty feet off the ground and rising with swift acceleration.

Faster and faster she rose; all ray-guns were silenced before her astounding ascent. Higher and higher--faster and faster--till with a stunning, ear-deafening crash she struck the great dome and was through.

Then came chaos.
A huge, jagged gash marked the ship's passage, and through this the air inside the dome poured with cyclonic force, snatching into a maelstrom everything unfastened within the dome and hurling it crazily into space. For seconds the flood rushed out, a visible thing, gray from the soil which it scooped up; and while its fury lasted every building on the asteroid quivered and groaned from the terrific strain.

And where, a moment before, men had stood--two white men and a black, and a score of coolie-guards--there was now nothing save the flat rock under the gaping hole. The upper soil had been ripped out and flung forth like a concealing veil around the bodies that had gone with it....

For an interval Hawk Carse knew nothing. He had ceased to live, it seemed, and was soaring through Eternity. He never knew how much time passed before his numbed senses began to return and he became aware of weight and of a furious roaring in his head.

He was moving forward at blinding speed. Something kept flashing before him--a wide stream of ruddy orange light: his dazed brain could connect it with nothing he had ever known. Soon the orange stream settled into spasmodic bursts, pitch blackness filling the intervals; and when it came more slowly he saw that it was in reality the vast flaming ball of Jupiter, streaking across the line of vision as he tumbled over and over, head over heels--free in space!

The realization helped his return to alertness. As the wild tumbling motion gradually ceased, and Jupiter tended to stay more and more under his feet, he peered around through his face-plate. To one side he glimpsed two grotesque, bulky figures, one half of them limned glaringly against the blackness of space by the near-by planet's light. He saw other figures, too, spread out in a scattered fringe--figures of men in smocks, dead and bloated and white.

They were the coolies, these last, and the other two were of course Leithgow and Friday. But had they survived the outrush of air? Carse felt in his left glove for the suit's gravity control lever; found it and tentatively moved it. His acceleration slowly increased. He brought the lever part-way back. Then, into the microphone encased inside the helmet, he called:

"Leithgow! Leithgow! Can you hear me? Friday!"

The radio broadcast his words. Soon welcome answers came in Eliot Leithgow's tired voice and the negro's emphatic bass.

"Maneuver together," Carse instructed them. "We must lock arms and stay close."

Slowly, clumsily, the three monstrous figures made toward each other, and presently they were reunited in close group. Carse pointed an arm into the face of Jupiter where there hung poised a gleaming globe of white, dappled with dark splotches.

"Satellite III," he said, "--our goal. And we'll get there without interruption now that Ku Sui, his laboratory, his coordinated brains, are destroyed.... You are very quiet, Eliot. Aren't you happy at our success?"

"I am very tired," the old scientist said. "Oh, but we'll sleep and feast and game when we get back to my hidden lab on Three--won't we?"

"Chicken for me!" exclaimed Friday. "Even at twenty dollars a can!"

"Your shoulder, Carse--how is it?" asked the Master Scientist solicitously. "And how did you ever get out of that space-ship in time, after you had given it such an acceleration?"

There was a tired smile in the adventurer's voice when he replied:

"My shoulder--a trifle. I have a dozen such burns. But my feet still hurt from the twenty-foot drop I took out of the Scorpion. I had to get out: the shock of the crash would have killed me."

"But I've been looking for the asteroid," he went on--and interrupted himself. "By the horn of the phanti!" he exclaimed in amazement. "Look, Eliot! That explains it all!"

His whole body was tilted back to allow him to look upward. Friday and the Master Scientist followed his startled gaze, and they too gaped in wonder.

For there was nothing above or around them--no dwindling fragment of rock--no sign of any asteroid: only the eternal stars.

"Yes," said Eliot Leithgow slowly, "that explains it all...."

"It explains what?" asked Friday, staring. "And where is the asteroid?"

"It's up there," the Hawk replied. "Don't you see now, Eclipse, why no one's ever found it; why we could hunt forever for it and hunt in vain? Ku Sui made his whole asteroid invisible!"
WE'RE FRIENDS, NOW
By HENRY HASSE

The little man stood in front of the monstrous machine as the synaptic drone heightened to a scream. No ... no, he whispered. Don't you understand....

Today more than other days Raoul Beardsley felt the burden, the dragging sense of inevitability. He frowned; he glanced at his watch; he leaned forward to speak to the copter pilot and then changed his mind. He settled back, and from idle habit adjusted his chair-scope to the familiar broad-spoked area of Washington just below.

"I'll not have it happening again today!" he told himself grimly ... and at once his thoughts quavered off into many tangles of self-reproach. "Blasted nonsense the way I've been acting. A machine, a damned gutless machine like that! Why do I persist in letting it get to me?"

He pondered that and found no solace. "Delusion," he snorted. "Hyper synapse-disorder ... that's how Jeff Arnold would explain me. I wish he'd confine his diagnostics to the Mechanical Division where it belongs! He's amused, they're all amused at me--but damn it they just don't know!"

Beardsley's rotund body sagged at the thought. Adjusting the chair-scope, he fixed his gaze on the broad facade of Crime-Central Building far across the city; again he felt the burgeoning embarrassment and foreboding, but he put it down with an effort before it reached the edge of fear. Not today, he thought fiercely. No, by God, I just won't permit it to happen.

There. So! He felt much better already. And he had really made good time this morning. Today of all days he mustn't keep ECAIAC waiting.

Mustn't.... Something triggered in Beardsley, and he was assailed with a perverse rebellion at the thought.

* * * * *

Must not? But why not? Why shouldn't he just once keep ECAIAC and Jeff Arnold and his clique stewing in their own tangle of tubes and electronic juice? And wouldn't this, he gloated, be the perfect day for it! Arnold especially--just once to shatter that young man's complacent routine....

No. Beardsley savored the thought tastily, and let it trickle away, and the look of glee on his cherubic face was gone. For too many years his job as serological "coördinator" (Crime-Central) had kept him pinned to the concomitant routine. Pinned or crucified, it was all the same; in crime analysis as in everything these days, personal sense of achievement had been too unsubtly annihilated. Recalling his just completed task--the Citizen Files and persona-tapes and the endless annotating--Beardsley felt himself sinking still further into that mire of futility that encompassed neither excitement nor particular pride.

He brought himself back with a grimace, aware that he was clutching the briefcase of tapes possessively from long habit. The pilot had touched the news-stat, and abruptly one of the new "commerciappeals" grated on Beardsley's senses:

"... we repeat, yes, PROT-O-SUDS is now available in flake or cake or the new attachable luxury-spray. Remember, PROT-O-SUDS has never been laboratory-tested, it contains no miracle ingredients, no improved scientific formula, and NO LANOLIN. Then what is the new PROT-O-SUDS? I tell you frankly, friends, it is nothing but a lot of pure soft soap! Remember ... we make no fabulous claims for PROT-O-SUDS ... we assume that you are reasonably clean to start with! And now for your late breakfast news, PROT-O-SUDS takes you direct to the Central News Bureau for a final survey on the Carmack murder case...."

Beardsley groaned. New voice in the background, while the screen presented a slow montage. Cine-runs of the great Carmack himself, including those at the International Cybernetics Congress a year ago ... survey of the murder scene, the Carmack mansion ... close-up of ECAIAC ... diagrammatic detail of ECAIAC ... then dramatically, the grim and imposing figure of George Mandleco, Minister of Justice.

And then the news-caster's voice: "... certain that final processing will go forward today. It would be a gross understatement to say that the Carmack Case has captured the attention of the nation, both officialdom and public alike! Never in the history of Crime-Central has there been such an undercurrent of speculation and excitement...."

"Excitement?" murmured Beardsley.

"And now it is heightened, by no less an authority than the Minister of Justice himself, who brought both plaudits and censure upon himself today with the outright statement that deep-rooted political issues may well be involved. As you must know by now, it was the murdered man himself--Amos Carmack--who some years ago carried on the incessant lobbying that resulted in ECAIAC being accepted pro bono publico by Crime-Central. What devastating irony! For now it is ECAIAC itself that must weigh each detail, correlate all factors, probe every motive
and machination leading to the murder of its creator...."

"That's not entirely true, you know," muttered Beardsley.

Quick flicker, again a close-up of ECAIAC, and the drama-laden voice: "ECAIAC! Electronic Analysis Integrator and Computor. And now--an exclusive! From a very reliable source this reporter has learned that three Primes are involved...."

"Hal!" grated Beardsley.

"... and they will be broken down in quotient. Two must ultimately be eliminated--barring, of course, the possible emergence of any minor factor to status of Prime, which at this stage seems unlikely. It is estimated that by today or tomorrow at the latest Carmack's murderer will be brought to justice...."

Beardsley had taken as much as he could of this pseudo-factual mush. He jerked forward violently, rapped the pilot on the shoulder. "DAMN IT! WILL YOU SHUT THE DAMN THING OFF!"

* * * * *

He was immediately appalled at his outburst, and by the pilot's startled glance, but the stat went off immediately.

Beardsley leaned back muttering to himself. Carmack, Carmack! For seven weeks now he had lived with it intricately and intimately, as the case shoved everything else right off the news-stat. People took the latest echoes to bed with them, commuters gobbled it with their breakfast cereal. Thank God today would see the end, and they could once more have the hot South Polar crisis with their cereal.

* * * * *

Seven weeks! He clutched the bulging briefcase with a wearisome horror. Twenty-two persona-tapes from Central File, all neatly processed and ready for ECAIAC. End result of the endless chart sifts, emphasis (as always!) on parietosomatic recession, the slow emergence of minor constants, the inexorable trend toward Price Factor and then verification, verification, to each his own, with all the subtle and shaded values of the Augment Index brought finally to focus on the relevance-graph Carmack.

Sure, thought Beardsley. A thing of augment-indexing and psych-tapes, quite without possibility of error. Now in the old days of crime detection--it might have taken them seven months instead of weeks, not to mention frustration and leg-work and false-leads and sweat, but--

His mouth pulled down bitterly. Serological Coördinator. Glorified file-clerk is more like it. High-salaried errand-boy.

"Here we are, sir!" The pilot's voice jarred him to reality as the copter berthed.

Beardsley hurried toward the roof entrance. His faded blue suit, a size too large, flapped about him, and the outmoded felt hat seemed to sink to the level of his thick-lensed glasses. The guard greeted him, but suppressed a smile as the cherubic little man flashed his official pass.

For there was something about Raoul Beardsley that eternally evoked amusement--an air of vacuous innocence and a remote forlornness. He gave the appearance of a person who sold shoes during the day, washed his wife's dishes at night and then solved two or three galacti-gram puzzles before turning off the light precisely at ten. Few, if any, remembered that this nervous little man had once been top Inspector of New York City's Homicide Bureau ... but that was a dozen long years ago. Since then he had seen the antiquated detective methods of 1960 disappear, and he had died a little, too, seeing his Homicide Bureau relegated to a mere subsidiary with the growth of the Coördinate and Mechanical Divisions. His appointment to Chief of Co-ördinants, Federal, was automatic and unquestioned; and Beardsley would have been the last to know, or to care, that he had correlated some eight million miles of serological data for the entrains of ECAIAC, a perfect record of not a single unsolved case.

And the penalty was in his eyes, if one cared to look beyond the thick-lensed glasses. No one ever did. They were remote eyes, a little bewildered, a little hurt ... a mirror gone dull from times remembered but irretrievably lost.

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Beardsley stepped onto the corridor slidewalk, coasted to the escalator and rode it down. Still immersed in his thoughts, he pushed into ECAIAC's room ... and again it happened.

So shockingly sudden, there was not even time for remonstrance at himself. The feeling hit him as always before, straight and unerring, a surging impact that smashed forward and stopped him in his tracks, literally paralyzed.

He caught his breath convulsively. How often had he come here? And how often had this happened, even when he'd sworn he wouldn't let it? There was something about the sight and sound and feel of ECAIAC that got to him, that seeped beneath flesh and bone and into his brain and sent his senses singing. Beardsley managed to gulp, as he observed the shiny black colossus that filled the entire length of the ninety-foot room; a dozen techs scurried around it, taking notes, attentive to the flashing lights in red-and-green and the faint clicking of thousands of relays that rose in susurration.
But more than that arose. It was something that pervaded the room, not a pulsing but a presence, a sort of snapping intangible intelligence that reached beyond the audible and sheared at Beardsley's nerve-ends.

And it hadn't been there a moment before. That was the shocking thing. Beardsley knew that it knew! It was sentient, it was alive and aware and waiting, and it was listening.

As always, it knew that he had entered.

Beardsley gulped again, stood frozen for half a minute. None of the techs seemed to notice; they had often chided him about it, but he was used to that now. At last he broke the spell and made his legs move, feeling cold sweat as he hurried along the length of ECAIAC toward Arnold's office.

There... just about there... by the rheostats, where the four red lights and the two green made a baleful pattern against the black metal skin. He felt it stronger than ever this time, something reaching and sinister aimed solely at him. He skirted the place with a quick goosey hop, stumbled a little and felt panic, but made it all right to the office.

Beardsley hated these moments. He was still trembling as he made a hurried entrance. Sure enough, as if on cue Jeff Arnold glanced up from his charts and grinned.

"Ah, good morning, Beardsley! Now don't tell me our pet goo--uh--snapped at you again?"

It was the routine remark, but today Arnold was immediately contrite for a change. "Sorry," he said, and a certain weariness replaced the grin. He gestured to the alco-mech. "Can I dial you a drink? Feel in need of one myself!"

"Eleven-C," said Beardsley, and slumped into the pneumo-chair. Arnold rose and dialled 11-C, handed him the drink and dialled 9-R for himself. Sipping it, he moved around the desk.

There was something very strange and preoccupied in his movements, Beardsley thought, more than a mere tiredness. He had never seen Arnold this way.

"Yes sir, this is the day!" A muscle twitched in his corded neck; Arnold eased his long frame into a chair, rubbed thumb and forefinger at his eyes. "Been up half the night running off clearance tests. Can't afford to foul up on this one!"

Beardsley tossed off his drink and blinked at the fiery strength of it. Now why should Arnold say that? When had ECAIAC ever fouled up? He watched the man across the desk. Jeff Arnold was a vigorous, striking specimen, handsome in an athletic way, with long stubborn jaw and unhappy gray eyes beneath his unruly hair; the sort of face that intrigues women, Beardsley catalogued from past experience. And, he added, altogether too young a man to be operating a monster like ECAIAC.

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Arnold indicated the empty glass. "Another?"

"No, I think not," Beardsley replied carefully.

Arnold hesitated, eyeing the briefcase in Beardsley's clutch. "It's been rough on you, too, I imagine. Hope there aren't more than thirty variants! We're set up for more, of course, but it'll necessitate--"

"Twenty-two," Beardsley assured him. Carefully, he spread the coded and sealed persona-tapes across the desk. "Fresh from Citizen-File Augment, everything annotated and cross-checked. Blood-count, emotional stasis, plethora, psycho-geneological index, neuro-thalamic imbalance--every type factor is here. We really went to the Files on this case."

"Looks as if you did! How does it narrow down?"

"Fifteen possibles, four Logicals and three Primes--" Beardsley stopped abruptly. (That news-caster: how had he known there were three Primes? This stuff was not supposed to leak!) "Twenty-two who knew Carmack," he went on. "That includes associational as well as motive-opportunity factors, with a probability sphere of .004...."

Arnold nodded thoughtfully; his fingers moved unconscious and caressing across the edge of the desk. "That's close! Good job," he said uncertainly.

"Should be! Seven weeks for annotation and code." Beardsley was watching Arnold's fingers; there was something aimless and fretful as they pushed among the code-sealed tapes. Beardsley made his voice casual. "If it interests you," he said, "yes--you are there."

* * * * *

He wanted a reaction and he got it.

"Me!" Arnold stiffened, pulled his fingers away hastily.

"That surprises you? Don't worry, you're not one of the Primes; probably be rejected on the first run. It's just that you once knew Carmack rather well. Cal Tech, wasn't it, when Carmack was doing his special work on magnetronics? Naturally you've had contact since, due to the nature of your job."

Arnold nodded, frowning. "That's right. It just hadn't occurred to me that--"

Beardsley realized that he wasn't lying. It was not the thought of his own tape that bothered Arnold.

"Oh, we're thorough over at 'Coördinates Division!'" Beardsley laughed, making a minor joke of it. "Now
here," he touched a spool labelled in red, "is your Basic Invariant. Carmack--Amos T. Murdered man. Found bludgeoned in library of his home, night of April 4. Age 56, held all outstanding patents on ECAIAC, worth millions, and"--he looked up, beaming--"leaves beautiful wife."

He paused for the merest moment. Save for a soft drumming of fingers on the desk, Arnold was silent.

"And here's a sub-Basic: Mrs. Carmack will be a rich woman now. She was considerably younger than Carmack--and she's been having an affair with another man." Beardsley smiled at Jeff Arnold. "That's a sociological note beyond our sphere, but we managed to get the data. I'll bet the department was appalled that such a gorgeous woman could be resolved into neo-Euclidian equations!"

"Why?" Arnold was suddenly irritable. "It's been done a thousand times before!"

"Of course," shrugged Beardsley. "And it's really up to ECAIAC, isn't it? A Prime can be negated, while on the other hand a variant can shift from possible to Logical to Prime. Or am I wrong? I've never been up on the mechanics."

Arnold grunted. "There's bound to be some correlatory shift! The Primes--how many did you say?"

"Three as of now."

Arnold rose abruptly, then strode to the alco-mech and dialled himself another drink. He took an uncommonly long time about it. "Look," he said, "we both know about these things! In a case like this there are bound to be political repercussions--" He hit Beardsley with a gauging glance. "Well," he blurted, "I have to admit I'm damn curious! Mind telling me who are the three Primes? Ah--strictly off the record, you understand."

Beardsley had expected something like this, and he was quite ready to answer; but he carefully removed his glasses, massaged the bridge of his nose and frowned. "Well, now...."

"Come on, give! I know it's against protocol and all that ... but hell! We'll have the answer anyway in a matter of hours."

Beardsley nodded with a show of thoughtfulness. "Yes, that's true, isn't it? Very well. But strictly off the record! I warn you--not only will the first Prime startle you, but the information could be dangerous!"

He waited a moment, then he leaned forward and whispered: "Mandleco!"

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For a moment Arnold didn't move. His face was ludicrous. Then Beardsley saw his hands clench. "Mandleco!" the word jolted from his lips. "George Mandleco, Minister of Justice? I don't believe you!"

"It's a fact," Beardsley told him. "Right now he equates into an uncertain Prime."

"Yes, yes ... but Mandleco! Good Lord...."

"I said uncertain Prime. As you mentioned yourself, there is sure to be a shift of variants. Surely you have faith in ECAIAC?"

"Of course! But Mandleco, why Mandleco?"

"Why not? He was a friend of Carmack's--or a business associate shall we say? He worked with Carmack on the ECAIAC lobby, was largely responsible for pushing it through."

"Yes, I--say, that's right! It would be in C-F...."

"There are things," murmured Beardsley, "in Central File that would astound you."

Arnold was staring at the coded tapes. "Mandleco," he breathed. "And with elections coming up!" He shook himself out of the daze. "The--the other two Primes?"

"Next is not so startling. A really strong Recessive Factor there ... Professor Karl Losch."

Arnold jerked erect suddenly. "Losch? Say, I remember him! Now there's a man pursued by bad luck. He was working along similar lines to Carmack--in fact, wasn't he in Carmack's employ for a while?--but Carmack was first with the patents. You don't suppose that Losch--"

"I'm not supposed to suppose," Beardsley said softly. "But clinically, it is interesting to note that motive factor alone equates Losch from Logical into Prime. Plus a high neuro-thalamic imbalance--132 over 80 on the last Index, with pronounced efforts at suppression."

He watched Arnold absorb that, and went on: "Now for the third Prime. I think it'll interest you...."

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He waited deliberately. He looked at Jeff Arnold for a long moment and saw that the man was calm. Too calm. So absolutely motionless that it wasn't real.

"Third Prime. A strong one, believe me. In a way most interesting of all." He pressed the words out slowly and flatly. "The third Prime," said Beardsley, "is ... Pederson."

He watched Arnold relax ever so slowly, leaning back, the tension going away as he uncoiled in the chair; but the young man's face wasn't so much relieved as it was puzzled.

"Pederson. Pederson? I don't seem to--You can't mean Brook Pederson, the one-time tele-columnist?"

"None other. I don't suppose you remember, but back in '60 he opposed the ECAIAC lobby. I mean opposed it,
fought it! Predicted that Government installation of such a machine would not inspire confidence, that the nation's
crime rate would rise ... he saw nothing but chaos. For a while there he was quite a man. Got himself a following.
Had ambitions."

"But I do remember it!" Arnold thumped the desk. "Of course! Pederson headed a bloc against 'Carmack's
Folly,' but he backed the wrong horse, and when the bubble burst he was out in the cold. Became a laughing stock."
Arnold paused, and his glance held something of shrewdness and a livening challenge. "Actually, Pederson couldn't
have been more wrong. In those first two years ECAIAC reduced the crime-rate by some forty percent."

"So it's claimed!" This was a sore point and Beardsley rose to the bait. "It couldn't be that crime was on the
down-grade already? I could show you plenty of statistics that--why, I could show you methods--"

"I'll just bet you could." Arnold gave a thin tolerant smile. "I refuse to enter that argument again, not with you,
Beardsley. I for one trust in machines not in evolution. I've told you before...."

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And Beardsley found himself sitting there with a flush of heat at his hair-roots, half-angry and half foolish as he
realized how he had been baited.

Jeff Arnold was abruptly all business. He plunged his finger at a button, spoke into the intercom. "Joe! How's
that test-run coming?"

"All-X so far! Give us ten minutes for clearance."

"Take twenty, but make sure it's clearance. Checked Quantitative, have you? How about feed-backs? ... yes ...
what's that? Semantic circuits? Hell yes, check all synaptics for clearance! I want no excess data fouling up this run!"

He clicked off and sat there moodily, and Beardsley watched him, noting the quick nervous rhythm of Arnold's
fingers. Arnold noticed it, too, and desisted.

"Look," he said. "Mandleco, Losch, Pederson. Those three Primes just don't make sense to me!"

"They don't?" Beardsley allowed just the proper note of resentment. "Surely you are not questioning Coördinates...."

"You know I'm not! But--"

Beardsley waited, knowing it was coming now. The thing Arnold had been aching to voice for the past five
minutes.

"But--well, damn it, there is Mrs. Carmack, for example. As you pointed out yourself, she'll be a rich woman
now! It would seem to me--"

"That she'd be a Prime? I'm surprised at you, Jeff; that's ancient thinking." If there was a trace of sarcasm, it
was lost on Arnold. "Oh, I grant you it used to hold true--principle beneficiary was always prime suspect. Fiction
especially was full of it. Queen, Dickson Carr, Boucher you--know the ilk. But with ECAIAC we've gotten away
from all that, haven't we?"

Arnold stared at him suspiciously, hesitated, then brought it out with an effort. "Well--how did she equate?"

"Who? Oh yes, the beautiful widow. She only made Logical, and even that is borderline."

"I see." Arnold rose, dialled himself another drink, then changed his mind and put it down untouched. He
turned to gather up the tapes, and his voice was apologetic.

"It's not that I'd ever questioned Coördinates Division! We're too closely aligned for that, Raoul...." (First time
he's ever used my first name, thought Beardsley.) "You have a splendid record to uphold, as we do here at
Mechanical. That's why ... well, I want to get this off as smoothly as possible!"

Something indefinable, a queasy feeling, took Beardsley about the middle. He said sharply: "Any reason why
not?"

"No, not really. But in recent weeks--I tell you this in strictest confidence, understand!--in recent weeks it's
been a rather ticklish thing to get total synaptic clearance."

* * * * *

Synaptics? Beardsley began thinking back to the Crime-Central "Required Annual Basic." The Mechanical had
never been his strong point. He said uncertainly, "But--that's serious!"

"It's just that we've found ECAIAC holding back excess data from previous runs. Fouls up the relays, takes
hours to iron out the clearance." Arnold gave him a keen look. "More of a nuisance really, but the weirdest thing.
Stubborn!"

Stubborn. Beardsley could have thought of a better word. Through the panelled glass he glimpsed the black
metal sheathe of the monster out there, the shapeless crouching and malevolent winking lights, and he felt himself
going to pieces inside with a sudden shaking crumble; he hated himself for it but he couldn't stop it; his hands
clenched until the knuckles showed white.

"... matter of time until we find the cause," Arnold was saying, "but I guarantee total clearance today. Shall we
get on with it?" Hands loaded with tapes, he moved for the door.
"No!" Beardsley cried. "Arnold, if you don't mind, I--"

"Oh, for God's sake, not again! Raoul, I swear I'm going to do something about this phobia of yours; it's getting to be not so funny any more." With a show of exasperation, Arnold propelled him through the door. "I give you my absolute word our pet won't snap at you. Not today. It's going to be far too busy for the likes of you!"

* * * * *

And Jeff Arnold was right, Beardsley discovered. Those baleful overtones were gone, replaced by a sustained soft whisper along the ninety-foot hull--a rather impatient whisper but not at all unpleasant. Beardsley relaxed by slow degrees, but kept a cautious distance, while Arnold pointed out every light along the length flashing green for Total Clearance.

"She's rarin' to go," said Arnold with a display of good humor, "but we'll let her wait a while, eh?" He clapped a friendly arm across Beardsley's shoulder. "You just come along now and watch; I think your trouble is, you've never been properly introduced! We'll have no more of this feudin' and fussin' between you and ECAIAC."

So Beardsley, showing more courage than he felt, trailed the cyberneticist through every unit of final check-up. Much of it he knew already from the "Required Annual Basic" ... or thought he knew. For this was so different from the Manuals! He felt at once ashamed and awed as he viewed at first hand the unfolding schematic structure. He was thrilled at sight of the selectors and analyzers of processed beryllium, the logic-and-semantic circuits in complex little bundles, the sensitized variant-tapes waiting for transferral impress, all revealed by a flick of Arnold's fingers that threw open entire sheathed sections to bare the inner secrets. The thousands of tiny transistors amazed Beardsley. The endless array of electric eyes startled him. And the spongy centers of synaptic cell-clusters horrified him, recalling too vividly to mind what he knew of the physical human brain.

Along the monstrous length he trailed Jeff Arnold; he trailed and he watched and he listened, not interfering once by word or gesture. And before it was over his heart was surging with a great revelatory beat because suddenly he knew ... he knew....

Arnold seemed in high good humor as they paced back. "So," he nudged Beardsley in the ribs, "we'll have no more of this nonsense between you and ECAIAC. Eh? You're just bound to be good friends now."

Beardsley didn't answer. The revelation was still too much with him. He watched as Arnold conferred with a group of his techs about a micro-chron, and the time was carefully noted for Central Record.

Then the first of the tapes went in. The Basic Invariant--Amos Carmack.

It reached synapse and a tiny blip registered on cue.

The rest of the tapes fed in, razoring through the rollers, past the selenic-sensitized tips of the relays. There was no progressive order. After the Basic Invariant progression didn't matter. Possible or Logical or Prime, all factors would correlate or cancel; any divergent status-shift would be duly handled by transferral impress.

Beardsley counted the tapes. Twenty ... twenty-one ... twenty-two.

The techs dispersed, taking up their various posts where special eject-tapes clicked out a second-by-second record of the progression.

Nothing much happened. The sound of ECAIAC became a steady inundant drone; or did Beardsley just imagine that he detected something of the gleeful in it? With an effort he put the thought from him, and keeping a cautious distance he took a turn around the monster, up one side and down the other.

He stopped by Jeff Arnold, who was jotting down figures from the chrono. That seemed silly, as nothing had happened yet.

Arnold glanced up and grinned at him, as if totally unconcerned that this was the most repercussive case in the entire history of Crime-Central! A little disconcerted, Beardsley said, "What happens first?"

"Oh, plenty is happening. But the first you'll notice will be a total reject. Watch when that happens. Complete silence, every light red for exactly two and a half seconds--the reject, and then everything continues."

"How about Transferral Impress? You know--possible to Logical, or Logical to Prime?"

Arnold paused over his notes for the merest instant. "Why--it's progressive, of course. That you won't notice!"

Beardsley stared at him curiously, started to speak and then changed his mind. He wandered again, watching the techs but not interfering. And suddenly he was aware that the first total reject had come. It happened with smooth and sudden silence just as Arnold had described, ECAIAC breaking pace for mere seconds ... then all was clear again, and one of the techs hurried down the aisle with the tape, which he handed to Arnold.

Beardsley was aware of a wild pounding of pulse as he stared at the anonymous tape. One of the fifteen "possibles"? It might even be a rejected Logical. Mrs. Carmack? She was borderline. Or a Prime! It could be Mandleco himself--or Losch or Pederson. No ... it was unlikely any Primes would fall this early....

But maybe they were no longer Primes! Maybe right now Transferral Impress was at work, maybe one or more
of them was being relegated to lower coordinate-status somewhere there in the entrails....

He felt a bounding excitement. And, as if reading his thoughts, Jeff Arnold gave him an amused look.

"Don't let it get to you, Raoul. I used to find it the same; we all do. But then you get to thinking, hell, why try to guess? Identities don't matter now!" He indicated the coded tape. "A total reject--anonymous. ECAIAC's way of telling us that person could not possibly be the murderer."

"But--you're not even curious?"

"At rejects? Why?" Arnold seemed perplexed. "Oh, you mean because I'm among the 'possibles.' Frankly it doesn't bother me. I know I'm not the murderer, and I have faith in ECAIAC. If this isn't my tape, the next will be--or the eighth, or the fifteenth."

Beardsley nodded slowly. With ECAIAC it was only the final equate that mattered, the total result of Cumulative. He saw the truth in that, and the perfection. Or--his eyes beneath the glasses came to a quick bright focus--was it quite perfection? He watched in silence as Arnold consulted the micro-chron and jotted more notes. Rej. Q-9 (code): (.008 synap. circ.): 11:23 A.M.

Beardsley wandered again, watching the techs. A sudden shivering seized him. How could they remain so calm? Were they so close to the forest they couldn't notice? Something was about to happen ... to him it was unmistakable, in the very atmosphere, sharpened and heightened by the four walls--a pervading sense of wrongness and a pyramiding tension.

Even Arnold wasn't aware; audibly nothing had changed, as ECAIAC continued its soft-clicking whisper and the techs methodically checked the progress tapes. Beardsley stood numbly for a moment, struggling against a welter of panic. Palms sweating, he moved a safe distance away and waited.

Eight minutes later came another reject. Six minutes later, the third. ECAIAC continued its blithe, soft-throated rhythm--but Beardsley was not fooled.

Someone sent out for coffee. It arrived in steaming thermo-containers. Beardsley was on his first cup of coffee when rejects 4, 5 and 6 came through.

He was on his second cup when number 7 ejected, and he had just taken a last swallow when all hell broke loose.

* * * * *

It wasn't much different from the other rejects. Total silence, every light in every section red ... trouble was, they couldn't seem to get together again. Some went back to green, others blinked with ominous uncertainty, still others said "to hell with it" and exploded in vicious shards of glass that sprayed across the room. That was only the beginning. Twenty feet from Beardsley came a louder explosion, a sort of muffled hiss. He ducked, as a complete bank of transistors zoomed past his head. From a dozen places along the ninety-foot length angry trails of smoke poured out. A tech yelled "Dammit!" as he pulled back a burned hand. Sheaths crashed open. Long strands of varicolored wire burst out and began a crazy aimless writhing, accompanied by an ominous buzzing sound as if a swarm of angry metallic bees had escaped. Someone was yelling, "Master-switch! The master-switch!"

Beardsley saw Arnold leap to the master-switch, where he became entangled with a tech who was screaming at him, "My God, sir, hurry! It's BREAKDOWN!"

Cursing, Arnold shoved the man aside and pulled the controls.

But now that it was roused, ECAIAC didn't want to give up so easily. There came a staccato series of minor explosions--defiant gesture, thought Beardsley!--before silence engulfed the room together with a drift of acrid smoke.

It was acrid and angry smoke. From a safe distance Beardsley adjusted his glasses and observed the frantic, scurrying techs, many of them nursing burned hands. Aside from a pounding heart he was amazed at his own calm; nevertheless, he tread with caution as he approached Arnold, who was on his haunches dolefully surveying the area of major damage.

"Uh--is it something serious?"

Arnold glared up at him. "Overload on the feed-backs. If that's all it is, we can pull out the unit and replace it in a few hours."

"Never happened before, eh?"

"Not like this," Arnold groaned. "Lord--it just seemed to go berserk!"

Beardsley glanced around nervously. "You see? You see? I didn't think our beautiful friendship could last...." Arnold snarled, "Get out, Beardsley! What the hell you doing here anyway? Go somewhere and read a book!"

"Yes. Yes, I--" Beardsley swallowed hastily. He then straightened, took a last look around and pulled himself together. Without a word, he turned and strode resolutely into Jeff Arnold's office; he closed the door carefully, then hurried over to the stat and pushed the button for priority.

"Hello," he said. "Mandleco's office? ... this is Mechanical Division ... no, I want Mandleco ... I don't care, get
him I said! This is emergency! Put him on at once!"

Mandleco arrived twenty minutes later. The Minister of Justice was tall and raw-boned with a long hook-nose, a shock of whitening hair, and more than a suggestion of military arrogance. He paused for precisely one second in the doorway, then strode straight over to Jeff Arnold. Before saying a word he bent slightly and peered into the maze of mechanism.

Beardsley wanted to say, "Do you find the cause of the trouble, sir?" But he held his tongue. Mandleco straightened up, glaring. "Arnold, what is the meaning of this?"

"Breakdown, sir."
"I can see that! The cause, man, the cause!"
"I--it's only the feed-back, sir." Arnold struggled with the terminals, most of which were a fused and tangled mess. "Not as bad as it looks, I assure you. I've already contacted Maintenance; they're sending up a new unit."

"What precisely does that mean? Can you complete the run or not! This has got to go through today!"

Arnold touched a hot terminal, jerked back his hand and swore. "It will, sir. Give us a few hours. We had seven total rejects, so I doubt the tapes are at fault. More like a synaptic overload. Transferrals are okay, so I want to try it with a stepped-up synaptic check; that'll alleviate any overload without drain on the minor selective, which is better than setting up complete new correlation-grams."

It was too much for Mandleco. Grinding a fist in his palm, he stared into the matrix and muttered, "Unprecedented. Absolutely unprecedented! Arnold, I just can't understand why--"

"Happened pretty suddenly," Beardsley intruded. His voice was low and laden with meaning. "Almost as if it had gone berserk! And little wonder, if you ask me...."

Mandleco turned quickly. "Eh? What do you mean?"

"Well ... how would you feel if you had just been handed the news, out of the blue, that someone you loved had been brutally murdered? ECAIAC reacted, is all. She must have regarded Carmack as a father--"

Arnold looked up in amazement. "Beardsley, will you stop that crazy nonsense!"

"Nonsense?" Beardsley appeared hurt. "Why--you said yourself that you wanted me and ECAIAC to become great friends!" He appealed to Mandleco. "That's what he said, sir, and he even took pains to introduce me and all, and--"

"It was in the nature of a joke, sir!" Arnold's voice rose an octave. "A private little joke, and he's trying to make it appear--"

"Stop it, stop it!" Mandleco thundered. "Arnold--you get that new unit installed on the double! Put your best men on it. That's an order! Beardsley, I'm glad you had the presence of mind to contact me. Commendable, most commendable."

Arnold scowled, hit Beardsley with an accusing look.

"Above all," said Mandleco, "not a word of this must leak! Damn it, why should this have to happen now? Public confidence will be undermined if they think ECAIAC is--is--"

"Not infallible?" suggested Beardsley.

"Exactly. You hear me, Arnold? Not a word of this must get out!"

"I'm sure it won't," Arnold glared venomously at Beardsley, "if you'll just keep him away from the tele-stats."

The Minister of Justice walked away, still muttering something about public confidence and political repercussions. Beardsley kept pace beside him until they were across the room. Then he spoke, timidly at first.

"Pardon me, sir, but--I'd like to ask you something." His voice was low and confidential. "If you'll just look around you...."

"Eh?" Mandleco followed Beardsley's gesture, and for the first time he seemed to see the room in total. Shards of glass lay everywhere. A great tangle of wire was strewn half the length of ECAIAC, and a bank of transistors reposed against the far wall in pitiful ruin. The techs had already started a strip-down, their tools and units across the floor adding to the general confusion.

Mandleco said, "Well? What is it you--" His words stopped as if sliced in two by his teeth. "Yes. Yes, by God, I see what you mean!"

"Can you really conceive of operation in two hours? Two hours," Arnold said. "Two days, maybe. More likely in two weeks!"

Mandleco groaned as if in pain, staring around.

Beardsley pressed his point. "You'll pardon my saying it, sir, but I do realize what the Carmack Case means--to you personally. So much build-up and publicity, and the people demanding a verdict ... why, if the case were to snag
"Unthinkable!" A shudder touched Mandleco's long, lean frame. "Out with it, man! What are you trying to say?"

Beardsley was suddenly sweating. He felt as if a long tube were inside of him, hot and throbbing, reaching up with a surge of pulse to his temples. It had to be now. He had to say it.

"Well," he gulped. "Just this, sir. I think the case can be cracked right now. Today. Without ECAIAC."

"Nonsense! Without ECAIAC? Why, that's--"

"Sure. You think it's crazy. But I tell you I can do it!" Beardsley's words came fast and urgent. "I've followed this case from the beginning, I processed it, I'm familiar with every angle. I tell you, I can deliver the killer. Give me permission to try!"

Mandleco stared at Beardsley as if he were some queer specimen under a microscope; his mouth opened to speak, then he clamped his teeth tightly and strode away.

He turned back abruptly. "So you think you have the solution. You actually--do--think it!" His eyes narrowed down, no longer amused, as he fixed the little serologist with a peculiar gaze. "Go on, Beardsley. Your suggestion at least has the novelty of imagination!"

"The novelty of experience," Beardsley said bitterly. "With your permission and co-operation I can solve this case, together with positive evidence that will hold up in any court! What's more, I'll do it today. A guarantee," Beardsley said pointedly, "which I dare say you no longer have from ECAIAC."

* * * * *

Mandleco stood quite motionless, trying to recall something. "Now I remember! You were with New York Homicide, weren't you, before promotion to Coördinates in '60? I recall passing on your record. Top record, too, for those days."

Beardsley gestured impatiently. "How about it, sir? I know every pertinent fact of this case, plus a few of my own which haven't been tested in a dozen years. Not indexes and tubes and tapes--just facts! Fact and method! Let me apply them!"

"I'm afraid it's not as simple as that, Beardsley. There is ECAIAC, and public confidence must not be allowed--"

"The public be damned," Beardsley caught himself. "All right--for appearance sake you can say the solution came from ECAIAC. Let ECAIAC verify me later if you wish. I'm not after headlines and glory ... by heaven, sir, I'm offering you an out!"

Mandleco pondered that. He glanced again at the confusion across the room, and realization seemed to hit him. Quite suddenly, then, he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"An out. And by heaven, Beardsley, I'm offering you a try! The idea appeals to me! Beardsley versus ECAIAC ... socio-archaism opposed to the machina-ratiocinatrix. Why, it's delicious!" He subsided to a rumble of mirth and wiped tears from his eyes. "So! Just what do you propose?"

Beardsley saw nothing amusing. "I propose first, sir, that we reach an understanding. I'm to conduct the investigation my own way, without interference?"

"You have my word! I never violate it."

"Good. Then start using your word right now. There are three persons I want placed in temporary custody; they are to be brought over here at once for questioning."

* * * * *

Mandleco looked appalled. "Questioning? Here?"

"Yes, right here. Immediately! The three I want are Mrs. Carmack--I happen to know she's still in the city. And Brook Pederson--you should reach him easily at Central News Bureau. The third--"

"Would that be Professor Losch?" Mandleco smugly asked. "Sorry, but Losch happens to be in Bermuda right now."

Beardsley said sharply: "How did you know that?"

"Why, I--I'm acquainted with Losch, you know. He was planning a vacation, and he mentioned Bermuda--"

"No. I don't mean that. How did you know Losch was my third person?"

Mandleco bristled a little, his face reddening as he groped for an answer. "Never mind," Beardsley waved it aside. "If Losch is in Bermuda at present we'll reach him by tele-stat right now!" He was suddenly crisp as he propelled the Minister of Justice toward Jeff Arnold's office.

Mandleco stared at this little man, wondering if it were the same person he had been talking to just minutes before. "Now see here, Beardsley--" But he was interrupted.

"I thought we had an understanding! Of course, if you'd prefer to count on ECAIAC--"

"Very well," Mandleco nodded grimly, "I gave you my word. But the instant Arnold repairs the breakdown,
your little experiment is over! Do you understand that?"

Beardsley nodded. He understood very well.

"In the meantime, Beardsley, I warn you. I'll have no brow-beating of these citizens, no--what was it called--
third-degreeing tactics! I understand that sort of thing used to be pretty prevalent."

Beardsley snorted, as if that were beneath comment, and closed the office door behind them. Mandleco hit him
with a cagey glance. "The Logicals and the Primes, eh? I suppose you know that I happen to be one of those
Primes."

Beardsley looked straight at him. "Yes, I'm aware of it. My own approach will be individualistic, of course, but
I promise you won't be over-looked!"

It might have been fatal--but Beardsley had judged his man well. Mandleco took it as a challenge. He was silent
as he approached the tele-stat, and he no longer seemed amused.

He put through the directive to have Mrs. Sheila Carmack and Mr. Brook Pederson brought in. "As my guests,
that is," Mandleco told his operative. "Be sure they understand that. They are to be brought to Crime-Central,
Mechanical Division, at once...yes, I said Mechanical Division! At once means now."

Beardsley nodded approval. "And now Professor Losch, please?"

Without a waste of motion, Mandleco put through to Bermuda on priority beam. While they waited he gave
Beardsley a look of puzzlement and new respect. "Ah--I'm not implying that it's against protocol, of course, but I
assume you've already made some investigation along lines of your own?"

"Superficial only," Beardsley said.

"I see. Well then, would you mind giving me some...you know, just an idea of how you plan to proceed?"

Beardsley said bluntly: "Yes, I would mind."

"Oh," Mandleco frowned and persisted. "Psychologic deduction. Wasn't that your forte? I seem to recall--"

Beardsley grunted. "I'll tell you this much, there are implications about this case that fascinate me!"

"Oh?" Mandleco found himself a chair, sat upon it and edged forward. "I don't just quite--"

"Look. To begin with, the case is unique; so much so that your entire structure of approach is wrong. I mean
top-heavy! Top-heavy with gadgetry and assumption."

"Assumption?" Mandleco bristled a little. "You of all people should know better. Not once in the past dozen
years has ECAIAC failed to arrive at a conclusive and pin-point solution based on correlative factors!"

Beardsley smiled thinly. "Ah, yes. But we were speaking of the Carmack case. I repeat, it's not only unique but
untenable; it became untenable the moment you assigned ECAIAC the task of solving the murder of its own creator!
That," he said grimly, "is a mistake we wouldn't have made even in '60...."

Mandleco thought that over, shook his head and frowned. It was obvious he missed the connotation. "So?" he
urged.

"So look at the murder itself. The pattern. You'll admit it does seem odd and misplaced for these times--or
hadn't you noticed?" Beardsley leaned forward sharply. "But it strikes a familiar note with me! Absolutely nothing in
the way of material clues; not even the weapon; and the modus operandi is one I haven't seen employed in years, the
old idea of the most direct and simple murder being the safest!"

"I--I guess I just don't follow you."

"I mean the way Carmack was struck down. Nothing cute and fancy, no frills or improvisation--just the
proverbial blunt instrument, after which the killer simply walked out of there. Believe me, I know about these
things. The very simplicity is the killer's protection. You can bet no trace will ever be found of that blunt instrument,
and naturally he left no evidence coming or going. But then," Beardsley said obliquely, "your so-called 'Survey' men
made a horrible botch of the scene. In '60 we'd have sent them back to patrolling the freeways!"

Mandleco started to protest, then closed his mouth quickly. "I see, I see."

"I can understand," Beardsley murmured. "how emphasis on basic groundwork has become minimized. So
much reliance on Indexes and thalamic-imbalance and chart-sifts! It was only a matter of time until a criminal, a
really clever one, saw through the system--and reverted." His fingers drummed the chair arm, then he looked up
sharply. "And yet of all places, I'd say that Carmack's estate was least ideally situated for this type of murder; you
know what I mean? You've been there?"

"Well, I--there have been occasions. Yes."

Beardsley nodded. "I refer to Carmack's elaborate system against invasion of his privacy. To put it bluntly, he
had enemies, and his estate was designed as a refuge against those enemies; electronic barriers pitched at ultra-
frequency to respond only to certain neural vibrations. Must have taken years of research to come up with that!"

Mandleco shifted impatiently. "Of course, but look here, Beardsley--"
"So it leaves me right where I started, doesn't it? And yet I know this: it was no emotional killing. It was all coldly planned. The killer was someone Carmack trusted enough to have in his home; they were probably having a quiet little chat together. And then precisely--on a predetermined minute--the killer rose from his chair and struck."

Mandleco lifted his heavy hands and then, as if conscious of them, let them fall limply across the desk. "But--come now, Beardsley! Psychologic deduction is all very well, but how can you possibly know that?"

Beardsley gazed calmly at the Minister of Justice. For a moment he said nothing. Mandleco seemed more alert than startled, more annoyed than either.

"That," said Beardsley softly, "I am not prepared to tell you."

Mandleco seemed about to pursue the point, but there came an interruption. Both men turned abruptly as the stat-screen gave its warning blip.

"Code C-C-Five!" came the remote voice. "Bermuda to Washington, Priority. This is Priority. C-C-Five ... your party is ready now, sir!"

* * * * *

It was a pool-side scene, with hotel and tropical palms against an unbelievable blue sky. Professor Emil Losch loomed on the screen; he was in swimming trunks, a small gray man who seemed hard as nails, his lean tanned body belying his years.

"Hello?" Losch peered sharply and then pulled away, almost upsetting an expensive decanter of liquor on the table beside him. He seemed to blanch as he recognized the Minister of Justice. "Mandleco!"

The latter raised a hand in greeting. "Don't be alarmed, Professor, this is not official. Just a social call."

"I want to correct that," Beardsley said bluntly as he thrust himself into range. "Professor Losch, this is official; furthermore, I wish to advise you that this stat is monitor-taped for both vis and audio, and the resulting record is therefore admissible in any Court of Law. Being so advised, is there any objection on your part to answering a brief series of questions pertaining to the Carmack Case? I have been duly authorized by George Mandleco, Minister of Justice," he added for the record.

Losch glanced bewilderedly from Beardsley to Mandleco, and seemed to take courage from the latter.

"Objection?" he said. "This is a bit unusual, but ... of course, I have no objection."

"Very well. I shall make a series of statements, and give you opportunity to refute them either in part or in toto. Professor Losch, some years ago you were engaged privately, in magnetonic cybernetic research along similar lines to those later developed by Amos Carmack. Shortly thereafter you claimed that Carmack had thwarted you, outmaneuvered you, out-stolen you at every turn; I believe those are pretty much your own words, as revealed by court records--"

"Correct! I repeat them now!"

"You filed against him, and litigation dragged through the courts for several years before Carmack finally won out. Shortly thereafter you disappeared; I believe you took up residence in Europe. About a year ago you returned, and was hired as Research Consultant in the laboratories of the Carmack Foundation. This is true?"

* * * * *

For a moment Losch avoided looking at the screen. It was obvious he was considering his answer carefully.

"It's true," he said.

Beardsley said quickly, "It is my understanding that Mr. Mandleco interceded with Carmack on your behalf--"

"I protest the last statement!" Losch's words exploded from the screen. "There was no intercession by anyone!"

His head lifted defiantly. "Yes, I came back. I don't mind admitting I came crawling back. Carmack offered me the position and I accepted!"

"Quite so. And he offered you a hundred thousand a year, didn't he? Twice the salary of any other top man?"

"You think that's out of line," Losch bristled, "but he must have thought I was worth it--I think you know why! He owed me ten times as much!"

"You must have really hated Carmack," murmured Beardsley.

Mandleco thrust forward angrily, gesturing. "Losch, let me caution you not to answer that!"

"But I will answer it! Yes, I hated him, but if you think I killed the man you're wrong. Sure--I wanted to kill him--I thought about it often enough, but I hadn't the courage." Losch glared at Beardsley from the screen. "No doubt my Augment Index will bear it out," he said bitterly. "Neuro-thalamic imbalance isn't it called? Pronounced efforts at emotional suppression?"

"Close enough," Beardsley nodded, refusing to be enticed from his query. "And you were in Washington prior to and including the day of the murder. You admit this?"

"Of course, of course I admit it!" Losch sighed wearily and lifted his hands. "Why deny the obvious? I'm resigned to the fact that my Index probably makes me a prize Prime!"

"Professor Losch. As a person closely associated with the Carmack Laboratories, you must be aware of the--"
shall we say--elaborate precautions Carmack took to ensure his privacy?"

Losch sank back slowly, but his eyes couldn't conceal a livening interest. "I don't know what you mean."

"Then I'll tell you. I refer to the frequency barrier which Carmack installed within the past year. The 'neuro-
vibe' I think he called it. That strikes a note?"

Losch said sullenly, "Perhaps! What about it?"

"Only this. Assuming the killer was a person Carmack had reason to mistrust--or to fear--he had to solve the
neuro-vibe in order to gain access. Not many persons could have done that, Losch. But you could have done it."

Losch came up out of his chair with a heavy, angry look. "Now see here, you--"

"Which pretty well establishes motive, means and method. You were in Washington the day of the murder!
And you left for Bermuda the day following! Is that substantially correct?"

"Totally correct!" said Losch savagely. "Now may I ask what the hell you're going to do about it?"

Beardsley observed him for a prolonged second. "Remember it," he answered softly.

Losch opened his mouth to say more, but Beardsley lifted a palm at the screen and smiled benignly. "Well, sir,
I think that about covers it. I want to thank you very much for the record, and--ah--have a nice vacation! Goodbye."

With that he clicked off abruptly.

He turned to face Mandleco, who was struggling between anger and distress as he paced away from the screen
and back. He confronted Beardsley with a sad and accusing look. "Now see here, Beardsley! If I'd known your
methods were... don't you think that was all a bit high-handed?"

"What? No, not in the least. Didn't you notice?"

"Notice what?"

"Losch was an angry man, yes, indeed."

"Angry," snapped Mandleco. "Good reason!"

"No," Beardsley mused. "The wrong reason. Murder--at least the type we're concerned with--is a form of
release, you know. A killer may commit his deed in anger, but once the thing is accomplished he never retains that
anger long." Beardsley gazed contemplatively at the screen. "You know, I admire that man. I really do. He had the
convictions at least, if not the courage."

Mandleco pounced on that. "Then you think Losch is innocent?"

"I didn't say that!" Beardsley paused in a strange hesitation; his eyes had gone remote beneath the very thick
glasses, and his words came slow and isolated. "But he's part of the record. Yes, it should be quite a record. In fact, I
have a feeling--you know?--that this case is going to stand as a monument in the annals of crime...."

Mandleco stared at him, searched for the meaning there and then gave it up. Why had he ever committed
himself to this situation anyway? Did this little man really know as much as he pretended, or was he merely
fumbling around in the dregs of a forgotten past? To be sure, Beardsley was a pathetic enough figure; but the man
had once been great in his field, and there was something about him even now....

There was the sudden way Beardsley had of losing his abstracted look, the eyes beneath those ridiculous lenses
coming to a sharp bright focus with tiny livening flecks in the gray of the iris; and the way the change lifted his
features from mediocrity to the alertness of a terrier. It was absurd, it was farcical... and it was all very disturbing.

"You told me," Mandleco said testily, "that the killer was someone Carmack trusted enough to have in his
home. Then you bludgeon Losch with the idea it was a person Carmack had reason to fear! It would seem to me,
Beardsley--"

"No, no. I think my words to Losch were assuming the killer was such a person." Beardsley looked up brightly,
and even through those lenses Mandelco could see the sharp focus.

"Just the same, I fail to see what's to be gained by these outlandish methods!"

Beardsley seemed genuinely surprised. "But I've gained a great deal already! And don't forget, Mrs. Carmack
and Pederson should be here soon."

"That's a prospect I look forward to," Mandleco said testily, "that the killer was someone Carmack trusted enough to have in his
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home. Then you bludgeon Losch with the idea it was a person Carmack had reason to fear! It would seem to me,
Beardsley--"
Arnold was making out very well, much to Mandleco's delight. No longer was there chaos and confusion. The new feed-back unit had arrived, and installation was well under way. Blueprints were spread out as a crew of techs worked feverishly at all damage areas.

"It looks promising," Arnold hurried up to greet him. "Told you I had a good crew here! Look--see this?" He indicated one of the variant-tapes being slowly reversed across the relays.

"What is it?"
"The number eight reject."
"That what caused the trouble?"
"Well ... we think so, but it's problematical. Whether it did or not, we're safe in resuming the run without any shift in the correlation total."

Mandleco stared at the number eight. "Throw it out!" he snapped.
"What--what did you say, sir?"
"I said throw it out! Get this thing to functioning!"
Arnold was aghast. "But," he gulped, "we just can't throw out data! Sure, it was about to be a reject--but everything, even rejects, contain a factor-balance! You know that, sir."

Mandleco got control of himself with an effort. "Yes--yes, of course. I know you're right. But damn it, man, those units cost something like eighty thousand dollars! Suppose the same breakdown occurs?"

"Not a chance of it this time. We'll merely continue with a stepped-up synaptic check. Take longer for Cumulative, perhaps, but absolutely fool-proof once we--"

For a long instant Mandleco stood musing. Then he nodded brusquely. "All right. How long to get going?"

"Why, we'll be ready in forty minutes at the most. I told you I had a good crew, sir! Excuse me--" One of Arnold's techs was motioning to him. "Excuse me," Arnold said again, and hurried away to consult with the man.

"Forty minutes!" Mandleco couldn't believe it. He chortled happily, and swung about to greet Beardsley who approached at that moment. "Hear that, Beardsley? Forty minutes! Excellent man, Arnold. I'm sorry I ever doubted--"

Beardsley wasn't listening. He stared about at the miracle of reconstruction, and there was more of amazement on his face than distress. Adjusting his glasses, he gazed thoughtfully at Jeff Arnold's retreating figure.

Mandleco was saying, "Just as well your little experiment didn't go any further! Dangerous precedent ... don't know what possessed me ... you realize that in the last analysis I'll have to put my faith in ECAIAC! No bad feelings?"

"No, sir," Beardsley pronounced somberly. "No bad feelings, because I'm holding you to your word. ECAIAC hasn't solved your case and it never will."

Mandleco stood still, open-mouthed. "What's that? Nonsense! Arnold just assured me--"

"He assured you of nothing! I'm more convinced than ever now. I'm the only one who can solve this case, and I'm holding you to your word."

Mandleco seemed undecided whether to laugh or censure. His heavy fingers opened and closed aimlessly, as he stared across the room at Arnold and back at Beardsley. Finally his teeth snapped together. "Beardsley," he choked--"I warn you, if this is some sort of trickery--"

Beardsley shook his head solemnly. "You'd do well to believe me, sir. I was never more serious."

"So you're determined to go on with it! Very well, Beardsley. You have something like forty minutes, and believe me you'd better prove yourself! May I remind you"--fraught with meaning, his voice bordered on anticipation--"may I remind you, Beardsley, that already you've given sufficient cause for a complete review of your qualifications as Coördinator?"

Beardsley looked at him and smiled. "Yes, sir. And may I remind you, sir," he nodded toward the far door, "that your guests have arrived?"

Mrs. Carmack, Beardsley thought as he watched her, was that rare type of woman who could defy all the current conventions of style and carry it off successfully; her type of beauty was unostentatious and yet vibrant. She was dressed impeccably in black and silver, her hair was authentic honey-blond in a coronet braid, and her face possessed that pure line of profile together with the quality of translucence one sees in rare porcelain.... Sheila Carmack was thirty-five, and she paid her beauticians that many thousands annually to keep her looking fifteen years younger. Just now she seemed in buoyant good spirits as she greeted Mandleco.

Not so the young man who accompanied her. The escort was a person Beardsley had never seen before, quite handsome and quite aware of it, with an impudent world-wisdom centered about his sharp eyes. He turned
immediately to Mandleco with a bluster as phony as it was towering:

"This is an outrage, sir! A damned outrage! On Sheila's behalf I deplore these tactics, and I question your right! Our entire afternoon perfectly ruined...."

"Correction, darling," purred Mrs. Carmack. "You mean our perfect afternoon entirely ruined." She turned smiling to the Minister of Justice. "You really mustn't mind Victor."

"Hello, Sheila," Mandleco greeted her wanly. "I must apologize for the inconvenience, but I assure you--"

"Oh, but this is thrilling! I mean really!" Mrs. Carmack was gazing about ECAIAC's room with considerable more delight than suspicion, and Beardsley watching her was thinking: Thrilling! Can she really mean it? She must surely be aware of ECAIAC's task for today--today of all days....

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He glanced uneasily down the room, and saw that Jeff Arnold was much too occupied to have noticed the newcomers. He gestured to Mandleco, who finally took the hint and escorted the visitors into the privacy of the office.

There Mandleco offered drinks, but the young man named Victor refused his, preferring to maintain his air of injured dignity. Mandleco sighed and gave an accusing look at Beardsley. "I know this is unusual," he apologized to Sheila, "but I--uh--I am rather hopeful that you may find it entertaining!" He gave a slight sardonic emphasis to the last word. "If you'll just bear with me until our other guest arrives."

Victor had been awaiting his chance. "Another? Really! We're guests, Sheila, do you hear that?" He looked at Mandleco with immense disdain, gave a pert tilt of his head and surveyed the room with a grimace of distaste. "And just how long are we to be detained in this--this--"

Beardsley's fist itched to splatter those handsome features around a little. Instead he strode forward, said bluntly: "That'll do it, sonny! Who the hell are you anyway?"

The handsome face sneered at him. "I am Victor d'Arlan! I am a good friend of Sheila's--of the family," he corrected. "We were on our way to the Concert when those--those impertinent men detained us. To think we must forego Perro's Fifth Color-Concerto for Sub-Chromatics in favor of this!"

Sheila's eyes danced with tolerant amusement. "Victor, please. This promises to be much more exciting; I'm sure Mr. Mandleco knows he is what he is about, and...." Wide and curious, her gaze went to Beardsley and lingered there.

Belatedly, Mandleco made introductions. "Perhaps I should explain," he gave an improvident laugh, "that Mr. Beardsley's role at the moment is--ah--a little beyond the ordinary! That is, I--" He paused miserably, and then was saved for the moment as all eyes turned toward the door.

Brook Pederson had arrived and the attention of everyone was drawn to him.

* * * * *

The effect was startling. The tele-columnist was a tall, dour and bushy-browed man who took a perverse sort of pride in the impression he gave of shabbiness. He slouched wordlessly into the room, hands thrust deep in the pockets of a makeshift jacket. But there was nothing shabby about the man's perceptive and analytic mind, Beardsley remembered; true, Pederson had fallen from the heights since the ECAIAC debacle, but his retirement from the limelight was more studied than sullen and could only have been his own choosing. Lately he had emerged again, and with all of his old news-sense and political acumen he was making his presence felt ... he was a man of considered but lightning mood who, when asked for an opinion invariably gave an argument.

Beardsley observed him shrewdly. From the depths of his mind came a warning, a restless unease that took root and blossomed into turbulence. This man will bear special watching....

Pederson came on into the room, nodded dourly at Mandleco (no love lost there!) and remained alertly silent; for the merest instant he met Beardsley's gaze, and there was a definite challenge and something of mockery. Damn him, thought Beardsley, he knows why he's here ... but how could he know? He's aware that he's on the tapes, too--even one of the Primes--and he doesn't give a damn!

Mandleco finished the introductions quickly and took over. It was plain that he wanted to get through with this, but at the same time Beardsley sensed that he was no longer quite so sure of Jeff Arnold and ECAIAC ... above all things, Mandleco had to avoid any hint of trouble with ECAIAC.

And he managed that with an adroitness that bordered on the cunning. After some glowing comments on Beardsley's past esteemed record--with pointed emphasis on the pre-ECAIAC era--he ended with a truly inspirational touch:

"Let us just say, then, that you have been invited here in the interests of an experiment which Crime-Central has been contemplating for some time. An inquiry into--ah--certain facets of past investigatory methods. Crude as it may seem to you, certain factors may be forthcoming here--psychologic and derivational--which may later be refined, analyzed and integrated into the operational function of ECAIAC...."
Beardsley stared at Mandleco. It was altogether a neat side-step, and he almost admired him for it.

"Please understand, this is a necessary adjunct to the true development of ECAIAC. We shall have here two divergent lines of approach within parallel fields. Actually, each of you will be an important co-aide in this experiment! I would like you to cooperate fully with Mr. Beardsley's line of approach. Uh--vintage '60," he added for their amusement.

The reaction was immediate and varied. Victor d'Arlan examined his fingernails and registered aristocratic boredom. Pederson slouched up against the desk, seeming amused at Mandleco's pitch ... but he wasn't watching Mandleco. The gaze he fastened on Beardsley said plainer than words that he was quite aware of the situation.

Only Sheila Carmack seemed fascinated, as she sat a bit straighter in her chair and peered brightly across her drink. It was obvious that she, for one, was taken in.

"Why, I wouldn't have missed it for the world!" she sparkled. "Just like, you know, in those--what did they call them--whodunits? It's actually thrilling!"

"It's archaic!" d'Arlan sneered.

"It's heroic," said Pederson, his gaze still on the little Coördinator. "Beardsley, I hope you pull it off. I actually do. Always did think you were twice the man ECAIAC is!"

Beardsley moved forward, not smiling. "Thanks," he said. "In that case you won't mind if I begin with you."

"With me?" Pederson stared, then laughed suddenly and without mirth. "Skip it, Beardsley! I know your methods, and I can tell you right now it won't get you any--"

Beardsley stopped him. "Pederson," he said, "as of now we agree on just one thing. I also think I'm twice the man. The only difference is that I'm man enough to really believe it." He paused and watched him absorb that. "It's going to be ECAIAC or vintage '60, Pederson. Your choice!"

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It was at once a rebuff and a challenge. Pederson then straightened up slowly, a muscle in his face flinched and then he smiled--with all but his eyes. "All right," he snapped, "we'll begin with me. I'll fill you in plenty! You want to know if I saw Carmack the day of the murder? I did! The louse put through a vis call to me. Insisted I come out and see him--"

"Whoa, now just a minute! You wouldn't say this was a friendly visit?"

"I'll get to that!" Pederson's words came fast and clipped. "You know how I fought the ECAIAC lobby. I fought it long and hard, and when I lost it finished me with the public. But I wasn't through! I began digging up every fact I could about Carmack. Took me a few years, but worth it. Most of it smelled! Ask Professor Losch, he'll tell you--"

"I've already spoken with Losch," Beardsley said quietly. "He managed to convey his sentiments pretty thoroughly."

"Good. Then try talking to him," Pederson nodded venomously at Mandleco. "Ask Mandleco how the great Carmack managed to get those patents through.... I can tell you he didn't do it alone! Oh, I've dug plenty!"

"Why, you--" Mandleco gave a snort of anger and started forward, but Beardsley managed to forestall him. He gazed sternly at the tele-columnist.

"I think we're all aware of your considerable talent for digging, Pederson. ECAIAC, too," he added pointedly, "for we already have it on the tapes."

Pederson bristled. "Sure. Sure, you have it! My past connection, my opposition to the lobby, even my digging maybe. But you don't have it all! How do you equate hate, Beardsley? Is that on your tapes?"

Beardsley could have told him that it was, indeed, on the tapes. But he only shook his head. "No," he said slowly, "we don't have it all. Not ECAIAC nor I nor any of us, and that's the eternal pity of it. But I'd like to try! The sum and the substance, Pederson ... don't you understand me? Just once before I'm through--"

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It was the voice, some secret and subtle thing in the voice that reached out and gripped Pederson and bore meaning with it. He stood quite motionless, staring at Beardsley; for a split second his eyes widened, then disbelief gave way to something of comprehension, admiration.

"Beardsley," he said softly. "You fool. You utter damned fool!"

Oblivious of the others, then, he turned and began to pace. "All right. Here it is. Carmack called me out to see him. He had gotten wind of what I was up to, and offered to buy me off." Pederson laughed bitterly. "Wasn't even subtle about it! Said he liked my stuff, and would like to see me at the top again where I belonged. Said he could arrange for me to step into a top job at Central Telecast. Providing, of course, I could manage to--ah--'forget' certain little items I'd uncovered."

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Pederson was doing all right. Beardsley gave him his lead.

"He actually thought it would be that simple! I refused him outright, and of course, he couldn't believe it. A
man like that--We dropped all pretense, there were some bitter words--"

Beardsley said quickly, "Could you elaborate?"

"Oh, I don't remember exactly. He went venomous! I suppose there were threats. I told him he hadn't enough
money or influence to buy what I knew, and that when I had it properly documented I intended to make a national
scandal of it." Pederson halted abruptly. "You know, it occurred to me later that was a foolhardy thing to say!"

"Ah? Why is that?"

"Well, I had heard of that safeguard of his--the 'neuro-vibe'--and I suppose there were other things, too. He was
a cautious man, a dangerous man. But," Pederson shrugged, "he let me into his home readily enough."

Beardsley lifted a finger. "Because he was confident he was going to buy you--wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose that's it. Maybe I was lucky to get out of there so easily! Anyway I did." Pederson stopped pacing,
and his gaze bored into Beardsley's. "So now to the big question. Yes, he was alive when I left him. No, I never saw
Carmack again. I went straight to my office and worked until well past midnight; by the way, I have ample proof of
that--"

"Yes, I'm sure you do! What were your feelings at this point?"

"My feelings? I knew my life was in danger now! Carmack would be out to stop me. I don't mind admitting I
was ... well, rather relieved, when I heard the news."

"Ah-h! And when did you hear it?"

Pederson glared, but his answer was quick. "Late the next afternoon, of course! By habit I work late hours and I
sleep long." With an air of finality he threw a challenging look around. "I want to congratulate whoever did it, and I
don't much care whether the answer comes from you or ECAIAC!"

Beardsley surveyed him solemnly. Pederson had little more than brushed the surface, but it was enough, it
served to set the pattern; he could have sworn Pederson was aware of that. He said drily, "Thanks, Pederson. Your
story is--very pat."

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He turned to the others. Mandleco rather surprised him, seeming not so much disturbed as he was engrossed
deeper in thought; as for Mrs. Carmack, Beardsley saw that the comedy had gone out of it for her, but she tried to keep
up the veneer.

"This is all most interesting!" she sparkled, placing her glass down carefully and turning to face him. "Am I to
be next, Mr. Beardsley? Shall I give both the questions and the answers as Mr. Pederson did?"

"No, Mrs. Carmack. I'll do that! I took note a moment ago that you mentioned the whodunits. You must be
familiar with them? Say as a hobby?"

It wasn't at all what she expected. She stood wide-eyed and startled.

"This is so thrilling, remember. Vintage '60! As the whodunits will tell you, one of the prime requisites is an
accounting and proof of your whereabouts at the time of the deed! Well?"

Beardsley's voice was just edged enough to throw her into confusion. "Why, I--" she faltered. "You mean that
night? I--"

"What, no alibi? You don't even remember? According to vintage '60 that could mean either complete
innocence or extreme cunning; beware the suspect who is clever enough to be ready with no alibi!"

Beardsley saw her stiffen; there was a change across her face, a struggle beneath the eyes. "But then," he
shrugged, "it has always been my conviction that motive rather than opportunity is the real requisite. On that basis
it's plain you couldn't have killed your husband. You loved him! He was only fifty-eight, he only left you a dozen
million dollars, but you loved him and you were faithful! Anyone can see that after seven weeks you're still all
broken up over it!"

The veneer was gone now; Sheila Carmack's eyes were vicious pools of hate, her mouth a grimace. "Why, you-
you ridiculous little monster!" Victor d'Arlan stepped forward belligerently. "Say, now look here! This is all very--"

Beardsley placed a hand on d'Arlan's chest and shoved, and the latter stumbled back with mouth agape. Pederson
was gazing at Beardsley with delight and admiration, seeming to visualize this little man as material for his next
tele-column. Mandleco stood transfixed, a monument of agony, twisting a fist into his palm. "Beardsley, stop it!
This ridiculous farce has gone far enough! I warned you about these tactics--"

Beardsley said, "Shut up!" and Mandleco stood there with mouth opening and closing soundlessly.

"Well, Mrs. Carmack? Answer me! You loved your husband, didn't you? For the past ten minutes you've heard
him maligned; I should think you'd want to protect his very good name!"

"Sheila, I must advise you against making any statement of whatever nature!" Mandleco strode for the tele-stat,
then turned back and pointed a trembling finger at Beardsley. "This man," he choked--"this man is no longer acting
in any official capacity for Crime-Central!"

With a quick step Pederson got himself between Mandleco and the tele-stat; he strolled over to the instrument
and leaned against it, with a knowing look at Beardsley.

Sheila Carmack tilted her chin in defiance. "But I wish to answer this man. I insist on answering! Loved Amos Carmack? Love him?" Her voice rose a full octave and broke in stridence. "For the past nine years I have hated--his-guts!"

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For a long moment the room was silent. No one moved. Beardsley's thick glasses glinted eerily as he peered around at them, from Mandleco to Sheila to Pederson and back to Mandleco.

"Well now," he said, "this is remarkable. Most remarkable! Everyone hated Carmack. Professor Losch--we know why. Pederson here--he's told us why. His wife--I think it's obvious. Who else? Surely not you, Mandleco! Carmack was a pal of yours! You backed his cause with ECAIAC, you lobbied for him, you even stole patents for him.... I wonder what persuasion he held over you to bring all that about. Or is persuasion too mild a word? Vintage '60 had a better term for it!"

Slowly, through the murk of his agitation Mandleco seized a measure of control; he gazed at Beardsley out of cold incalculable eyes now hooded with dire intention. "You're really trying hard, aren't you!" he grated. "Well, make the most of it, because I guarantee you won't be around, not after the next Annual Basic! Do you understand that--Mister Coördinator?"

But Beardsley was watching Pederson now, whose face took on a sudden febrile gleam. "Blackmail ... by God, Beardsley, that's it! And I have the proof! Sure, it was Carmack I was after, but I dug out a lot more--" Pederson shot a challenging look at the Minister of Justice. "It goes back some years, but I can prove that Amos Carmack had enough on Mandleco to finish him politically any time he chose. You can bet your life Mandleco hated him. Enough to warrant murder!"

There was an odd, illogical delight in the way Pederson said it--and something almost frightening the way Mandleco just stood there in cold silence, gazing at the tele-columnist with a look of boundless regret.

Beardsley said very softly, "Thanks, Pederson, but I'd suggest you save it. It's scarcely pertinent now."

"Not pertinent? But, man, I tell you I have proof! What better motive would you--"

"Motive?" Beardsley hit him with a pitying glance. "Why, I thought it was obvious. We've progressed beyond motives now."

Again there was an electric silence, and Beardsley let it assimilate. "I have said," he went on, "that all this is most remarkable. But you know, the really remarkable thing--" He paused and watched them. Mandleco continued to grind a fist into his palm; Pederson straightened attentively, and d'Arlan, sneery no longer, moved over to stand beside Sheila Carmack.

"--the really remarkable thing is this. I am now ready to state, unequivocally, that the person who killed Amos Carmack ... didn't hate him at all."

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A thought was throbbing through the room like the seconds passing. Quick and cumulative, almost embodied, it made transition from stunned mind to startled mind as Beardsley stood there blinking at them. Beardsley really didn't mind; they just couldn't know how subtly he worked into his themes! Taking advantage of the lull, he went over to the door and peered out into the Operations Room.

He peered long and soberly, then turned. Mandleco had found his voice first, perplexity pushing down his anger: "Beardsley, either you're bereft of your senses or--Do you mean to say," he choked--"after going to these preposterous lengths do you mean to say that no one here--"

"Just a moment!" To everyone's surprise it was d'Arlan who broke in. "I'm not sure what's going on here, not sure at all, but I want to make one thing quite clear. Sheila had no complicity in this crime! I know, because--" He hesitated, touched her gently on the arm. "Sorry, darling. I've got to say it. I know because she was with me that night."

Sheila was startled for a moment, then utterly scathing. "You needn't lie for me, Victor! I appreciate your sense of the dramatic, and even your motives, but I assure you they are both misplaced. I have never heard such nonsense!"

d'Arlan looked more desolate than abashed. As for Beardsley, he was only a little amused. "Well, now, this is really more than I deserve; in all my years on Homicide I wanted to experience this, but I finally put it down as a myth. The Noble Alibi!" He peered sharply. "True vintage, right out of the whodunits--wouldn't you agree, Mrs. Carmack?"

The answer didn't come, and Beardsley went on sternly: "And you reject his noble attempt on your behalf. That is interesting! Especially, as it occurs to me that d'Arlan's effort is just a little delayed..." He paused, gazing thoughtfully upward. "It's enough to make one wonder whether his noble effort is designed to protect you--or himself!"
d'Arlan suddenly paled, as if he had just been kicked in the stomach. He gulped heavily and tried to speak. Beardsley watched stolidly for a moment, then dismissed him with a gesture of complete disgust. "Oh, hell, never mind! I would say neither. The lady is right, sonny, you'd better watch those impulses. You just aren't the type!"

Mandleco had been hanging onto every word, grimly intent; he was sure Beardsley was getting somewhere at last. Now he straightened, and his grinding fist indicated that he'd had enough. Without a word, without even a deigning glance at Beardsley, he traversed the office with great purposeful strides and slammed through the outer door into ECAIAC's room--

And was back an instant later, trailing Jeff Arnold as the latter brushed past him into the office. Mandleco was saying something urgently, tugging at Arnold's arm. Arnold ignored him. His startled gaze was on the little group.

"Sheila!" He took a step forward. "Sheila, what are you doing here?"

"I wish you'd tell me, Jeff. I wish someone would explain what this is all about...."

Beardsley watched the tableau in silence. Jeff Arnold's gaze flicked to d'Arlan, who stared back with insolence, and there was no mistaking the hostility that leaped between the two.

Sheila noticed it, too, and there was an indefinite moment that mounted toward panic. Beardsley watched her churning effort to control it. She said quickly, an inflection of fear in her voice: "Mr. Beardsley, if it really matters--my whereabouts that night--you'll understand my reluctance to say it before! I was with Jeff. Truly! I'm sure he will tell you--"

The words were directed at Beardsley, but she was talking to Jeff Arnold. And deliberately, almost brutally, Arnold refused to accept the cue. Beardsley saw the pleading turn to apprehension in Sheila's eyes.

"But, Jeff, you remember! Surely you do! Jeff, you don't understand--you must tell them--"

Arnold looked at her for a single comprehending instant, a pitying instant, then his lips compressed tightly as he turned away.

There was finality in it. Sheila's eyes were stark and unbelieving. She stood there without motion, without a word, her mind groping in a shock of blindness.

Beardsley said gently, "It's all right, Mrs. Carmack. It's really all right. Merely an experiment, an inquiry into comparative methods as Mandleco said. I'm truly sorry if my methods seemed harsh, but"--he shrugged--"I dare say my participation is over now."

"You're damned right you may say it, Beardsley!" Arnold's eyes raked him with venom, but he controlled himself and turned to Mandleco. "I only came to tell you, sir, that we have ECAIAC ready. We'll be reaching Cumulative very shortly now."

"Jeff...are you sure?"

"Quite sure! Depend on it, there'll be no more trouble."

More than relief took hold of Mandleco; it was transformation, it was as if a spell had been snapped. He glanced once about the room, and shuddered as his gaze encountered Beardsley.

"Uh--yes. Fine!" he said. "That's fine, Jeff! Shall we proceed?" He strode through the door, pausing only to fling back scathingly: "That is, if Mr. Beardsley is quite sure it meets with his approval!"

ECAIAC was in finest fettle again as the tapes sped through. Circuits were activated. Codes gave meaning. Synaptic cells summed and integrated, cancelled and compared and with saucy assurance sent the findings on toward Cumulative. The murmur was soft and sustained and somehow apologetic, as if ECAIAC were quite aware that she had failed in her duty but would be just pleased to make amends this time.

So like a woman ... fractious, unfathomable, then fawning and attrite--with a purpose! Beardsley cocked his head and listened, his mien almost beatific. Purpose? This creature had none that could quite match his! He was convinced of it now, and he had never been more happy or self-assured.

It was Pederson who was distressed, as he paced with long nervous strides and watched the equate-panel where the mathematics were made visible in a pattern of constantly changing lights. It had meaning only for the techs, but Pederson couldn't seem to take his eyes from it. At last he came over to Beardsley and managed to steer him aside.

"Beardsley, I just don't get it! This whole thing--are you quite sure--"

Beardsley blinked at him. "Sure of what, Pederson?"

"Of what you're doing! Damn it, man, don't tell me that was all waste effort in there! Look--I know what this means, and I'm with you all the way. If only you could beat ECAIAC, I'll give it all the publicity it can bear! Who knows--""

Beardsley looked at him blankly, and Pederson gave a snort and a gesture. "All right! I guess I'm wrong. For a while there I actually thought you had it." Pederson surveyed him shrewdly. "Just the same, that bit you exploded--
about the person who killed Carmack didn't hate him at all—you meant that, Beardsley!"

"That's right, I meant it."

"My choice is Jeff Arnold."

"Ah? Now why do you say that?"

"The way you built up to it, that's why. And you got your result! Sheila Carmack's in love with Arnold, and she tried to cover up for him ... sure, that's it! It's obvious! She thinks he's the killer, either thinks or knows it—""

"Ah, yes. The obvious," Beardsley said with a grimace. "But you know, I learned a long time ago that the obvious can be a mighty tricky thing. A dangerous thing. The forceps of the mind are greedy, and inclined to crush a little in the seizing...."

Pederson pondered that. "And you," he said slowly, "are not seizing. I take that to mean you still have an angle!"

Beardsley didn't answer at once. He glanced over at the equate-panel, at the flux of dancing lights. Mandleco was bright-eyed and attentive, chomping on the stub of a cigar, head thrust forward as he listened to some detail of Arnold's. Sheila stood miserably near by, still in a blind shock of disbelief; it was as if she had a need to be close to Arnold, and he felt it, too, but they dared not look at each other.

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"Now let's suppose," said Beardsley, "just suppose that Arnold thinks Sheila is the killer. Eh? Let us say they suspect each other. Naturally, each has disclaimed any part of the deed. But the suspicion is there, that tiny seed; and suspicion, particularly where love is involved, has a habit of taking root and giving growth. Neither can be totally sure of the other's innocence—eh?" He paused, peering up at Pederson. "And Arnold would want to protect her from any possible consequence. Now what would be his way of doing that? The only way he knew?"

He saw the idea take hold. Pederson was staring at the equate-panel with an odd look of excitement.

"Total reject," he gasped. "By God, if he should try that—to equate her from Logical into reject—" He gestured helplessly. "No, it isn't possible. Those tapes are coded! There's no way of tampering—" Pederson stopped abruptly, as a great light dawned. "Wait a minute, though. It needn't be the tapes! One thing I've always wondered—would it be possible to negate a given factor beyond all reach of empirical coordinates? You know, through operational technique or setup—"

Beardsley peered at him. "I'd say anything was possible," he urged, "given time and incentive."

Pederson bobbed his head in facile agreement. "By God, you're right! For example, I've always thought there wasn't sufficient control on Cumulative! You can bet your life Arnold would know ... results at that point could be juggled a little, say if the extrapolations were just—"

The forceps, the forceps of the mind. Already Pederson was reaching out to seize and to crush; the man was a fool after all! Beardsley felt a burgeoning disgust, but there was something more, a throbbing, chest-filling sensation that he strove to hold rigidly in leash. He said quickly: "Come to think of it, Arnold did mention that he was here most of last night, working on setup."

He watched Pederson absorb that, too; he saw the excitement grow. "Beardsley, if you are sure—if you could prove that Arnold managed a thing like that—"

They were interrupted by the sudden quiet that engulfed the room. It was so total as to be frightening. CUMULATIVE--CUMULATIVE--CUMULATIVE. For half-a-minute all operation ceased, as the words flashed bright across the panel.

But the techs had been waiting. It was a mere respite. Swiftly, they checked their respective units against Cumulative Code, and at the end of thirty seconds every light went green for total clearance as ECAIAC's deep-throated power resumed.

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Beardsley had been waiting too. "Cumulative!" he breathed. He let his breath out slowly, and made a sweeping gesture that seemed to encompass all the latent delight, all the unleashed joy of his being.

He was aware of Pederson again, a voice in panic: "Beardsley! Don't you know what it means? If there's been an imbalance, it has passed through! It will reach final equate!"

"That's right, it's entirely in ECAIAC's lap. You wouldn't want to deprive her of the chance, now would you?"

"But—but what are you going to do?"

"Me? I'm going to watch. I'm going to watch one of the epic events of our time—" For a moment Beardsley was solemn, almost shocked, as a thought struck him. "In a way it will be sad. Yes, it will! ECAIAC is about to lose her first case."

Now that was strange. Why should he have said such a thing? Why ... now that the game was over which had had to be played, and he felt the bitter-sweet surge of victory that lay throbbing at his grasp! About to lose her first case....
He shrugged in remote annoyance and strode away from Pederson. It would be fast now! Already the rejects were falling, the irrelevants, as ECAIAC with blithe unconcern brought the final equate toward conclusion. He observed Jeff Arnold, standing silent and alert but so devoid of all emotion that somehow it wasn't real ... and Mandleco, half crouched, teeth gnawing away at the cigar, his heavy face rapacious and eager as he awaited the final tape; that was all that mattered now; the MATHEMATICS would register, CODE would add synaptic approval, and proof indisputable would be on that tape in clean translated print—the name of Carmack's killer.

Indisputable? Bowing his head, Beardsley smiled, and listened to the smooth rhythmic control. Nothing sinister now! No snapping malevolence! All those other times ... his unreasoning panic, the askance remarks from Arnold, the humiliation ... the very thought of it now was gibing and obscene. How could he ever have been caught up in such a thrill of terror?

It wasn't terror he felt now. Something.... His smile turned to a giggle as he felt a sudden compelling impulse to pat ECAIAC on the head!

* * * * *

Now how would one do THAT? Never mind. Never mind, never mind, never again are you going to snap at me, Ekky. We were introduced, remember? We're really great friends now.

For a moment Beardsley was suspended in astonishment, aware that he had almost crooned the thought. He glanced around in embarrassment--

Pederson was watching him. Pederson was at his side again, perplexed and frowning. "Beardsley--this business of Sheila and Arnold. It wouldn't happen that way, it couldn't! There's another answer, there's got to be--"

Beardsley stood unmoving, oblivious. Almost, he seemed suspended in another dimension; almost, he caught the quivering of a mind but could not separate it from the sudden tremor that rose in his own....

He couldn't avoid it. It came unbidden, it battered through his reason, it towered there and blotted out his thoughts until all that was left was a tremulous regret, an attrite compassion.

About to lose her first case ... but one loses! And one survives it, you know, one survives it! For twelve years now....

* * * * *

More than a tremor now. More than compassion now. A sense of betrayal almost, illogical and nameless and yet palpable as the scent of fear. There was a pulse of red darkness in Beardsley's brain as all the mental and emotional equations of his being sang a sharp alarm. For subtly, ever so subtly ECAIAC's deep-throated tone had changed ... nothing like those other times, rather it was a halting stutter of puzzlement, erratic and querulous, with overtones of immediacy as if some formless presence were on the verge of unleashing.

Beardsley looked down at his hands, and they were trembling. He could not stop the trembling. A tightness took him about the heart, and behind his eyes that pulse of red darkness presaged the beginning of a violent headache.

Even the others noticed it now, something amiss. Jeff Arnold especially. He looked up in quick alarm at the equate-panel where the mathematics seemed to have gone a little fitful, a little frantic, with stuttery lapses in progression as if ECAIAC were unable or unwilling to confront.

The flux of pattern dimmed, then hesitated; blanked out and heroically began anew.

It happened suddenly, then. It happened as the techs came crowding around. There came a quivering, a sort of shudder, and ECAIAC subsided with a final weary gasp. It was for all the world as if she were saying, "This is it, boys. I've had it!"

But it was there, it was there! All at once every symbol was constant, static and livid upon the screen, enhanced by the words EQUATE--COMPLETE--EQUATE--COMPLETE. In that moment every tech in the room must have felt a touch of pride.

A click, a whirr, and it was done. The fateful tape ejected.

Both Mandleco and Arnold leaped for it, but Arnold was there first. He ripped the tape clear and then paused, hand outflung, as if he could not resist this final bit of drama.

"Well? Well, Arnold?" Mandleco was hopping ludicrously about in an agony of impatience.

Arnold nodded. He brought the tape to his scrutiny. His mouth opened, then shut again as a shudder seized him. Once more he read it, a look of wild disbelief on his face ... he staggered, and seemed about to cry or go hysterical or both.

Mandleco gave a snort as he pounced, recovered the tape and with blunt assurance read the words aloud:

He sounded like a well-grooved parrot. Mandleco turned east, then south, then south-by-east, like a compass on a binge; he looked as if he wanted to roar, but his voice came out as a frantic bleat: "Why, this is crazy! Goddam it,
it's crazy! Do you realize what this will--" He confronted Arnold wildly. "What the hell does it MEAN, I say! Untenable? And who the hell is Ellery Sherlock...!"

He got no response; Jeff Arnold was oblivious to the moment, a man utterly defeated, beyond solace or action or answer ... but already a few of his techs were huddled about the panel, consulting, viewing the Equate Constant and frantically taking notes. Mandeleco shoved his way through them. "I demand to know the meaning of this!" he yelped.

* * * * *

It was Sheila Carmack who answered, her voice on the high edge of hysteria. "Meaning? I think it might mean," she said, "that ECAIAC has also had a recent indulgence for the whodunits. But with a smattering of confusion, wouldn't you say? Or would you say a distortion of the detectival? Perhaps a disenchantment," she murmured ... this was too absurd, too delicious. "Ellery Sherlock!" she choked, and the thought of it seemed to break her up.

In the general hysteria they paid no heed to Raoul Beardsley. He had regained his composure, and far down in his eyes something leaped into rapt expression; he adjusted his glasses and peered around cautiously, beaming. He beamed at them all, and had to suppress an inane glee....

Not glee as he observed Pederson, who stood there scowling into space as though at some incredible absurdity. Suddenly Pederson straightened, and there was something strangely different ... his gaze as it met Beardsley's was neither shocked nor accusing but held an expression of boundless sadness.

So Pederson knew. At last the poor fellow had found that other answer.... Beardsley had been expecting it. He could almost sense the man's thoughts going to and fro, like a shuttle, weaving all the facts into fabric....

And Pederson's voice, ineffably sad now, regretful now: "So I was right the first time. The tapes. It was the tapes. But even without that I ought to have known! The answer was there, you handed it to us, but it was like looking straight into the sun--"

He paused. Did he expect Beardsley to say something? Beardsley looked up at him and blinked.

* * * * *

"Motives," Pederson said accusingly. "There was your theme from the first! You were relentless, you pursued it to perfection, you laid our motives bare and you beat them raw, each and every one. Oh, I grant you it was masterful! It was the Beardsley of old! You managed to keep us off balance every moment--" He wet his lips. "What was it, Beardsley? A compulsion, some grotesque need to squeeze us all down to microscopic size first? Oh, you enjoyed doing that! I watched you. You enjoyed it in a way that--" He shook his head, glanced sorrowfully at the equate-panel. "And this ... was it all for this? An achievement--an absurdity. Ellery Sherlock!" he said with a shudder. "In Heaven's name, WHY? You didn't really expect to carry it off? No, don't answer! It's not important now--"

Beardsley shrugged in remote annoyance. Must the man use such puerile methods?

"Not important," Pederson repeated, and stood caught in a startled wonderment. "Because you see, Beardsley, I just happen to remember something from the whodunits! That surprises you? So long ago, I can't quite recall who said it; but it was a rather good exposition of logic, something to the effect that when you've exhausted the possible, all the possible--that which remains--no matter how impossible it may seem--must be the truth!"

His head lifted; his gaze bored into Beardsley's and his voice was tight with meaning. "And I'd say we have come full circle, wouldn't you? You will have to admit, you did a real good job of eliminating!"

Beardsley managed to smile, even as his mind jarred a little. Even as he met Pederson's gaze and saw the compassion there, the acceptance there, the understanding and boundless regret. For a split second something leaped unspoken between them, as if doors in both their minds had opened and closed again.

He turned away wordlessly. Close as Pederson had come, even he was an irrelevance now. But ECAIAC didn't know. Poor Ekky! Her first real failure, a fiasco--she really deserved a better fate. Beardsley's heart went out to her, as he observed Arnold in his defeat and Mandleco in his frustration and the huddle of techs in their futile efforts.

Suddenly then--"Code!" he heard one of them say, gesturing excitedly. "Post-subjective synapse!" another tech yelled, and there was a sudden scurry of activity about the screen. Without warning or appreciable reason those symbols had begun to shift ... wild and elusive, ghost patterns without semblance or sense, but so unmistakable that even Jeff Arnold was jarred alert; Arnold stared, then suddenly was white as chalk as he ploughed into the midst of his techs.

Beardsley stood frozen, a fatuous smile about his lips; there was only silence now, a silence that had a pulse in it--the beating of his heart. Seconds only ... suddenly there was another pulse, from another heart. ECAIAC wasn't quite finished! Unerring and resolute the sound came up, slowly at first and then faster, gathering strength into a steady drone as if every synapse were dredging, dredging deep into the sensitized structure ... and even before the panel attained flux again, a tech was waving his notes and yelling, "It's true! Post-subjective synapse! Unbelievable
... Jeff, we now have a Constant!"

But ECAIAC was telling them that. The sound went on, and on, wild and lone and constant, ascending to the confines of the room, transcending the confines of reason. It was crescendo incarnate; it was purpose gone rife; it was human and more than human, with all the fears and hopes and hates, as it attained a high-pitched scream with wailing overtones such as even Arnold had never heard. There was sentience in it, there was awareness in it, there was fury in it and who could say if there was grief...? There might have been.

Only Beardsley knew. He felt suddenly packed in ice, from his lips to the pit of his belly; he revolved slowly away, took a few steps and caught the edge of the panel. His whole body began to shake uncontrollably and his lips moved in a soundless whisper that seemed to say, "No, no ... don't you understand? ... we're friends now!"

But no one heard; no one would have understood. Arnold handled the tape as it came looping out. The words fell slowly at first, then faster and faster in constant repeat: CANCEL LAST EQUATE--SOLUTION TENABLE--CANCEL LAST EQUATE--SOLUTION TENABLE--

Another word came, a single word. Arnold stiffened. One of the techs was so indiscreet as to exclaim: "Murderer? Where did it pick up that word! 'Final Equate' is proper...."

A space, a whirr, and the rest of it came in a clicking rush against the high-pitched scream: MURDERER--RAOUL BEARDSLEY--MURDERER--RAOUL BEARDSLEY--MURDERER--RAOUL--MURDERER--MURDERER--incessant, untiring.

There was no trial. Trial presupposes a modicum of doubt, and Beardsley dispelled that readily enough. Once more the pathetic figure, it was as if he were impelled by a dull and pitiless logic; he waived all defense; his confession to the murder of Amos Carmack was straightforward and factual, unvarying to the point of boredom, insistent with repetition--and in the socio-legal aspect there was the rub! Whether it was true psychic shock or mere cunning, there seemed to be a blind spot in Beardsley's responses, a stumbling reticence to elaborate detail that left the Citizen's Disposition Council with a problem on its hands baffling as it was unprecedented. Judicially they were safe. There would not even be need of null-censor. But actually, the problem here was of far more vital consequence than murder and indeed more frightening; it had to do with Beardsley vs. ECAIAC, the encompassing modus operandi and all the implications of that grotesque dénouement.

At whatever cost, these things had to be answered.

Oh, there was amusement, too. The fact that Minister-of-Justice Mandleco had begged off, far from gracefully, and retired to the isolation of his ten-thousand-acre Alaskan ranch (for an unspecified time) had brought snickers from those in the know.

The Chief-Counselor of Disposition looked as if he'd like to retire, too. For the third time in as many days he took his place in the Private Sessions chamber, glanced at Beardsley with shuddering disbelief and then bent his head in pontifical guise as he leafed through his notes; it wasn't as if he were unversed in the matter by now, but who was there to question if his lips moved fretfully across the words "Ellery Sherlock?" He was thinking: yesterday wasted--covert regression, myself included--no more of that! And with that bolstering thought he brought his head up sharply.

COUNSELOR: Our task for today--(voice quavering, he saved it from the upper registers). Our task for today is to get at the aggregate pattern. And I assure you, gentlemen, we are going to do that! Now. Mr. Pederson, if you please....

PEDERSON: Yes, sir?

COUNSELOR: I see that Mr. Beardsley made certain statements to you, and to you alone, immediately after the--uh--ECAIAC incident--

PEDERSON: You saw that three days ago! Must we go through it again?

COUNSELOR: We must and we shall! Due to the unnatural tenor of the case, it is the opinion of the Council that these things must be fixed and adjudged if we are to make a correct Disposition.

PEDERSON: (wearily): Yes, sir. Well, the fact is he seemed to want to confide in me. Nothing strange in that! He realized he had lost, poor guy, and he--

COUNSELOR: Mr. Pederson! No diversions, please. We'd simply like to hear from your own lips what Beardsley told you. (Glances at his notes.) Is it true that he said--his sole motive in this affair was to prove he could conduct an investigation as efficiently as ECAIAC--or any damned machine?

PEDERSON: (hesitant, with a glance at Beardsley who sat remote and vacuous): Yes. He told me that.

COUNSELOR: Even to the point of committing a murder to prove it? And his entire subsequent action was predicated upon that? We have extensive reports here--from Mrs. Carmack, from Mandleco, from Jeff Arnold and yourself. It is difficult to see how such a basically integrated and well-functioning personality as Raoul Beardsley--

PEDERSON: (angrily): No. What you fail to see is the facade! What man has stronger reason than the man
who has lost his reason? It is the only outlet for aggression, a devious fulfillment, it brings psychological satisfactions which cannot be obtained in any other way--call it the self-destructive impulse if you will. I doubt if Beardsley rationalized this--but he had come to his moment, his time of assertion, his way of making fools of us all ... and my complete opinion, sir, is that his actions from beginning to end were both a triumph and an inspiration!

COUNSELOR: (smugly): Thank you, Mr. Pederson. These are the insights you had not revealed before. (Turns to member at far end of table.) Dr. Deobler. As psychologist assigned to Disposition Council, may I ask if there is an area of concurrence?

DEOBLER (bored, but deigns to lift a hand): Save for the rhetorics at the very end, you have my official concurrence; it is obvious in every aspect; this was a devious fulfillment of the self-destructive impulse.

COUNSELOR: Thank you, sir! It will be so noted. And now--(Makes a pretense of scanning his brief.) Now we come to an area of vital interest--an area demanding our most urgent attention, inasmuch as it gives indication of threatening our basic fundamental of cybernetic detection; believe me, I cannot place enough emphasis here; I refer, of course, to Mr. Beardsley's process of manipulation of ECAIAC, and this strange business of "Ellery Sherlock." (Pause.) Mr. Jeff Arnold, if you please. I believe you were to be ready with some observations today?

ARNOLD: Yes, sir. But more than observation, I am glad to report. We have solved the "Ellery Sherlock" equate.

COUNSELOR: This is wonderful! Will you proceed, sir?

ARNOLD: A strange thing ... and yet so simple! We began by resurrecting a huge number of "Summaries"; we dredged into Dead File for at least three years back, re-ran them under a synapse intensifier. It's all there, you know, every minute particle of every case that has gone through ECAIAC; almost subliminal, some of it, but--

COUNSELOR: One moment, sir. This reference to "synapse." Could you--ah--clarify?

ARNOLD: Why, a synapse is the primary adjunct to memory! The human brain has billions of them, neuronically linked--sort of pathways that get grooved deeper and deeper with constant repetition of thought, until after a while they become completely permanent, retentive and self-functioning. ECAIAC is similarly equipped--not to the degree of the human brain, as yet, but amazingly.

COUNSELOR (dazed): Ah--yes. Please continue, sir.

ARNOLD: As I said, we revived a number of the old cases. And what we discovered, was that Beardsley--for years past, mind you--had been utilizing his capacity as Chief of Coordinates to introduce extraneous material to ECAIAC via the tapes! In each and every case that came before him! Oh, you can believe me, he was clever, he went about it by slow and subtle degrees! And the substance of this material, sir--(Pauses, gulps and shakes his head, unable to go on.)

COUNSELOR: Please control yourself, sir! The substance of this extraneous material?

ARNOLD (again gulps): De-detective fiction!

COUNSELOR (leans forward sharply): Do I understand you correctly, Mr. Arnold? You did say detective fiction?

ARNOLD: Of two types. Ellery Queen and Sherlock Holmes--I presume it was Beardsley's random choice. But there was nothing random about his purpose! Don't you see, don't you see, it all fits! It explains the trouble we were having in recent months in getting total synaptic clearance! (His voice borders on the frantic.) I remember, now, I even mentioned this to Beardsley--and oh, the smug way he took it. He knew, damn him, he knew! He was getting there, he was reaching the synaptic, a bit of fiction here and a bit there, ECAIAC was being conditioned, unable to distinguish the real from the unreal--

COUNSELOR: Mr. Arnold! If you please, sir! (Waits for Arnold to subside.) I can appreciate how this discovery distresses you, both--ah--personally and in your official capacity, but be assured that your findings will be of inestimable value to future security. In fact (smiles slightly) Council has not been idle in its own pursuit of Mr. Beardsley's vagaries! (Rises, removes a small screen to reveal a towering pile of tomes.) And now, Mr. Beardsley. I must really ask you to cooperate; I believe you fully capable. Are these your books?

BEARDSLEY (adjusts his glasses, smiles at his books): Yes.

COUNSELOR: And these charts, these graphs that we found plastered to every wall of your home. Obviously they are also yours.

BEARDSLEY (adjusts his glasses, smiles at his graphs): Yes.

COUNSELOR: Thank you, Mr. Beardsley. That's fine. And, Mr. Beardsley, what did you use them for? These books, these graphs?

BEARDSLEY (groping, bewildered): I--I--

COUNSELOR (sees the futility of it): Gentlemen, I believe we can proceed on the grounds of self-evidence. Let me read you a few titles from these books. "The Cybernetic Principle: Advanced Theory" ... "The Synapse in Function" ... and here we have "Synaptics: Pattern and Flux." There are more, many more in similar vein. (Turns
abruptly.) Mr. Arnold. I'm sure you are familiar with most of these volumes. On the basis of the content, would you say that you could duplicate Beardsley's feat?

ARNOLD (aghast): No! I would not presume to say that, sir.

COUNSELOR (frowns; it was not the answer he wanted): Very well, then. Dr. Trstensky ... would you come forward, please? Dr. Trstensky ... you are head of the Department of Advanced Cybernetics at Cal Tech. You have had opportunity to study these graphs and charts in minutest detail--

TRSTENSKY: Oh, yes-s. Fascinating!

COUNSELOR: I put the question: would it be possible for you to duplicate the grotesque feat that Beardsley performed on ECAIAC?

TRSTENSKY: Yes-s, possibly. No, I will say definitely. You mean, of course, cold, from the beginning? Yes-s ... but it would take me approximately three-to-four years.

COUNSELOR: Yes, Mr. Beardsley? What is it? You would like to make a pertinent statement?

BEARDSLEY (abashed): Oh. It--I only wanted to say it took me longer. Four-to-five years.

COUNSELOR (wearily--just waits for laughter to subside): Gentlemen, I think we may safely wrap it up now. Our function here is Disposition. Our choice is two-fold. One: the subject is sane, in which case he will pay the supreme penalty for murder which he has freely admitted. Or two: he is obviously insane, in which case he will be subjected to Psychic Probe as provided by law, thus restoring a measure of normalcy sufficient to place him again in society--restricted, of course--

DR. DOEBLER: Sir, one moment, if you please! I simply do not understand your language, and even less can I condone your haste! Safely wrap it up, you said. What do you mean by that? Safe for whom? And "obviously" insane--was that a slip of the tongue, sir, or are you trying to force an issue here?

COUNSELOR (coldly): I must remind you that we already have competent reports on subject's status. Add to that the facts presented here; they are overwhelming; the man's own admission and attitude are substantiation. It is my considered opinion, and I'm sure the opinion of Council, that the man is insane. Subjection to Psychic Probe will restore him to--

DOEBLER: Oh, yes, the Psychic Probe. I have no quarrel there. But suppose you were wrong? Have you ever considered the effects of Probe on the sane mind? Have you ever seen it? Once I saw it, only once. It is worse than disaster--it is horrible--it results in a sort of psychic tearing that heals and then tears and then heals in continuous perpetuation. It--is indescribable. It is sub-human. Compared to that, death or even insanity is a blessed relief. Now, gentlemen, listen! I implore you not to be in error! True, it was my opinion that Beardsley acted in fulfillment of the self-destructive impulse, but the man is sane--sane, I tell you, and entitled to a humanitarian death! My professional judgment--

COUNSELOR (again coldly, glancing around): Is welcome, but does not bear final weight, sir.

* * * * *

Silence closed down like a pall. Doebler's plea by its very impassioned nature had gotten through. It was a moment of embarrassment and indecision in which each man weighed his conscience, and found it wanting ... in which every member of Council looked to his neighbor for solution or solace, and finding neither, turned back to himself, aghast.

Only one person looked to the true source and saw the solution as it would be, as it had to be. Pederson. Heartstuck with the knowing, he observed Raoul Beardsley and remembered! This funny little man ... this ridiculous man ... this proud man who had seized his fate and shoved it through because he had to be done, because he obeyed the dictates, because he had reached his Time of Assertion. Oh, Pederson remembered! And most of all he remembered Beardsley there at the last, in that final moment when ECAIAC had reached the wailing heights of sentience and grief ... and how could he ever forget Beardsley's soundless whisper that seemed to say, "No, no ... don't you understand? ... we're friends now!"

Pederson remembered. He remembered, and looking up saw that Council had reached equitable agreement, and his heart was sick and his soul was sick as he realized this was final, there could be no appeal. For the last time he looked upon Beardsley's face and saw that the man was fully cognizant.... Beardsley also knew.... Doebler had been right. Pederson turned his face away.

COUNSELOR: Now we are agreed, gentlemen? (waits for general approval.) Be it pronounced, then. Inasmuch as there exists a general area of doubt as to Disposition; and inasmuch as it is agreed that further deliberation would be prolonged and pointless; and inasmuch as our faith in the ultimate function of ECAIAC remains inestimable, despite recent vagaries which shall never occur again: be it therefore resolved, that the problem pending shall be taped in all its detail and submitted to ECAIAC for Final Disposition.

THE END
CHARLEY de MILO
By Laurence Mark Janifer

It isn't at all obvious--at first thought--that having two perfectly good, usable arms could be a real handicap to a man....

"To be, or not to be--that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms ..." Hamlet, Act III, Scene I

The rocket was on the way up, but Professor Lightning didn't seem to care. Outside the cooktent Wrout flapped his arms and, on that signal, Seaman started up the big electric band, whooping it up with John Philip Sousa for openers, while all over the midway the lights snapped on, big whites and yellows, reds, greens, purples and dusky violets framing, in a titillating dimness, the front flap of the girle tent. The outside talkers were busy outside the spectacle tents like Wicks' Hell Drivers, Biggest Auto Show in Fifty States--outside the grind shows, the eats, the rides: "Here and now, for the fourth part of one single dollar bill, the most amazing ..." "... Terrifying and strange beings from the farthest reaches of the Earth who will exhibit ..." "... Dances learned at the Court of the Sultan, Ay-rab dances right here, right on the inside, for only--"

And the crowd, filing in, laughed and chattered and shrieked on swooping rides, the Great Crane, the Space Race, the Merry-Go-Round and the Horses, threw down money to win a kewpie doll, a Hawaiian lei, a real life-size imitation scale model of Luna in three real dimensions ... living it up on the first show, while the rocket climbed on and out, and bubbled excitement in the blood.

The rocket was up: the carnival was open. But Professor Lightning didn't seem to care. He sat in the cooktent with his eyes hooded and hidden under the unshaded glow of a hundred-and-fifty-watt Forever bulb, while Charley de Milo fidgeted his feet, and listened, and tried to cut the old man off.

"Look, professor," he said nervously, "why don't we talk about it later? Table it, till after the show?" He scratched the side of his head with his left foot. "I got to go on in a couple of minutes," he said. "I can hear the talker going now. I got to--"

"Forget the show," Professor Lightning said. His voice was flatter and harsher, and his face more tense, than Charley ever remembered seeing it. "The show isn't important."

Charley blinked, trying to understand. "But, Professor--"

"Listen to me," Professor Lightning said. "The world is at the beginning of a new cultural revolution. Since the Cold War melted, and freedom of inquiry and research began to live again on both sides of the old Iron Curtain, science has begun a new Renaissance. The cultural interflow has--"

"Please, professor," Charley said miserably, rubbing his toes together. "There isn't much time before I got to go on. And you ought to be inside the Science tent, too, because any minute--"

"If I am not in the tent," Professor Lightning said calmly, "I will not appear in the show. It does not matter."

"But they'll fire you," Charley said. He grabbed for a cigarette with his right foot and got it into his mouth. Striking a match with his left foot, he lit the cigarette and blew out a long, ragged plume of smoke. "If you're not there on time," he said in strained tones, "they'll fire you. And what about me?"

Professor Lightning gestured with both big hands. It was the same movement he used every night, when he showed the crowd there were no wires or batteries secreted on his person. Charley half-expected him to grab hold of a couple of light bulbs and show them glowing in his fists. But the gesture was meant, this time, as an aid to relaxation. "Don't worry," Professor Lightning said, in a grating sort of caricature of a soothing tone. "If they fire me ... well, then, they save me the trouble of quitting. And as for you, my boy, a carnival job should be the furthest thing from your thoughts."

"Well, it isn't," Charley said sourly. "And if you'll excuse me, professor, I care how I get the money to eat, even if you don't. I got a good job--"

"You won't need your job," Professor Lightning said, "if you'll listen to me."

Charley made up his mind. Much as he hated to be impolite, there were some things more important than social forms, he decided. He stood up. "After the show, professor," he said with firmness, and went out of the cooktent, heading at a rapid dogtrot for the big tent at the other side of the midway. As he reached it he could see Dave Lungs, the outside talker, climb up on the front platform to begin his spiel.

"Marvels of the world!" Dave announced without preliminary. "Wonders of the natural universe! Surprises and startling sights for every member of the family!" By the time he had got that far, a crowd was beginning to collect in
front of the platform. "For the fourth part of a single dollar bill--" Dave went on, but Charley didn't have the time to
listen; he was in the bally.

He lifted the backflap of the tent with one foot, and wriggled inside.

As he made his way to the cluster of people near the front flap, past the booths and stands, he felt an enormous
sense of relief. He had made it--with all of fifty seconds to spare.

Ned and Ed stood next to him. "Where you been?" Ed said in a nasal whisper.

"I got held up," Charley explained. "Professor Lightning, he was talking to me, and--"

"Later," Ned said. His voice was lower and throatier than Ed's; it was the only way Charley could tell them
apart, but then he thought, nobody ever had to tell them apart. They were, like all Siamese twins, always together.
"We're going on," Ned said, and he and his twin moved forward.

Charley moved into place behind them, and came out blinking in the glare of the front platform.

"Siamese twins," Dave was shouting. "A contemporary marvel of science, ladies and gentlemen--and here we
have ..."

Charley stepped forward as Ned and Ed stepped back into the shadows again.

"... Charley de Milo! Ladies and gentlemen, the world-wide fame of this brave and talented boy is stupendous!
His feats of skill will amaze you! Watch him thread a needle! Watch him comb his hair! And all for one thin quarter,
ladies and gentlemen, only the fourth part--"

The electronic band choked on Sousa, coughed and began again with Kabalevsky. Charley watched the
audience below, staring up at him, hundreds of faces. He heard their gasp as he flexed his shoulders and turned. He
grimmed down, taking a second longer than usual, and then stepped back, still grinning.

"Charley de Milo, the Armless Wonder!" Dave said. "And many more sights inside, ladies and gentlemen,
sights to amaze you, sights to chill your very blood, sights ..."

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One-thirty, and the last show over. The rocket had come down for the night; all over the midway lights were
blinking off and silence was creeping, like a stain, over the ground. Professor Lightning was sitting on his bunk, in
the small tent he shared with Erma the Fish Girl. Erma was out drinking with Dave Lungs and some of the others,
and only the professor and Charley de Milo were in the room. Charley was sitting on Erma's bunk, looking resigned.

"Well, if you still want to talk to me," he said, "now's your chance. O.K."

"I certainly want to talk to you," Professor Lightning said firmly. "I want to tell you of the most important
moment of your life."

Charley tried to think of something to say to this, but there wasn't anything. He shifted on the bunk, scratched at
his nose with his left foot, and grinned spasmodically. "Sure," he said at random. "And, by the way, I'm sorry about
before, professor. But the show was going on, and--"

"The show," Professor Lightning said, in tones of the utmost contempt. "Forget about the show--now, and
tomorrow, and forever."

"But--"

"No words," Professor Lightning said, raising a hand delicately. "Please. Allow me to tell you of my
invention."

Charley sighed and lay back on the bed. "Invention, professor?" he said. "You mean sort of a machine?"

For some reason, Professor Lightning looked irritated. "It's not a machine," he said flatly. Then he sighed and
his tone changed. "Charley, my boy," he said, "do you remember what I was telling you before? About how the
world has entered a new Age of Science? How new inventions, new discoveries, are coming along every day?"

"Well, sure," Charley said. "The papers talk about it every once in a while. You know, I see the papers, or the
Chicago American, anyhow. My mother sends it to me. She likes the columns."

"Why," Professor Lightning went on, as if he hadn't been listening at all, "right here in Wrout's Carnival Shows,
we have things that just didn't exist ten or fifteen years ago. The electronic band. The Forever bulb."

"That's right," Charley put in. "And look at Joe Wicks. Why, he can do tricks with all those new things they got
on cars, tricks nobody ever did before or even thought about in the old days."

"And more fundamental discoveries," the professor said. "Chadwick's Law of Dimensionality, Dvedkin and the
Ontological Mean ... oh, I keep up with the literature. No matter what's happened to me, I keep up with the
literature."

Charley sighed, very softly so as not to injure the professor's feelings. But he did hope the old man wasn't going
to start on all those stories about his lost career again. Charley knew--everybody in the Wrout show did--that
Professor Lightning had been a real professor once, at some college or other. Biology, or Biological Physics, or
something else--he'd taught classes about it, and done research. And then there had been something about a girl, a
student the professor had got himself involved with. Though it was pretty hard to imagine the professor, white-
haired and thin the way he was now, chasing after a girl.

He'd been fired, or something, and he'd drifted for a while and then got himself an act and come with a Carnival. Charley knew the whole story. He didn't want to hear it again.

But the professor said: "I'm as good as I ever was--better than I ever was, my boy. I've been keeping up, doing experiments. I've been quiet about it."

Everybody, Charley thought, knew about Professor Lightning and his experiments. If they kept the old man happy, kept him contented and doing shows, why not? After all, the old guy didn't drink or anything really serious; if he wanted to play around with test tubes and even Bunsen burners, people figured, why, let him.

But Professor Lightning thought nobody knew. Well, he had been a real professor once, which is to say a square. Some people never really adjusted to carny life--where everybody knows everything.

Charley figured maybe it was better to act surprised. "Really?" he said. "Experiments?"

Professor Lightning looked pleased, which satisfied Charley. "I've been on the track of something big," he said. He seemed to be talking more to himself than to Charley. "Something new," he said. "And at last ... at last, my boy, I've found it. I'll be famous, Charley, famous--and so will you!"

"That's nice," Charley said politely. Then he blinked. "But what do you mean," he added, "me?"

"I want you to help me," the professor said. He leaned forward, and in the dim light of the tent's single lamp, his eyes glittered. "I want you to come with me."

"Come with you?" Charley said, and swallowed hard. He'd never thought, the way some did, that the old man was crazy. But it did look as if he'd slipped a couple of cogs for sure and for real. "Where?" Charley said.


Charley shifted a little in the bed. "Look, professor," he said, "I've got a job, right here in the carny. I couldn't leave here. So suppose we just--"

"Your job?" the professor said. "Your job's gone, my boy. Wait. Let me tell you what I've discovered. Let me tell you what has happened--happened to you, my boy. To you, and to me."

Charley sat upright, slowly. "Well," he said, "all right, professor."

Professor Lightning beamed, and his eyes glittered brighter and brighter. "Limb regeneration," he said, and his voice was as soft and quiet as if he'd been talking about the most beautiful woman in the world. "Limb regeneration."

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Charley waited a long minute before he admitted to himself that he didn't have the faintest idea what the professor was talking about. "What?" he said at last.

Professor Lightning shook his head slightly. "Charley," he said softly, "you're an Armless Wonder. That's right, isn't it?"

"Sure it is, professor," Charley said. "You know that. I was born that way. Made a pretty good thing out of it, too."

"Well," Professor Lightning said, "you don't have to be one. Can you realize that?"

Charley nodded slowly. "Sure I don't," he said. "Only it's pretty good money, you know? And there's no sense in sitting around back home and feeling sorry for myself, is there? I mean, this way I can make money and have a job and--"

"No," Professor Lightning said emphatically.

Charley blinked. "No?" he said.

Professor Lightning shook his head, meaningfully. "Charley, my boy," he said, "I don't mean that you should go home and mope. But think about this: suppose you had your arms? Suppose you had two arms, just like everybody else."

"Why think about anything like that?" Charley said. "I mean, I am what I am. That's the way things are. Right?"

"Wrong," Professor Lightning said. "I can give you arms, Charley. I can make you normal. Just like everybody else."

"Well," Charley said. After a few seconds he said: "Gee." Then he said: "You're kidding me, professor."

"I'm perfectly serious," Professor Lightning said.

"But--"

"Let me show you," Professor Lightning said. He stood up and went to the flap of the tent. "Come with me," he said, and Charley got up, dumbly, and followed him out into the cool darkness outside.

Later, Charley couldn't remember all that Professor Lightning had showed him or told him. There were some strange-looking animals called salamanders; Professor Lightning had cut their tails off and they'd grown new tails. That, he said, happened in nature. But he had gone a step farther. He had isolated the particular factor that made
such regrowth possible.

Charley remembered something about a molecular lattice, but it didn't make any sense to him, and was only a puzzle. But the professor told him all about the technique, in a very earnest and scientific voice that was convincing to listen to, and showed him mice that he'd cut the tails off of, and the mice had brand-new tails, and even feet in one or two cases. There were a whole lot of small animals in cages, all together in back of the professor's tent, and Charley looked at all of them. The professor had a flashlight, and everything was very clear and bright.

When the demonstration was over, Charley had no doubts at all. It was obvious to him that the professor could do just what he said he could do: grow limbs on things. Charley scratched his head with his left foot, nervously.

"That's why I came to you," the professor said. "I need a human being--just to show the scientific world that my technique works on human beings. And I've worked with you for a number of years now, Charley."

"Five," Charley said. "Five since you came with Wrout."

"I like you," the professor said. "I want to make you the first, the very first, person to be helped by my technique."

Charley shifted his feet. "You mean you want to give me arms," he said.

"That's right," the professor said.

"No," Charley said.

Professor Lightning nodded. "Now, then," he said. "We'll get right to work on ... Charley, my boy, what did you say?"

Charley licked his lips. "I said no," he said.

Professor Lightning waited a long minute. "You mean you don't believe me," he said at last. "You think I'm some sort of a crackpot."

"Not at all," Charley said politely. "I guess if you say you can do this ... well, I see all the animals, and everything, and I guess you can do it. That's O.K."

"But you're doubtful," Professor Lightning said.

Charley shook his head. "No," he said. "You can do it, all right. I guess I'm sure of that, professor."

"Then," the professor said, in a tenser voice, "you think it might be dangerous. You think you might be hurt, or that things might not work out right, or--"

"Gee," Charley said, "I never thought of anything like that, professor. I know you wouldn't want to hurt me."

"I certainly wouldn't," Professor Lightning said. "I want to help you. I want to make you normal. Like everybody else."

"Sure," Charley said uncomfortably.

"Then you'll do it," Professor Lightning said. "I knew you would, Charley. It's a great opportunity. And I offered it to you because you--"

"Gee, I know," Charley said, feeling more uncomfortable than ever. "And don't think I don't appreciate it. But look at it my way, professor." He paused. "Suppose I had two arms--just like everybody else, the way you tell me. What would happen to me?"

"Happen?" Professor Lightning blinked. "Why, Charley ... why, you could do anything you liked. Anything. You'd have the same opportunities as anybody else. You could be ... well, my boy, you could be anything."

"Could I?" Charley said. "Excuse me for talking about this, professor, but I've had a lot of time to think about it. And it's all sort of new to you. I mean, you weren't born the way I was, and so you just don't understand it."

Professor Lightning said: "But, my boy--"

"No," Charley said. "Let me explain this. Because it's important." He cleared his throat, sat down on the ground and fumbled for a cigarette. He found one in his shirt pocket, carried it to his lips with his right foot, and lit a match with his left. When he was smoking easily, he went on.

"Professor, do you know how old I am?" he said. "I'm forty-two years old. Maybe I don't look it, but that's how old I am. Now, I've spent all my life learning to do one thing, and I do a pretty good job of it. Anyhow, good enough to get me a spot with Wrout's show, and probably with anybody else I wanted to work for."

"But your arms--?" the professor said.

"That's what I mean," Charley said. "I don't have any arms. I never had any. Maybe I miss 'em, a little--but everything I do is based on the fact that I don't have 'em. Now, professor, do you know what I am?"

Professor Lightning frowned. "What you are?" he said.

"I'm an Armless Wonder," Charley said. "That's a pretty good thing to be. In a carny, they look up to an Armless Wonder--he's a freak, a born freak, and that's as high as you can go, in a carny. I get a good salary--I send enough to my mother and my sister, in Chicago, for them to live on. And I have what I need myself. I've got a job, professor, and standing, and respect." He paused. "Now, suppose I had arms. I'd have to start from scratch, all over
again. I'd have to start from the bottom up, just learning the basic elements of any job I signed on for. I'd be a forty-
two-year-old man doing the work of an eighteen-year-old. And not making much money. And not having much
standing, or respect."

Charley took the cigarette out of his mouth with his right foot, held it for a second and put it back.

"I'd be normal," he said. "I'd be just like everybody else, professor. And what do I want anything like that for?"

* * * * *

Professor Lightning tried everything, but it wasn't any good. "Fame," he said, and Charley pointed out, calmly
and reasonably, that the kind of fame he'd get from being an experimental subject was just like being a freak, all
over again--except that it would wear off, and then, he asked, where would he be? Professor Lightning talked about
Man's Duty to Science, and Charley countered with Science's Duty to Man. Professor Lightning tried friendship,
and argument, and even force--but nothing worked. Incredible as it seemed to the professor, Charley was content to
remain a freak, an Armless Wonder. More, he seemed to be proud and happy about it.

It was too bad that the professor didn't think of the one argument that might have worked. In the long run, it
wouldn't have made any difference, perhaps--but it would have cleared matters up, right there and then. Because the
one workable argument had a good chance of succeeding.

But, then, Professor Lightning really didn't understand carny. He never thought of the one good argument, and
after a while he gave up, and went away.

Of course, that was several days later. Professor Lightning told Charley that he was leaving for New York, and
Charley said: "What? In the middle of the season?" Then he told Wrout, and Wrout screamed and ranted and swore
that Professor Lightning would never work in carny again. "I'll have you blacklisted!" he roared.

And Professor Lightning shrugged and smiled and went away to pack. He took all his notebooks, and all the
cages with little animals in them, and he didn't seem at all disturbed. "I'll find another subject," he told Charley,
when he left. "When they find out what I've got, in New York, they'll provide me with subjects by the hundred. I did
want to help you ..."

"Thanks," Charley said honestly.

"... But that's the way things are, I suppose," Professor Lightning said. "Maybe some day you'll realize."

Charley shook his head. "I'm afraid not, professor," he said, and Professor Lightning shook Charley's foot, and
left, and Charley went back to work in the freak show, and for a while he didn't even think about Professor
Lightning. Then, of course, the news began to show up in the Chicago American, which Charley got two or three
days late because his mother sent it to him by mail.

At first Charley didn't realize that Dr. Edmund Charles Schinsake was Professor Lightning, but then the
American ran his picture; that was the day Professor Lightning was awarded a medal by the AMA, and Charley felt
pleased and happy for the old man. It looked as it he'd got what he wanted.

Charley, of course, didn't think much about the professor's "limb regeneration"; he didn't need it, he thought,
and he didn't want it, and that was that.

And then, one night, he was dropped from the bally, and he asked Dave Lungs about it, and Dave said: "Well,
we want the biggest draw we can get, out there before the show," and put Erma, the Fish Girl, out in his place. And
Charley started to wonder about that, and after a few days had gone by he found himself talking about it, to Ed
Baylis, over in the cooktent while they were having lunch.

Baylis was a little man of sixty or so, with a wrinkled face like a walnut and a powerful set of lungs; he was
Wrout's outside talker for the girlie show. "Because I'm old," he said, grinning. "I don't have trouble with the girls.
And if I got to take one off the bally or out of the show there's no personal stuff that would make it tough, see what I
mean?"

"That's what I'm worried about," Charley said.

"What?" Ed asked. He speared a group of string beans with his fork and conveyed them to his mouth. Charley,
using his right foot, did the same.

"The bally," Charley said. "The way things are, Dave took me off, and I'm worrying about it."

"Maybe some kind of a change," Ed said.

Charley shook his head. "He said ... he said he wanted the biggest draw out there. Now, you know I'm a big
draw, Ed. I always have been."

"Sure," Ed said. He chewed another mouthful and swallowed. "Still, people want a change now and then.
 Doesn't have to mean anything."

"Maybe not," Charley said uncomfortably. But he wasn't convinced.

* * * * *

The season drew to a close, and Charley went off to the Florida Keys, where he spent a month living with some
friends before holing up with his mother and sister for the winter. He was offered a job in New York, at a year-round
flea museum in Times Square, but after some thought he decided against it. He'd never had to work winters, and he wasn't going to start.

After all, he was still doing well, wasn't he? He told himself emphatically that he was. He was an Armless Wonder, a born freak, the top of the carny ladder, with a good job wherever he cared to look for one.

He had to tell himself that quite a few times before he began to believe it.

Spring came, and then summer, and Charley kissed his mother and his sister good-by and joined Wrout's Carnival Shows in Summit, Idaho, three days before their opening. He didn't notice much change from previous years, but it took an effort not to notice some things.

Not like the new man who'd taken Professor Lightning's place--a tall thin youngster who had an Electric Chair act. Or like the periodic quarrels between Ned and Ed; it seemed they'd met a girl over the winter season, and disagreed about her. Ed thought she was perfectly wonderful; Ned couldn't see her for beans.

No, things like that were a part of carny; you got used to them, as the show rolled along year after year, and paid no more attention to them than a housewife pays to rather uninteresting back-fence gossip.

It was something else that had changed, something important.

His contract, for instance. It was made out for the same pay as he'd been getting, but the option periods were shortened up; suddenly, Charley was living from season to season, with almost no assurance of continuous, steady work. Old man Wrout had looked a little less than happy when he'd given Charley the contract; he'd almost seemed ashamed, and he hadn't really looked Charley in the eye once. But when Charley asked what was wrong, he got no answer.

Or none that meant anything. "It's just the way things are," Wrout muttered. "Don't make no difference, kid."

But it did make a difference. Charley wasn't out in the bally any more, either; he was backstage among the second-rate acts, the tattooed man and the fire-eater and the rest, while Erma and Ned and Ed and the top-liners took their bows out before the crowd, pulling them in, and got the gasps and the applause.

The crowds in front of his own platform, inside during the show, were smaller, too. At first Charley thought that was due to the bally itself, but as the season began and wore on, the crowds continued to shrink beyond all expectation. Counting as he worked, combing his hair with one foot, drawing little sketches for the customers ("Take one home for only one extra dime, a treasured souvenir especially personalized for you by Charley de Milo")--counting the house, he discovered one evening that he was the smallest draw in the tent. The tattooed man did better than Charley de Milo, which was enough of a disgrace; the rest were so far ahead that Charley didn't even want to think about it.

His first idea was that somebody was out to get him. He could feel the muscles of his shoulders and back bunching up when he tried thinking what to do about the sabotage that had struck him; but an Armless Wonder has one very real disadvantage. He can comb his own hair and brush his own teeth; he can feed himself and--with proper clothing--dress himself; he can open doors and shut windows and turn the pages of books. But he can't engage in a free-for-all fight, not without long and careful training in that style of battle known as savate, or boxing with the feet. Charley had never learned savate; he had never needed it.

For the first time since he could remember, he felt helpless. He wasn't normal; he couldn't do what any normal man could do. He wanted to find the man who was sabotaging his show, and beat him into a confession, and throw him off the lot--

And he couldn't.

The muscles of his back pulled and pulled at him. He clenched his jaw. Then Dave Lungs came over to his platform and he forced himself to relax, sweating. There were four or five people behind Dave, ordinary marks with soft, soft faces and round eyes. While Dave talked Charley went through his act; perhaps ten other marks were scattered in the tent, standing at other platforms, watching other acts even without Dave there to guide them and talk them up.

And when he was through Dave sold exactly one of the sketches Charley had done. One. An old man bought it, a chubby little Santa Claus of a man with eyes that twinkled and a belly that undoubtedly shook like a jelly bowl when it was freed from its expensive orlon confines. Dave went off to the next platform, where Erma stood, and the marks followed him, and more drifted over. Erma had ten customers, Charley noticed, and he grabbed a handkerchief from the platform floor and wiped his damp face with one foot.

Something's wrong, he thought stupidly, and he must have said it aloud because, at his feet, a high, thin old voice said: "What was that, son? Did you say something?"

"Nothing at all," Charley mumbled, and looked down. The Santa Claus man was staring up at him. "Show's over," Charley said, more curtly than he meant. He took a deep breath and set his feet more firmly on the platform, but it didn't do any good. He was like a coiled spring, waiting for release.
"I don't expect any show," Santa Claus said. "Really I don't. But I did want to talk to you for a few minutes, if you don't mind."

"I'm not in a talking mood," Charley said. "Sorry." He was ashamed of the words as soon as he brought them out; that was no way to treat any stranger, not even a mark. But it was a long second before he could say anything else. Santa Claus stood watching him patiently, holding Charley's sketch by one corner in his left hand.

"I'm sorry," Charley said at last. "It ... must be the heat. I'm kind of on edge."


There was a little silence. Dave and the crowd trailed away from Erma and headed for Senor Alcala, the fire-eater at the end of the row. Charley barely heard Dave's spiel; he licked his lips and said: "You wanted to talk to me."

"Now," Santa Claus said, "I don't want you to be ashamed of anything. There's nothing personal in this, really there isn't. But I do want to help if I can, help anyone who needs help."

"I don't need help," Charley said. "I'm sorry." He tried to keep his voice gentle. The old man obviously meant well; there was no sense in hurting him.

"It's your ... infirmity," Santa Claus said. "Boy, have they been keeping the news from you?"

"News?" Charley said, with a sudden sick feeling.

"In New York," Santa Claus said. "There's a doctor there--a man who can help people like you. He has a new technique. I was reading in the papers just the other day--there was a man injured in a railroad accident, who lost one arm and one leg. This doctor used him as his first subject."

"He said he'd find another one," Charley put in without thinking.

"Another?"

"It doesn't matter," Charley said. "You were going to suggest that I go and see this doctor. Is that right?"

"Well," Santa Claus said, seeming oddly embarrassed, "it can't hurt, you know. And it might help. Really it might. And then ... then you might not have to ... have to be the way you are, and do what you do."

Charley took a long breath. "I'll think about it," he said, in the very politest tone he could manage.

"I only want to help," Santa Claus said.

"I'm sure you do," Charley said. "And thanks."

"If there's anything I can do--"

Charley smiled down. "That's all right," he said. "Thanks. But I guess you'd better join the rest--if you want to see the show at all."

Santa Claus said: "Oh. Of course." He turned and found the group just leaving Senor Alcala's platform, and scurried off to catch up with them. Charley stared at his retreating back, fighting to stay calm.

That was the way marks were, of course, and there wasn't anything to be done about it. It was always "the way you have to be," and "the things you have to do." It never seemed to enter their heads that pity was unnecessary baggage where a born freak was concerned, any more than it had entered Professor Lightning's head. A born freak, Charley reflected, had a pretty good life of it, all told; why, even marriage wasn't out of the question. Charley knew of some very happy ones.

But the marks pitied you, Charley thought. And maybe it wasn't especially smart to tell them anything different; pity, as much as anything else, keep them coming. Pity, and a kind of vicarious victory. When Charley threaded a needle, he was telling all the marks: "It doesn't matter what kind of accident happens to you--you can overcome it. You can go on and do anything. It's all what you make it--everything, every bad turn life hands you can be made into something better. If I can do it, you can do it."

That was what the marks felt, Charley thought. It was wrong-headed, it was stupid, and it could be a simple nuisance--but it brought in the dough. Why argue with it? Why try to change it?

Charley nearly grinned. The crowd of marks moved on down the other side of the tent, and Charley watched them. Ned and Ed drew the biggest crowd, an attentive, almost rapt crew who could be suckered into buying anything the Siamese twins wanted to sell them. Dave milked them for all they were worth, and Charley nodded quietly to himself. Dave was a good carny man.

He worked for the good of the show. Or--did he?

Dave had taken him off the bally. Did Dave have some reason to hate him? Could Dave be out to get him?

Charley couldn't think why, but it was a lead, the only one he had. And if Dave did turn out to be behind everything that was happening, Charley knew exactly what he was going to do.

He couldn't beat Dave himself.

But he had friends--

* * * * *

After the show, that night, Charley went hunting for Ed Baylis. Ed had been around Wrout's a long time, and if
anything were going on Ed would know about it. Charley went down to the girlie tent, and found Ed just clearing up. All over the midway, the lights were going out, and the Mars Race game gave one final roar and came to a halt. The last customers were leaving.

Ed looked up when he came over. Charley didn't ease into the subject; he couldn't. "Something's wrong," he said at once. "I'm off the bally, and the crowds are going down. I don't like it, Ed."

Baylis shrugged. "Who would?" he said.

"But--something's wrong," Charley said. "Ed, you know what's happening. You get the word. Let me in on it."

"I don't know anything about this," Ed said at once. But his face was still, his eyes shuttered in the darkness.

Charley kept after him. They went behind the girlie tent, talking softly. Overhead a rocket burned by, but neither man looked up.

At last Ed sighed. "Just forget about it," he said. "Just do your job. That's all that matters. You don't want to know anything else."

"Why don't I?" Charley said. "Sure I do. And it's no good telling me to do my job. The way things are running, Ed, I'm not going to have a job very long."

"There's nothing you can do about it," Ed said. "Believe me. You don't want to know because knowing wouldn't do you any good. And you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," Charley said. "Go ahead." He scratched at one shin with the other foot.

"Well," Ed began, and then stopped. He shook his head. "Look, Charley, let me tell this my way. Something like this happened before. A long while back--before the Cold War started, let alone ended."

"Go ahead," Charley said. A drop of sweat ran slowly down his forehead. He tried to ignore it.

"Did I ever tell you I used to talk for a strong-man act?" Ed said. "Not a sideshow talker, nothing like that; this guy had an act of his own, full tent and flies. Gondo, his name was, and I can still see those flies: Eighth Wonder of the World up on top, red on blue, and just Gondo underneath, pure white with red outlining. Class, but flashy, if you see what I mean. You never saw the like, kid."

Charley shook his head. "O.K.," he said. "But what does this have to do with--"

"Well," Ed cut in, "that was years ago; I was a youngster, pretty well just setting out. And Gondo drew crowds--big crowds. Lifting a wagonload of people on his back--that was one of his tricks. I think Sandow himself used to do it, but he had nothing on Gondo; the guy had style. Class. And he was a draw; I was working for J. C. Hobart Shows then, and there was nothing on the lot to top him."

Ed paused, rubbing at his chin reflectively.

"Then the crowds started to fall off," he said. "Just like with you, Charley. And nobody knew why. Gondo was doing the same act--no change there. So the change had to be some place else."

"Same with me," Charley said.

"Sure," Ed said. "The same with you. Charley, do you follow the papers?"

"I guess so," Charley said. "One, anyway. My mother sends it to me from Chicago. She likes the--"

"Sure," Ed said. "Well, did you ever hear about a Dr. Schinsake? Edmund Charles Schinsake?"

Charley snorted in surprise. "Who do you think you are?" he said. "Santa Claus?"

"What?"

"Nothing," Charley said. "It's just ... well, nothing. But sure, I know the guy. And so do you." He explained.

"Professor Lightning?" Ed said. "I never saw a picture. But it doesn't matter--except maybe it'll make the guy easier to see. Because this is it, Charley; I think you ought to go and see him."

There was a little silence.

"You, too?" Charley said. "You mean, so I can stop being a poor, poor cripple and stop making lots of money? Is that what you're talking about?"

"Listen, Charley," Ed said. "I--"

"Just give up," Charley cut in. "That's what you want me to do. Just give up and go to the good old doctor and ask him to give me some arms. Is that what you wanted to tell me about this Gondo of yours? How he just gave up and got a nice little white cottage some place and got a nice little low-paying job and lived unhappily ever after, because a carny isn't a healthy, well-adjusted life? Is that it, Ed?"

EdRibbed at his chin. "No, Charley," he said. "No, kid. Not at all. But I think you ought to--"

"Well, I won't," Charley said. "Look, Ed: I want you to get this straight. I don't care who's against me, or what they've got planned. I'm not going to give up. I'm going to find out what's going on, and I'm going to lick it. Have you got it?"

Ed sighed. "I've got it," he said. "But, Charley: there are some things you don't lick."

"I'll find out," Charley said. "Believe me, Ed. I'll find out."
But nobody else knew a thing—or, at least, nobody was willing to talk. Ned and Ed offered any help they could give—but said nothing that helped. Erma was puzzled, but ignorant; Senor Alcala knew nothing, and no one else was any better off, as far as Charley could discover.

After a week, Charley decided there was only one person for him to see. Ed Baylis had recommended him, and so had the little Santa Claus. Professor Lightning didn't look like much of a lead, but there was nothing else left. The audience was still dropping, little by little, and Charley knew perfectly well that something had to be done, and fast.

Getting a leave of absence was even easier than he'd expected it to be; and that was just one more proof of how far his standing with the show had dropped. People just didn't care; he wasn't a draw any more.

And his standing with the carny was all he had left. He had caught himself, lately, wondering if he would really be so badly off with two arms, like everybody else. The idea frightened him, but the way it kept coming back frightened him even more.

Leaving the carny lot, of course, he put on his sandals; outside the carnival, he had to wear shoes. They were laceless, of course, and made to be kicked off easily. Charley slipped into them and thought wryly of the professor and his "scientific Renaissance." The shoes were a new plastic, lightweight and long-lasting, but the dying problem hadn't quite been solved. Instead of a quiet, dull brown, they were a garish shade that almost approached olive drab.

Well, he thought, nothing's perfect. He shrugged into a harness and had his single suitcase attached to it; the harness and case were lightweight, too, and Charley headed for the station walking easily.

He climbed aboard the train and dropped his suitcase into the Automatic Porter, and then went to find a seat. The only one available was next to a middle-aged man chewing a cigar in a sour silence. Charley slipped into his seat without a word, and hoped the man would ignore him. He had a face like an overripe summer squash, and his big hands, clasped in his lap, were fat and white, covered with tiny freckles. Charley leaned back and closed his eyes.

A minute or so passed in silence.

Then a voice said: "Heading for New York?"

"That's right," Charley said tiredly. He opened his eyes. The middle-aged man was leaning toward him, smelling of his cheap cigar.

"Likewise," the man said. His voice was hoarse and unpleasant. "I thought you might be."

"That's right," Charley said. "Long trip." He hoped desperately that the man would leave him alone. He wasn't on display now; he wanted the time to think, to try and figure out what had been happening. He had to have some questions to ask Professor Lightning, and that meant that he had to have some sort of plan of action.

"Going to see that doctor," the middle-aged man said. "That right?"

"That's right," Charley said. Apparently Professor Lightning had become a nine-day wonder; anyone going to New York was presumed to be going to see him.

Then Charley corrected himself. Not anyone.

Any cripple.

"Get the arms fixed, right?" the middle-aged man said.

"That's right," Charley said for the third time. Maybe the man would take the hint. But he had no such luck. "That's a fine thing the doctor is doing," he said. "I mean, helping all these people. Don't have to be ... well, look, bud, don't take me personally."

"I don't mind," Charley said. "I'm used to it."


"Charley de Milo," Charley said.

"Glad to know you," the man said. "So while we're traveling companions, you might say ... might as well get to be friendly."

"Sure," Charley said tiredly. He looked round the car. A great many people seemed to be heading East. There were no other seats. Charley sighed and shrugged himself deeper into the upholstery.

"You know," Roquefort said suddenly, "I can't help thinking."

"Oh?" Charley said, fidgeting his feet.

"That's right," Roquefort said. "I mean, all these people. And Dr. Schinsake. I remember once, I went to a circus, or a sideshow."

"Carnival, probably," Charley put in, knowing exactly what was coming.

"Something like that," Roquefort said. "Anyhow, they had this sideshow, and there was a man there without any legs. Did all kinds of tricks--got along real good. But I can't help thinking now: he wouldn't have to get along that way any more. Because this doctor would fix him up."

"I guess so," Charley said wearily.

"Sure," Roquefort said. "It's a great thing, what he's doing. All these freak shows ... you understand, it's just a
name for them--"

"I understand," Charley said. "Don't worry about it." He shifted his feet nervously. Shoes always felt a little uncomfortable, even lightweight sandals; he felt trapped in them. Now, if he had arms and hands ...

He choked the thought off before it got any further.

"All these shows," Roquefort said, "why, there isn't any need for them any more. I mean the people without legs, or arms, anyhow. See? Because this doctor--"

"I see," Charley said.

"Why, anybody works in a show like that, I mean without arms or legs--why, he's just crazy, that's all. When he can get help, I mean."

"Sure," Charley said uneasily. "Sure, he's just crazy."

Roquefort chomped on his cigar and looked solemn and well-informed. Charley shivered slightly, and wondered why.

"Just crazy." Was that what they thought, he wondered. Was that what they were thinking when they looked up at him?

He shivered again and slipped his shoes off quietly. Immediately, he felt a little better.

But not very much.

* * * * *

New York was a madhouse worse than any carnival Charley had ever seen. He made his way, harness and suitcase on his back, through the station crowds and out into the taxi ramp. A line of the new cabs stood there, and Charley managed to grab one inches ahead of a woman with a small, crying child in tow. He gestured to the driver with his head, and the door slid open. He stepped inside, released the catch that let his suitcase thump to the floor, and sat down with a sigh.

"Tough, hey?" the cabbie said. His glowing nameplate read David Peters Wells. He turned around, showing a face that had little in common with the official license photo, under his name. He was swarthy and short, with large yellowing teeth and tiny eyes. "Where to, Mac?" he said.

Charley licked his lips. "I really don't know," he said.

The cabbie blinked. "What?"

"I'm going to need some help," Charley said. "I want to find a Dr. Schinsake, but I don't know where he is. If you can drive me to a drugstore, where we can look him up in a phone book--"

"Dr. Schinsake?" the driver said. "That's the guy who grows things? I mean, arms and legs? Like that?"

"That's right," Charley said.

"O.K., buddy," the driver said. "Just hang on." The cab started with a cough and a roar, and shot out of the terminal like a bazooka shell. Over the noise of travel, the cabbie said: "Going to get yourself fixed up? No offense, Mac."

"No offense," Charley said. "I'm just going to talk to him."

"Oh," the cabbie said. "Sure." There was silence for a second. Then the cabbie turned around. The machine shot ahead, down a wide avenue filled with cars. Charley took a deep breath and forgot to let it go. "You know," the cabbie said, "I seen something funny the other day."

"Really?" Charley said, through clenched teeth.

The cabbie turned back casually, flicked the wheel to avoid an oncoming truck, and continued: "Funny, yeah. Went to the Flea Museum ... you know, the sideshow here, on Forty-second?"

"I know it," Charley said. He'd been offered winter work in the place several times, though he'd never accepted. Everyone in carny life knew of the place.

"And, anyhow, I went down the other day, and there was this guy ... he was like you ... he was like you, Mac, I mean no arms. You don't mind me talking about it?"

Apparently everybody thought he was sensitive on the subject, Charley reflected tiredly. "I don't mind," he said.

"Sure," the cabbie said. A red light showed ahead and the cab screeched to a halt. "Anyhow, there he was, like a freak, you know? Hell, Mac, I was mad. I mean mad. The guy wants me to pay money to see him; he don't want to go get cured. He's like lazy, Mac. Lazy. Wants to sit around and let me pay money I work hard for, like some kind of a stuffed exhibit he thinks he is." The light changed; the cab shuddered and moved on. "And this doctor right here in the same city. Now, what do you think of that?"

Charley shrugged. "I wouldn't know," he said cautiously. He took out a cigarette with his left foot, lit it with his right, and slid both feet back into his shoes. "Nearly there?" he asked.

"No offense, Mac," the cabbie said, sounding obscurely troubled. "We're there in a minute." He turned and stared narrowly at Charley. The cab shot blindly on. "Say, listen. That with the cigarette. You belong to some kind
of sideshow? I mean, no offense--"

"No offense," Charley said. "That's right. I'm with a carnival."

"We'll, you're doing the right thing," the cabbie said, turning back to the road again. Amazingly, there was no obstruction before them. "I mean, a guy has to be honest. With this doctor around, you can't be a no-arms guy any more; it's not fair. Right?"

Charley licked his lips. The cab stopped.

"Here we are," the driver announced.

Charley indicated his grrouch-bag, still heavy with dollar bills, hanging round his neck. With scrupulous care, the driver extracted one bill. "Keep the change," Charley said. "And thanks for the conversation."

He stepped out, hooking the suitcase to his harness as he did so. And there, in front of him, was a small white-faced stone building. The cab roared away behind him, and Charley started across the sidewalk.

Now, in New York, he had found out what he was going to ask Professor Lightning. And it was the one thing he hadn't thought possible.

* * * * *

One flight of stairs led straight up from the doorway, and Charley took it slowly. At the top was a great wooden door with a brass plate screwed to it, and on the brass plate a single name was incised: Dr. E. C. Schinsake. There was nothing else. Charley slipped the shoe off his right foot, and rang the bell.

A voice inside said: "Who's there? Who is it, please?"

"It's me, professor," Charley called. He slipped the sandal back on. "Charley de Milo. I came to see you."

"Charley--" There was a second of silence. "Charley de Milo?" Professor Lightning's grating voice said. "From the show?" Footsteps came across a room, and the door swung open. Professor Lightning stood inside, just as tall and white-haired as ever, and Charley blinked, looking at him, and past him at the room.

People didn't live in rooms like that, he thought. They were only for the movies, or maybe for millionaires, but not for people, real people that Charley himself knew to talk to.

The furniture--a couch, a few chairs and tables, a phonograph--was glitteringly new and expensive-looking. The walls were freshly painted in soft, bright colors, and pictures hung on them, strange-looking pictures Charley couldn't make sense out of. But they looked right, somehow, in that room.

On the floor there was a rug deeper and softer-looking than any Charley had ever seen. And, away to the right, two floor-length windows sparkled, hung with great drapes and shining in the daylight. There were flowers growing outside the sills, just visible above the window frames. Charley gulped and took a breath.

"Come in," Professor Lightning said. "Come in." In the midst of the riot of wealth, the professor didn't seem to have changed at all. He was still wearing the same ratty robe he'd worn in the carnival, his hair was still as uncombed. It was only on second glance that Charley saw the look in his eyes. Professor Lightning was Dr. Schinsake now; the eyes said that, and were proud of it. And the world agreed with Dr. Schinsake.

Charley came into the bright room and stood quietly until Dr. Schinsake asked him to sit down.

"Well, now, my boy," he said. "You haven't given me a word since you rang the bell, and I would like to know why you're here. Frankly, you're lucky to catch me in; but we were up late last night, working in the labs. I'm afraid I overslept a little." His eyes shone with the mention of his laboratories. It was a far cry from the back of the science tent, Charley supposed.

But he'd come for a definite purpose. He licked his lips, waited a second, and said: "Professor, it's about my arms. What you said you could do."

"Your arms?" The old man frowned. "Now? You've come to me ... Charley, my boy, tell me why. Tell me why you have changed your mind now."

Charley nodded. "I ... I didn't start out here to ask you about my arms," he said. "But on the way I started putting things together. Professor, why do people come to sideshows?"

The old man shrugged. "Entertainment," he said.

"Sure, but there are all kinds of entertainment," Charley said. "Like strong men. There used to be a lot of strong men in carnivals, but there aren't any more. And now I know why. Ed Baylis started to tell me, but I ... well, never mind."

"Charley," the old man said. "What do strong men have to do with--"

"Let me tell you, professor," Charley said. "People don't care about strong men any more; there are too many gadgets around. Nobody has to be a strong man; nobody wants to watch one. They're useless. See?"

"Everyone can be his own strong man," the old man said.

"Right," Charley said. "The chain hoist--machines like that--they killed off the whole act. Years ago. And you've killed off the Armless Wonders and the Legless Wonders, professor. You've done it, all at once."

Professor Lightning shook his head. "I don't see--" he began.
"Anybody can grow new arms," Charley said. "So the man without arms--he's not an object of pity any more. He's just some guy who doesn't want to work. Nobody wants to go and see him; let him grow arms, if he doesn't want to be called a lazy bum. See?"

There was a little silence.

"I see," Professor Lightning said slowly. "Without pity, without a strong sense of identification, there is no audience."

"For me there isn't," Charley said. "Or for anybody like me."

Professor Lightning nodded. "Well," he said. "I hardly meant to ... well, Charley, you came for something else."

His face seemed to lengthen. "And I must tell you ... Charley, I have been doing a lot of work. I am hardly a professional scientist; I have been away too long."

"But--"

"It is true," Professor Lightning said sadly. "Never mind; I've had my one discovery--how much an accident, no one may ever know. But I neglected to widen the scope of what I had done; I generalized too rapidly, my boy." He took a deep breath. "The method, the technique, is very complex," he said. "But imagine it this way: a man comes to New York. He explores it. Later, when he goes home, he is asked to draw a map of it--and he can do so, because he has the experience. He has the memory of New York, locked in his mind."

Charley nodded. "What does that have to do with me?" he said.

"The cells ... the cells of the body seem to have such a memory," the professor said. "It is the basis of my technique."

Charley nodded. "O.K.," he said "I don't care how it works, so long as it-- It does work, doesn't it?"

The professor shook his head. Very slowly, he said: "Not for you, my boy. Not for you." He paused. "You see, you were born without arms. In such a case the cellular memory does not seem to exist--like a man who has never been to New York. He cannot draw the map. He has no memory to begin with."

The silence this time was a long one.

At last Charley said: "But somebody could tell him. I mean about New York, so he could draw the map."

"Perhaps," the professor said. "We are working on it. Some day--"

"But not today," Charley said. "Is that it?"

"I ... I'm afraid so," the professor said.

Charley sat for a long time, thinking. He pictured the carnival, and the shrinking audiences. Could he explain to them why he couldn't get arms? Would any audience stop to listen and digest the truth? Charley thought of the armless man in the Flea Museum, and decided slowly that no explanation would be good enough. People didn't stop to make small distinctions. Not in a sideshow. Not in a carnival.

No.

There was only one thing he could do; he saw that clearly. But it took him a long time to find the right words.

At last he had them.

"Professor," he said, "suppose I go right back to being a sideshow exhibit--but with a limited audience."

Professor Lightning looked puzzled. "What do you mean?" he said.

"Well," Charley said, carefully and with a sudden, surprising feeling of hope, "you don't happen to need a new guinea pig, do you?"

THE END

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Contents

THE FIRST ONE
By HERBERT D. KASTLE

The first man to return from beyond the Great Frontier may be welcomed ... but will it be as a curiosity, rather than as a hero...?

There was the usual welcoming crowd for a celebrity, and the usual speeches by the usual politicians who met him at the airport which had once been twenty miles outside of Croton, but which the growing city had since engulfed and placed well within its boundaries. But everything wasn't usual. The crowd was quiet, and the mayor didn't seem quite as at-ease as he'd been on his last big welcoming--for Corporal Berringer, one of the crew of the spaceship Washington, first to set Americans upon Mars. His Honor's handclasp was somewhat moist and cold. His Honor's eyes held a trace of remoteness.
Still, he was the honored home-comer, the successful returnee, the hometown boy who had made good in a big way, and they took the triumphal tour up Main Street to the new square and the grandstand. There he sat between the mayor and a nervous young coed chosen as homecoming queen, and looked out at the police and fire department bands, the National Guard, the boy scouts and girl scouts, the Elks and Masons. Several of the churches in town had shown indecision as to how to instruct their parishioners to treat him. But they had all come around. The tremendous national interest, the fact that he was the First One, had made them come around. It was obvious by now that they would have to adjust as they’d adjusted to all the other firsts taking place in these--as the newspapers had dubbed the start of the Twenty-first Century--the Galloping Twenties.

He was glad when the official greeting was over. He was a very tired man and he had come farther, traveled longer and over darker country, than any man who’d ever lived before. He wanted a meal at his own table, a kiss from his wife, a word from his son, and later to see some old friends and a relative or two. He didn’t want to talk about the journey. He wanted to forget the immediacy, the urgency, the terror; then perhaps he would talk.

Or would he? For he had very little to tell. He had traveled and he had returned and his voyage was very much like the voyages of the great mariners, from Columbus onward--long, dull periods of time passing, passing, and then the arrival.

The house had changed. He saw that as soon as the official car let him off at 45 Roosevelt Street. The change was, he knew, for the better. They had put a porch in front. They had rehabilitated, spruced up, almost rebuilt the entire outside and grounds. But he was sorry. He had wanted it to be as before.

The head of the American Legion and the chief of police, who had escorted him on this trip from the square, didn’t ask to go in with him. He was glad. He’d had enough of strangers. Not that he was through with strangers. There were dozens of them up and down the street, standing beside parked cars, looking at him. But when he looked back at them, their eyes dropped, they turned away, they began moving off. He was still too much the First One to have his gaze met.

He walked up what had once been a concrete path and was now an ornate flagstone path. He climbed the new porch and raised the ornamental knocker on the new door and heard the soft music sound within. He was surprised that he’d had to do this. He’d thought Edith would be watching at a window.

And perhaps she had been watching ... but she hadn’t opened the door.

The door opened; he looked at her. It hadn’t been too long and she hadn’t changed at all. She was still the small, slender girl he’d loved in high school, the small, slender woman he’d married twelve years ago. Ralphie was with her. They held onto each other as if seeking mutual support, the thirty-three-year old woman and ten-year-old boy. They looked at him, and then both moved forward, still together. He said, "It's good to be home!"

Edith nodded and, still holding to Ralphie with one hand, put the other arm around him. He kissed her--her neck, her cheek--and all the old jokes came to mind, the jokes of travel-weary, battle-weary men, the and-then-I’ll-put-my-pack-aside jokes that spoke of terrible hunger. She was trembling, and even as her lips came up to touch his he felt the difference, and because of this difference he turned with urgency to Ralphie and picked him up and hugged him and said, because he could think of nothing else to say, "What a big fella, what a big fella."

Ralphie stood in his arms as if his feet were still planted on the floor, and he didn't look at his father but somewhere beyond him. "How's it going in school?"

"Gee, Dad, it's the second month of summer vacation."
"Well, then, before summer vacation?"
"Pretty good."

Edith said, "He made top forum the six-month period before vacation, and he made top forum the six-month period you went away, Hank."

He nodded, remembering that, remembering everything, remembering the warmth of her farewell, the warmth of Ralphie's farewell, their tears as he left for the experimental flight station in the Aleutians. They had feared for him, having read of the many launchings gone wrong even in continent-to-continent experimental flight.

They had been right to worry. He had suffered much after that blow-up. But now they should be rejoicing, because he had survived and made the long journey. Ralphie suddenly said, "I got to go, Dad. I promised Walt and the others I'd pitch. It's Inter-Town Little League, you know. It's Harmon, you know. I got to keep my word." Without waiting for an answer, he waved his hand--it shook; a ten-year-old boy's hand that shook--and ran from the room and from the house.

He and Edith sat beside each other, and he wanted badly to take her in his arms, and yet he didn't want to oppress her. He stood up. "I'm very tired. I'd like to lie down a while." Which wasn't true, because he'd been lying down all the months of the way back.

She said, "Of course. How stupid of me, expecting you to sit around and make small talk and pick up just where you left off."

He nodded. But that was exactly what he wanted to do--make small talk and pick up just where he'd left off. But they didn't expect it of him; they wouldn't let him; they felt he had changed too much.

* * * * *

She led him upstairs and along the foyer past Ralphie's room and past the small guest room to their bedroom. This, too, had changed. It was newly painted and it had new furniture. He saw twin beds separated by an ornate little table with an ornate little lamp, and this looked more ominous a barrier to him than the twelve-foot concrete-and-barbed-wire fence around the experimental station.

"Which one is mine," he asked, and tried to smile.

She also tried to smile. "The one near the window. You always liked the fresh air, the sunshine in the morning. You always said it helped you to get up on time when you were stationed at the base outside of town. You always said it reminded you--being able to see the sky--that you were going to go up in it, and that you were going to come down from it to this bed again."

"Not this bed," he murmured, and was a little sorry afterward.

"No, not this bed," she said quickly. "Your lodge donated the bedroom set and I really didn't know--" She waved her hand, her face white.

He was sure then that she had known, and that the beds and the barrier between them were her own choice, if only an unconscious choice. He went to the bed near the window, stripped off his Air Force blue jacket, began to take off his shirt, but then remembered that some arm scars still showed. He waited for her to leave the room.

She said, "Well then, rest up, dear," and went out.

He took off his shirt and saw himself in the mirror on the opposite wall; and then took off his under-shirt. The body scars were faint, the scars running in long lines, one dissecting his chest, the other slicing diagonally across his upper abdomen to disappear under his trousers. There were several more on his back, and one on his right thigh. They'd been treated properly and would soon disappear. But she had never seen them.

Perhaps she never would. Perhaps pajamas and robes and dark rooms would keep them from her until they were gone.

Which was not what he'd considered at all important on leaving Walter Reed Hospital early this morning; which was something he found distasteful, something he felt beneath them both. And, at the same time, he began to understand that there were many things, previously beneath them both, which would have to be considered. She had changed; Ralphie had changed; all the people he knew had probably changed--because they thought he had changed.

He was tired of thinking. He lay down and closed his eyes. He let himself taste bitterness, unhappiness, a loneliness he had never known before.

But sometime later, as he was dozing off, a sense of reassurance began filtering into his mind. After all, he was still Henry Devers, the same man who had left home eleven months ago, with a love for family and friends which was, if anything, stronger than before. Once he could communicate this, the strangeness would disappear and the First One would again become good old Hank. It was little enough to ask for--a return to old values, old relationships, the normalcies of the backwash instead of the freneticisms of the lime-light. It would certainly be granted to him.

He slept.
Dinner was at seven P.M. His mother came; his Uncle Joe and Aunt Lucille came. Together with Edith, Ralphie and himself, they made six, and ate in the dining room at the big table.

Before he'd become the First One, it would have been a noisy affair. His family had never been noted for a lack of ebullience, a lack of talkativeness, and Ralphie had always chosen mealtimes--especially with company present--to describe everything and anything that had happened to him during the day. And Edith herself had always chatted, especially with his mother, though they didn't agree about much. Still, it had been good-natured; the general tone of their lives had been good-natured.

This wasn't good-natured. Exactly what it was he wasn't sure. "Stiff" was perhaps the word.

They began with grapefruit, Edith and Mother serving quickly, efficiently from the kitchen, then sitting down at the table. He looked at Mother as he raised his first spoonful of chilled fruit, and said, "Younger than ever." It was nothing new; he'd said it many many times before, but his mother had always reacted with a bright smile and a quip something like, "Young for the Golden Age Center, you mean." This time she burst into tears. It shocked him. But what shocked him even more was the fact that no one looked up, commented, made any attempt to comfort her; no one indicated in any way that a woman was sobbing at the table.

He was sitting directly across from Mother, and reached out and touched her left hand which lay limply beside the silverware. She didn't move it--she hadn't touched him once beyond that first, quick, strangely-cool embrace at the door--then a few seconds later she withdrew it and let it drop out of sight.

So there he was, Henry Devers, at home with the family. So there he was, the hero returned, waiting to be treated as a human being.

The grapefruit shells were cleaned away and the soup served. Uncle Joe began to talk. "The greatest little development of circular uniform houses you ever did see," he boomed in his powerful salesman's voice. "Still going like sixty. We'll sell out before--" At that point he looked at Hank, and Hank nodded encouragement, desperately interested in this normalcy, and Joe's voice died away. He looked down at his plate, mumbled, "Soup's getting cold," and began to eat. His hand shook a little; his ruddy face was not quite as ruddy as Hank remembered it.

Aunt Lucille made a few quavering statements about the Ladies' Tuesday Garden Club, and Hank looked across the table to where she sat between Joe and Mother--his wife and son bracketed him, and yet he felt alone--and said, "I've missed fooling around with the lawn and the rose bushes. Here it is August and I haven't had my hand to a mower or trowel."

Aunt Lucille smiled, if you could call it that--a pitiful twitching of the lips--and nodded. She threw her eyes in his direction, and past him, and then down to her plate. Mother, who was still sniffling, said, "I have a dismal headache. I'm going to lie down in the guest room a while." She touched his shoulder in passing--his affectionate, effusive mother who would kiss stray dogs and strange children, who had often irritated him with an excess of physical and verbal caresses--she barely touched his shoulder and fled.

So now five of them sat at the table. The meat was served--thin, rare slices of beef, the pink blood-juice oozing warmly from the center. He cut into it and raised a forkful to his mouth, then glanced at Ralphie and said, "Looks fresh enough to have been killed in the back yard." Ralphie said, "Yeah, Dad." Aunt Lucille put down her knife and fork and murmured something to her husband. Joe cleared his throat and said Lucille was rapidly becoming a vegetarian and he guessed she was going into the living room for a while. "She'll be back for dessert, of course," he said, his laugh sounding forced.

Hank looked at Edith; Edith was busy with her plate. Hank looked at Ralphie; Ralphie was busy with his plate. Hank looked at Joe; Joe was chewing, gazing out over their heads to the kitchen. Hank looked at Lucille; she was disappearing into the living room.

He brought his fist down on the table. The settings jumped; a glass overturned, spilling water. He brought it down again and again. They were all standing now. He sat there and pounded the table with his big right fist--Henry Devers, who would never have thought of making such a scene before, but who was now so sick and tired of being treated as the First One, of being stood back from, looked at in awe of, felt in fear of, that he could have smashed more than a table.

Edith said, "Hank!"

He said, voice hoarse, "Shut up. Go away. Let me eat alone. I'm sick of the lot of you."

Mother and Joe returned a few minutes later where he sat forcing food down his throat. Mother said, "Henry dear--" He didn't answer. She began to cry, and he was glad she left the house then. He had never said anything really bad to his mother. He was afraid this would have been the time. Joe merely cleared his throat and mumbled something about getting together again soon and "drop out and see the new development" and he, too, was gone. Lucille never did manage to speak to him.
He finished his beef and waited. Soon Edith came in with the special dessert she’d been preparing half the day—a magnificent English trifle. She served him, and spooned out a portion for herself and Ralphie. She hesitated near his chair, and when he made no comment she called the boy. Then the three of them were sitting, facing the empty side of the table. They ate the trifle. Ralphie finished first and got up and said, “Hey, I promised—"

“You promised the boys you’d play baseball or football or handball or something; anything to get away from your father.”

Ralphie’s head dropped and he muttered, “Aw, no, Dad.”

Edith said, “He’ll stay home, Hank. We’ll spend an evening together—talking, watching TV, playing Monopoly.”

Ralphie said, “Gee, sure, Dad, if you want to.”

Hank stood up. “The question is not whether I want to. You both know I want to. The question is whether you want to.”

They answered together that of course they wanted to. But their eyes—his wife’s and son’s eyes—could not meet his, and so he said he was going to his room because he was, after all, very tired and would in all probability continue to be very tired for a long, long time and that they shouldn’t count on him for normal social life.

He fell asleep quickly, lying there in his clothes.

But he didn’t sleep long. Edith shook him and he opened his eyes to a lighted room. "Phil and Rhona are here."

He blinked at her. She smiled, and it seemed her old smile. "They’re so anxious to see you, Hank. I could barely keep Phil from coming up and waking you yourself. They want to go out and do the town. Please, Hank, say you will."

He sat up. "Phil," he muttered. "Phil and Rhona." They’d had wonderful times together, from grammar school on. Phil and Rhona, their oldest and closest friends. Perhaps this would begin his real homecoming.

Do the town? They’d paint it and then tear it down!

* * * * *

It didn’t turn out that way. He was disappointed; but then again, he’d also expected it. This entire first day at home had conditioned him to expect nothing good. They went to the bowling alleys, and Phil sounded very much the way he always had—soft spoken and full of laughter and full of jokes. He patted Edith on the head the way he always had, and clapped Hank on the shoulder (but not the way he always had—so much more gently, almost remotely), and insisted they all drink more than was good for them as he always had. And for once, Hank was ready to go along on the drinking. For once, he matched Phil shot for shot, beer for beer.

They didn’t bowl very long. At ten o’clock they crossed the road to Manfred’s Tavern, where Phil and the girls ordered sandwiches and coffee and Hank went right on drinking. Edith said something to him, but he merely smiled and waved his hand and gulped another ounce of nirvana.

There was dancing to a juke box in Manfred’s Tavern. He’d been there many times before, and he was sure several of the couples recognized him. But except for a few abortive glances in his direction, it was as if he were a stranger in a city halfway around the world.

At midnight, he was still drinking. The others wanted to leave, but he said, “I haven’t danced with my girl Rhona.” His tongue was thick, his mind was blurred, and yet he could read the strange expression on her face—pretty Rhona, who’d always flirted with him, who’d made a ritual of flirting with him. Pretty Rhona, who now looked as if she were going to be sick.

"So let’s rock," he said and stood up.

They were on the dance floor. He held her close, and hummed and chatted. And through the alcoholic haze saw she was a stiff-smiled, stiff-bodied, mechanical dancing doll.

The number finished; they walked back to the booth. Phil said, "Beddy-bye time."

Hank said, "First one dance with my loving wife."

He and Edith danced. He didn't hold her close as he had Rhona. He waited for her to come close on her own, and she did, and yet she didn’t. Because while she put herself against him, there was something in her face—no, in her eyes; it always showed in the eyes—that made him know she was trying to be the old Edith and not succeeding. This time when the music ended, he was ready to go home.

They rode back to town along Route Nine, he and Edith in the rear of Phil’s car, Rhona driving because Phil had drunk just a little too much, Phil singing and telling an occasional bad joke, and somehow not his old self. No one was his old self. No one would ever be his old self with the First One.

They turned left, to take the short cut along Hallowed Hill Road, and Phil finished a story about a Martian and a Hollywood sex queen and looked at his wife and then past her at the long, cast-iron fence paralleling the road. "Hey," he said, pointing, “do you know why that’s the most popular place on earth?”

Rhona glanced to the left, and so did Hank and Edith. Rhona made a little sound, and Edith seemed to stop
breathing, but Phil went on a while longer, not yet aware of his supposed faux pas.

"You know why?" he repeated, turning to the back seat, the laughter rumbling up from his chest. "You know why, folks?"

Rhona said, "Did you notice Carl Braken and his wife at--"

Hank said, "No, Phil, why is it the most popular place on earth?"

Phil said, "Because people are--" And then he caught himself and waved his hand and muttered, "I forgot the punch line."

"Because people are dying to get in," Hank said, and looked through the window, past the iron fence, into the large cemetery at the fleeting tombstones.

The car was filled with horrified silence when there should have been nothing but laughter, or irritation at a too-old joke. "Maybe you should let me out right here," Hank said. "I'm home--or that's what everyone seems to think. Maybe I should lie down in an open grave. Maybe that would satisfy people. Maybe that's the only way to act, like Dracula or another monster from the movies."

Edith said, "Oh, Hank, don't, don't!"

The car raced along the road, crossed a macadam highway, went four blocks and pulled to a stop. He didn't bother saying good night. He didn't wait for Edith. He just got out and walked up the flagstone path and entered the house.

* * * * *

"Hank," Edith whispered from the guest room doorway, "I'm so sorry--"

"There's nothing to be sorry about. It's just a matter of time. It'll all work out in time."

"Yes," she said quickly, "that's it. I need a little time. We all need a little time. Because it's so strange, Hank. Because it's so frightening. I should have told you that the moment you walked in. I think I've hurt you terribly, we've all hurt you terribly, by trying to hide that we're frightened."

"I'm going to stay in the guest room," he said, "for as long as necessary. For good if need be."

"How could it be for good? How, Hank?"

That question was perhaps the first firm basis for hope he'd had since returning. And there was something else; what Carlisle had told him, even as Carlisle himself had reacted as all men did.

"There are others coming, Edith. Eight that I know of in the tanks right now. My superior, Captain Davidson, who died at the same moment I did--seven months ago next Wednesday--he's going to be next. He was smashed up worse than I was, so it took a little longer, but he's almost ready. And there'll be many more, Edith. The government is going to save all they possibly can from now on. Every time a young and healthy man loses his life by accident, by violence, and his body can be recovered, he'll go into the tanks and they'll start the regenerative brain and organ process--the process that made it all possible. So people have to get used to us. And the old stories, the old terrors, the ugly old superstitions have to die, because in time each place will have some of us; because in time it'll be an ordinary thing."

Edith said, "Yes, and I'm so grateful that you're here, Hank. Please believe that. Please be patient with me and Ralphy and--" She paused. "There's one question."

He knew what the question was. It had been the first asked him by everyone from the president of the United States on down.

"I saw nothing," he said. "It was as if I slept those six and a half months--slept without dreaming."

She came to him and touched his face with her lips, and he was satisfied.

Later, half asleep, he heard a dog howling, and remembered stories of how they announced death and the presence of monsters. He shivered and pulled the covers closer to him and luxuriated in being safe in his own home.

THE END

Contents

IT COULD BE ANYTHING
By KEITH LAUMER

"She'll be pulling out in a minute, Brett," Mr. Phillips said. He tucked his railroader's watch back in his vest pocket. "You better get aboard--if you're still set on going."

"It was reading all them books done it," Aunt Haicey said. "Thick books, and no pictures in them. I knew it'd
make trouble." She plucked at the faded hand-embroidered shawl over her thin shoulders, a tiny bird-like woman with bright anxious eyes.

"Don't worry about me," Brett said. "I'll be back."
"The place'll be yours when I'm gone," Aunt Haicey said. "Lord knows it won't be long."
"Why don't you change your mind and stay on, boy?" Mr. Phillips said, blinking up at the young man. "If I talk to Mr. J.D., I think he can find a job for you at the plant."
"So many young people leave Casperton," Aunt Haicey said. "They never come back."
Mr. Phillips clicked his teeth. "They write, at first," he said. "Then they gradually lose touch."
"All your people are here, Brett," Aunt Haicey said. "Haven't you been happy here?"
"Why can't you young folks be content with Casperton?" Mr. Phillips said. "There's everything you need here."
"It's that Pretty-Lee done it," Aunt Haicey said. "If it wasn't for that girl--"
A clatter ran down the line of cars. Brett kissed Aunt Haicey's dry cheek, shook Mr. Phillips' hand, and swung aboard. His suitcase was on one of the seats. He put it up above in the rack, and sat down, turned to wave back at the two old people.

It was a summer morning. Brett leaned back and watched the country slide by. It was nice country, Brett thought; mostly in corn, some cattle, and away in the distance the hazy blue hills. Now he would see what was on the other side of them: the cities, the mountains, and the ocean. Up until now all he knew about anything outside of Casperton was what he'd read or seen pictures of. As far as he was concerned, chopping wood and milking cows back in Casperton, they might as well not have existed. They were just words and pictures printed on paper. But he didn't want to just read about them. He wanted to see for himself.

* * *
Pretty-Lee hadn't come to see him off. She was probably still mad about yesterday. She had been sitting at the counter at the Club Rexall, drinking a soda and reading a movie magazine with a big picture of an impossibly pretty face on the cover—the kind you never see just walking down the street. He had taken the next stool and ordered a coke.

"Why don't you read something good, instead of that pap?" he asked her.
"Something good? You mean something dry, I guess. And don't call it ... that word. It doesn't sound polite."
"What does it say? That somebody named Doll Starr is fed up with glamor and longs for a simple home in the country and lots of kids? Then why doesn't she move to Casperton?"
"You wouldn't understand," said Pretty-Lee.

He took the magazine, leafed through it. "Look at this: all about people who give parties that cost thousands of dollars, and fly all over the world having affairs with each other and committing suicide and getting divorced. It's like reading about Martians."

"I still like to read about the stars. There's nothing wrong with it."
"Reading all that junk just makes you dissatisfied. You want to do your hair up crazy like the pictures in the magazines and wear weird-looking clothes—"
Pretty-Lee bent her straw double. She stood up and took her shopping bag. "I'm very glad to know you think my clothes are weird—"

"You're taking everything I say personally. Look." He showed her a full-color advertisement on the back cover of the magazine. "Look at this. Here's a man supposed to be cooking steaks on some kind of back-yard grill. He looks like a movie star; he's dressed up like he was going to get married; there's not a wrinkle anywhere. There's not a spot on that apron. There isn't even a grease spot on the frying pan. The lawn is as smooth as a billiard table. There's his son; he looks just like his pop, except that he's not grey at the temples. Did you ever really see a man that handsome, or hair that was just silver over the ears and the rest glossy black? The daughter looks like a movie starlet, and her mom is exactly the same, except that she has that grey streak in front to match her husband. You can see the car in the drive; the treads of the tires must have just been scrubbed; they're not even dusty. There's not a pebble out of place; all the flowers are in full bloom; no dead ones. No leaves on the lawn; no dry twigs showing on the trees. That other house in the background looks like a palace, and the man with the rake, looking over the fence: he looks like this one's twin brother, and he's out raking leaves in brand new clothes—"
Pretty-Lee grabbed her magazine. "You just seem to hate everything that's nicer than this messy town—"

"I don't think it's nicer. I like you; your hair isn't always perfectly smooth, and you've got a mended place on your dress, and you feel human, you smell human—"

"Oh!" Pretty-Lee turned and flounced out of the drug store.

* * *
Brett shifted in the dusty plush seat and looked around. There were a few other people in the car. An old man was reading a newspaper; two old ladies whispered together. There was a woman of about thirty with a mean-
looking kid; and some others. They didn't look like magazine pictures, any of them. He tried to picture them doing the things you read in newspapers: the old ladies putting poison in somebody's tea; the old man giving orders to start a war. He thought about babies in houses in cities, and airplanes flying over, and bombs falling down: huge explosive bombs. Blam! Buildings fall in, pieces of glass and stone fly through the air. The babies are blown up along with everything else--

But the kind of people he knew couldn't do anything like that. They liked to loaf and eat and talk and drink beer and buy a new tractor or refrigerator and go fishing. And if they ever got mad and hit somebody--afterwards they were embarrassed and wanted to shake hands....

The train slowed, came to a shuddery stop. Through the window he saw a cardboardy-looking building with the words BAXTER'S JUNCTION painted across it. There were a few faded posters on a bulletin board. An old man was sitting on a bench, waiting. The two old ladies got off and a boy in blue jeans got on. The train started up. Brett folded his jacket and tucked it under his head and tried to doze off....

* * * * *

Brett awoke, yawned, sat up. The train was slowing. He remembered you couldn't use the toilets while the train was stopped. He got up and went to the end of the car. The door was jammed. He got it open and went inside and closed the door behind him. The train was going slower, clack-clack ... clack-clack ... clack; clack ... cuh-lack ...

He washed his hands, then pulled at the door. It was stuck. He pulled harder. The handle was too small; it was hard to get hold of. The train came to a halt. Brett braced himself and strained against the door. It didn't budge.

He looked out the grimy window. The sun was getting lower. It was about three-thirty, he guessed. He couldn't see anything but some dry-looking fields.

Outside in the corridor there were footsteps. He started to call, but then didn't. It would be too embarrassing, pounding on the door and yelling, "Let me out! I'm stuck in the toilet ..."

He tried to rattle the door. It didn't rattle. Somebody was dragging something heavy past the door. Mail bags, maybe. He'd better yell. But dammit, the door couldn't be all that hard to open. He studied the latch. All he had to do was turn it. He got a good grip and twisted. Nothing.

He heard the mail bag bump-bump, and then another one. To heck with it; he'd yell. He'd wait until he heard the footsteps pass the door again and then he'd make some noise.

Brett waited. It was quiet now. He rapped on the door anyway. No answer. Maybe there was nobody left in the car. In a minute the train would start up and he'd be stuck here until the next stop. He banged on the door. "Hey! The door is stuck!"

It sounded foolish. He listened. It was very quiet. He pounded again. The car creaked once. He put his ear to the door. He couldn't hear anything. He turned back to the window. There was no one in sight. He put his cheek flat against it, looked along the car. He saw only dry fields.

He turned around and gave the door a good kick. If he damaged it, it was too bad; the railroad shouldn't have defective locks on the doors. If they tried to make him pay for it, he'd tell them they were lucky he didn't sue the railroad ...

* * *

He braced himself against the opposite wall, drew his foot back, and kicked hard at the lock. Something broke. He pulled the door open.

He was looking out the open door and through the window beyond. There was no platform, just the same dry fields he could see on the other side. He came out and went along to his seat. The car was empty now.

He looked out the window. Why had the train stopped here? Maybe there was some kind of trouble with the engine. It had been sitting here for ten minutes or so now. Brett got up and went along to the door, stepped down onto the iron step. Leaning out, he could see the train stretching along ahead, one car, two cars--

There was no engine.

Maybe he was turned around. He looked the other way. There were three cars. No engine there either. He must be on some kind of siding ...

Brett stepped back inside, and pushed through into the next car. It was empty. He walked along the length of it, into the next car. It was empty too. He went back through the two cars and his own car and on, all the way to the end of the train. All the cars were empty. He stood on the platform at the end of the last car, and looked back along the rails. They ran straight, through the dry fields, right to the horizon. He stepped down to the ground, went along the cindery bed to the front of the train, stepping on the ends of the wooden ties. The coupling stood open. The tall, dusty coach stood silently on its iron wheels, waiting. Ahead the tracks went on--

And stopped.

He walked along the ties, following the iron rails, shiny on top, and brown with rust on the sides. A hundred feet from the train they ended. The cinders went on another ten feet and petered out. Beyond, the fields closed in.
Brett looked up at the sun. It was lower now in the west, its light getting yellow and late-afternoonish. He turned and looked back at the train. The cars stood high and prim, empty, silent. He walked back, climbed in, got his bag down from the rack, pulled on his jacket. He jumped down to the cinders, followed them to where they ended. He hesitated a moment, then pushed between the knee-high stalks. Eastward across the field he could see what looked like a smudge on the far horizon.

He walked until dark, then made himself a nest in the dead stalks, and went to sleep.

* * *

He lay on his back, looking up at pink dawn clouds. Around him, dry stalks rustled in a faint stir of air. He felt crumbly earth under his fingers. He sat up, reached out and broke off a stalk. It crumbled into fragile chips. He wondered what it was. It wasn't any crop he'd ever seen before.

He stood, looked around. The field went on and on, dead flat. A locust came whirring toward him, plumped to earth at his feet. He picked it up. Long elbowed legs groped at his fingers aimlessly. He tossed the insect in the air. It fluttered away. To the east the smudge was clearer now; it seemed to be a grey wall, far away. A city? He picked up his bag and started on.

He was getting hungry. He hadn't eaten since the previous morning. He was thirsty too. The city couldn't be more than three hours' walk. He tramped along, the dry plants crackling under his feet, little puffs of dust rising from the dry ground. He thought about the rails, running across the empty fields, ending ...

He had heard the locomotive groaning up ahead as the train slowed. And there had been feet in the corridor. Where had they gone?

He thought of the train, Casperton, Aunt Haicey, Mr. Phillips. They seemed very far away, something remembered from long ago. Up above the sun was hot. That was real. The rest seemed unimportant. Ahead there was a city. He would walk until he came to it. He tried to think of other things: television, crowds of people, money: the tattered paper and the worn silver--

Only the sun and the dusty plain and the dead plants were real now. He could see them, feel them. And the suitcase. It was heavy; he shifted hands, kept going.

There was something white on the ground ahead, a small shiny surface protruding from the earth. Brett dropped the suitcase, went down on one knee, dug into the dry soil, pulled out a china teacup, the handle missing. Caked dirt crumbled away under his thumb, leaving the surface clean. He looked at the bottom of the cup. It was unmarked. Why just one teacup, he wondered, here in the middle of nowhere? He dropped it, took up his suitcase, and went on.

* * *

After that he watched the ground more closely. He found a shoe; it was badly weathered, but the sole was good. It was a high-topped work shoe, size 10-1/2-C. Who had dropped it here? He thought of other lone shoes he had seen, lying at the roadside or in alleys. How did they get there...

Half an hour later he detoured around the rusted front fender of an old-fashioned car. He looked around for the rest of the car but saw nothing. The wall was closer now; perhaps five miles more.

A scrap of white paper fluttered across the field in a stir of air. He saw another, more, blowing along in the fitful gusts. He ran a few steps, caught one, smoothed it out.

BUY NOW--PAY LATER!

He picked up another.

PREPARE TO MEET GOD

A third said:

WIN WITH WILLKIE

* * *

The wall loomed above him, smooth and grey. Dust was caked on his skin and clothes, and as he walked he brushed at himself absently. The suitcase dragged at his arm, thumped against his shin. He was very hungry and thirsty. He sniffed the air, instinctively searching for the odors of food. He had been following the wall for a long time, searching for an opening. It curved away from him, rising vertically from the level earth. Its surface was porous, unadorned, too smooth to climb. It was, Brett estimated, twenty feet high. If there were anything to make a ladder from--

Ahead he saw a wide gate, flanked by grey columns. He came up to it, put the suitcase down, and wiped at his forehead with his handkerchief. Through the opening in the wall a paved street was visible, and the facades of buildings. Those on the street before him were low, not more than one or two stories, but behind them taller towers reared up. There were no people in sight; no sounds stirred the hot noon-time air. Brett picked up his bag and passed through the gate.

For the next hour he walked empty pavements, listening to the echoes of his footsteps against brownstone fronts, empty shop windows, curtained glass doors, and here and there a vacant lot, weed-grown and desolate. He
paused at cross streets, looked down long vacant ways. Now and then a distant sound came to him: the lonely honk of a horn, a faintly tolling bell, a clatter of hooves.

He came to a narrow alley that cut like a dark canyon between blank walls. He stood at its mouth, listening to a distant murmur, like a crowd at a funeral. He turned down the narrow way.

It went straight for a few yards, then twisted. As he followed its turnings the crowd noise gradually grew louder. He could make out individual voices now, an occasional word above the hubbub. He started to hurry, eager to find someone to talk to.

Abruptly the voices--hundreds of voices, he thought--rose in a roar, a long-drawn Yaaayyyyy...! Brett thought of a stadium crowd as the home team trotted onto the field. He could hear a band now, a shrilling of brass, the clatter and thump of percussion instruments. Now he could see the mouth of the alley ahead, a sunny street hung with bunting, the backs of people, and over their heads the rhythmic bobbing of a passing procession, tall shakos and guidons in almost-even rows. Two tall poles with a streamer between them swung into view. He caught a glimpse of tall red letters:

... For Our Side!

* * *

He moved closer, edged up behind the grey-backed crowd. A phalanx of yellow-tuniced men approached, walking stiffly, fez tassels swinging. A small boy darted out into the street, loped along at their side. The music screeched and wheezed. Brett tapped the man before him.

"What's it all about...?"

He couldn't hear his own voice. The man ignored him. Brett moved along behind the crowd, looking for a vantage point or a thinning in the ranks. There seemed to be fewer people ahead. He came to the end of the crowd, moved on a few yards, stood at the curb. The yellow-jackets had passed now, and a group of round-thighed girls in satin blouses and black boots and white fur caps glided into view, silent, expressionless. As they reached a point fifty feet from Brett, they broke abruptly into a strutting prance, knees high, hips flirting, tossing shining batons high, catching them, twirling them, and up again...

Brett craned his neck, looking for TV cameras. The crowd lining the opposite side of the street stood in solid ranks, drably clad, eyes following the procession, mouths working. A fat man in a rumpled suit and a panama hat squeezed to the front, stood picking his teeth. Somehow, he seemed out of place among the others. Behind the spectators, the store fronts looked normal, dowdy brick and mismatched glass and oxidizing aluminum, dusty windows and cluttered displays of cardboard, a faded sign that read TODAY ONLY--PRICES SLASHED. To Brett's left the sidewalk stretched, empty. To his right the crowd was packed close, the shout rising and falling. Now a rank of blue-suited policemen followed the majorettes, swinging along silently. Behind them, over them, a piece of paper blew along the street. Brett turned to the man on his right.

"Pardon me. Can you tell me the name of this town?"

The man ignored him. Brett tapped the man's shoulder. "Hey! What town is this?"

The man took off his hat, whirled it overhead, then threw it up. It sailed away over the crowd, lost. Brett wondered briefly how people who threw their hats ever recovered them. But then, nobody he knew would throw his hat...

"You mind telling me the name of this place?" Brett said, as he took the man's arm, pulled. The man rotated toward Brett, leaning heavily against him. Brett stepped back. The man fell, lay stiffly, his arms moving, his eyes and mouth open.


Brett stooped quickly. "I'm sorry," he cried. He looked around. "Help! This man..."

Nobody was watching. The next man, a few feet away, stood close against his neighbor, hatless, his jaw moving.

"This man's sick," said Brett, tugging at the man's arm. "He fell."

The man's eyes moved reluctantly to Brett. "None of my business," he muttered.

"Won't anybody give me a hand?"

"Probably a drunk."

Behind Brett a voice called in a penetrating whisper: "Quick! You! Get into the alley...!"

He turned. A gaunt man of about thirty with sparse reddish hair, perspiration glistening on his upper lip, stood at the mouth of a narrow way like the one Brett had come through. He wore a grimy pale yellow shirt with a wide-flaring collar, limp and sweat-stained, dark green knee-breeches, soft leather boots, scuffed and dirty, with limp tops that drooped over his ankles. He gestured, drew back into the alley. "In here."

Brett went toward him. "This man..."

"Come on, you fool!" The man took Brett's arm, pulled him deeper into the dark passage. Brett resisted. "Wait a
minute. That fellow ..." He tried to point.

"Don't you know yet?" The red-head spoke with a strange accent. "Golems ... You got to get out of sight before the--"

* * *

The man froze, flattened himself against the wall. Automatically Brett moved to a place beside him. The man's head was twisted toward the alley mouth. The tendons in his weathered neck stood out. He had a three-day stubble of beard. Brett could smell him, standing this close. He edged away. "What--"

"Don't make a sound! Don't move, you idiot!" His voice was a thin hiss.

Brett followed the other's eyes toward the sunny street. The fallen man lay on the pavement, moving feebly, eyes open. Something moved up to him, a translucent brownish shape, like muddy water. It hovered for a moment, then dropped on the man like a breaking wave, flowed around him. The body shifted, rotating stiffly, then tilted upright. The sun struck through the fluid shape that flowed down now, amber highlights twinkling, to form itself into the crested wave, flow away.

"What the hell...!"

"Come on!" The red-head turned, trotted silently toward the shadowy bend under the high grey walls. He looked back, beckoned impatiently, passed out of sight around the turn--

Brett came up behind him, saw a wide avenue, tall trees with chartreuse springtime leaves, a wrought-iron fence, and beyond it, rolling green lawns. There were no people in sight.

"Wait a minute! What is this place?!"

His companion turned red-rimmed eyes on Brett. "How long have you been here?" he asked. "How did you get in?"

"I came through a gate. Just about an hour ago."

"I knew you were a man as soon as I saw you talking to the golem," said the red-head. "I've been here two months; maybe more. We've got to get out of sight. You want food? There's a place ..." He jerked his thumb. "Come on. Time to talk later."

* * *

Brett followed him. They turned down a side street, pushed through the door of a dingy cafe. It banged behind them. There were tables, stools at a bar, a dusty juke box. They took seats at a table. The red-head groped under the table, pulled off a shoe, hammered it against the wall. He cocked his head, listening. The silence was absolute. He hammered again. There was a clash of crockery from beyond the kitchen door. "Now don't say anything," the red-head said. He eyed the door behind the counter expectantly. It flew open. A girl with red cheeks and untidy hair, dressed in a green waitress' uniform appeared, swept up to the table, pad and pencil in hand.

"Coffee and a ham sandwich," said the red-head. Brett said nothing. The girl glanced at him briefly, jotted hastily, whisked away.

"I saw them here the first day," the red-head said. "It was a piece of luck. I saw how the Gels started it up. They were big ones--not like the tidiers-up. As soon as they were finished, I came in and tried the same thing. It worked. I used the golem's lines--"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Brett said. "I'm going to ask that girl--"

"Don't say anything to her; it might spoil everything. The whole sequence might collapse; or it might call the Gels. I'm not sure. You can have the food when it comes back with it."

"Why do you say 'when 'it' comes back'?

"Ah." He looked at Brett strangely. "I'll show you."

Brett could smell food now. His mouth watered. He hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours.

"Care, that's the thing," the red-head said. "Move quiet, and stay out of sight, and you can live like a County Duke. Food's the hardest, but here--"

The red-cheeked girl reappeared, a tray balanced on one arm, a heavy cup and saucer in the other hand. She clattered them down on the table.

" Took you long enough," the red-head said. "I saw how the Gels started it up. They were big ones--not like the tidiers-up. As soon as they were finished, I came in and tried the same thing. It worked. I used the golem's lines--"

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The red-cheeked girl reappeared, a tray balanced on one arm, a heavy cup and saucer in the other hand. She clattered them down on the table.

" Took you long enough," the red-head said. The girl sniffed, opened her mouth to speak--and the red-head darted out a stiff finger, jabbed her under the ribs. She stood, mouth open, frozen.

Brett half rose. "He's crazy, miss," he said. "Please accept--"

"Don't waste your breath." Brett's host was looking at him triumphantly. "Why do I call it 'it'?" He stood up, reached out and undid the top buttons of the green uniform. The waitress stood, leaning slightly forward, unmoving. The blouse fell open, exposing round white breasts--unadorned, blind.

"A doll," said the red-head. "A puppet; a golem."

* * *

Brett stared at her, the damp curls at her temple, the tip of her tongue behind her teeth, the tiny red veins in her
round cheeks, and the white skin curving ...

"That's a quick way to tell 'em," said the red-head. "The teat is smooth." He rebuttoned the uniform, then jabbed again at the girl's ribs. She straightened, patted her hair.

"No doubt a gentleman like you is used to better," she said carelessly. She went away.

"I'm Awalawon Dhuva," the red-head said.

"My name's Brett Hale." Brett took a bite of the sandwich.

"Those clothes," Dhuva said. "And you have a strange way of talking. What county are you from?"

"Jefferson."

"Never heard of it. I'm from Wavly. What brought you here?"

"I was on a train. The tracks came to an end out in the middle of nowhere. I walked ... and here I am. What is this place?"

"Don't know." Dhuva shook his head. "I knew they were lying about the Fire River, though. Never did believe all that stuff. Religious hokum, to keep the masses quiet. Don't know what to believe now. Take the roof. They say a hundred kharfads up; but how do we know? Maybe it's a thousand--or only ten. By Grat, I'd like to go up in a balloon, see for myself."

"What are you talking about?" Brett said. "Go where in a balloon? See what?"

"Oh, I've seen one at the Tourney. Big hot-air bag, with a basket under it. Tied down with a rope. But if you cut the rope...! But you can bet the priests will never let that happen, no, sir." Dhuva looked at Brett speculatively. "What about your county: Fesson, or whatever you called it. How high do they tell you it is there?"

"You mean the sky? Well, the air ends after a few miles and space just goes on--millions of miles--" Dhuva slapped the table and laughed. "The people in Fesseron must be some yokels! Just goes on up; now who'd swallow that tale?" He chuckled.

"Only a child thinks the sky is some kind of tent," said Brett. "Haven't you ever heard of the Solar System, the other planets?"

"What are those?"

"Other worlds. They all circle around the sun, like the Earth."

"Other worlds, eh? Sailing around up under the roof? Funny; I never saw them." Dhuva snickered. "Wake up, Brett. Forget all those stories. Just believe what you see."

"What about that brown thing?"

"The Gels? They run this place. Look out for them, Brett. Stay alert. Don't let them see you."

* * *

"What do they do?"

"I don't know--and I don't want to find out. This is a great place--I like it here. I have all I want to eat, plenty of nice rooms for sleeping. There's the parades and the scenes. It's a good life--as long as you keep out of sight."

"How do you get out of here?" Brett asked, finishing his coffee.

"Don't know how to get out; over the wall, I suppose. I don't plan to leave though. I left home in a hurry. The Duke--never mind. I'm not going back."

"Are all the people here ... golems?" Brett said. "Aren't there any more real people?"

"You're the first I've seen. I spotted you as soon as I saw you. A live man moves different than a golem. You see golems doing things like knitting their brows, starting back in alarm, looking askance, and standing arms akimbo. And they have things like pursed lips and knowing glances and mirthless laughter. You know: all the things you read about, that real people never do. But now that you're here, I've got somebody to talk to. I did get lonesome, I admit. I'll show you where I stay and we'll fix you up with a bed."

"I won't be around that long."

"What can you get outside that you can't get here? There's everything you need here in the city. We can have a great time."

"You sound like my Aunt Haicey," Brett said. "She said I had everything I needed back in Casperton. How does she know what I need? How do you know? How do I know myself? I can tell you I need more than food and a place to sleep--"

"What more?"

"Everything. Things to think about and something worth doing. Why, even in the movies--"

"What's a movie?"

"You know, a play, on film. A moving picture."

"A picture that moves?"

"That's right."

"This is something the priests told you about?" Dhuva seemed to be holding in his mirth.
"Everybody's seen movies."

Dhuva burst out laughing. "Those priests," he said. "They're the same everywhere, I see. The stories they tell, and people believe them. What else?"

"Priests have nothing to do with it."

Dhuva composed his features. "What do they tell you about Grat, and the Wheel?"

"Grat? What's that?"


"I suppose you're talking about God," Brett said.

"I don't know about God. Tell me about it."

"He's the creator of the world. He's ... well, superhuman. He knows everything that happens, and when you die, if you've led a good life, you meet God in Heaven."

"Where's that?"

"It's ..." Brett waved a hand vaguely, "up above."

"But you said there was just emptiness up above," Dhuva recalled. "And some other worlds whirling around, like islands adrift in the sea."

"Well--"

"Never mind," Dhuva held up his hands. "Our priests are liars too. All that balderdash about the Wheel and the River of Fire. It's just as bad as your Hivvel or whatever you called it. And our Grat and your Mud, or Gog: they're the same--" Dhuva's head went up. "What's that?"

"I didn't hear anything."

* * *

Dhuva got to his feet, turned to the door. Brett rose. A towering brown shape, glassy and transparent, hung in the door, its surface rippling. Dhuva whirled, leaped past Brett, dived for the rear door. Brett stood frozen. The shape flowed--swift as quicksilver--caught Dhuva in mid-stride, engulfed him. For an instant Brett saw the thin figure, legs kicking, upended within the muddy form of the Gel. Then the turbid wave swept across to the door, sloshed it aside, disappeared. Dhuva was gone.

Brett stood rooted, staring at the doorway. A bar of sunlight fell across the dusty floor. A brown mouse ran along the baseboard. It was very quiet. Brett went to the door through which the Gel had disappeared, hesitated a moment, then thrust it open.

He was looking down into a great dark pit, acres in extent, its sides riddled with holes, the amputated ends of water and sewage lines and power cables dangling. Far below light glistened from the surface of a black pool. A few feet away the waitress stood unmoving in the dark on a narrow strip of linoleum. At her feet the chasm yawned. The edge of the floor was ragged, as though it had been gnawed away by rats. There was no sign of Dhuva.

Brett stepped back into the dining room, let the door swing shut. He took a deep breath, picked up a paper napkin from a table and wiped his forehead, dropped the napkin on the floor and went out into the street, his suitcase forgotten now. At the corner he turned, walked along past silent shop windows crowded with home permanents, sun glasses, fingernail polish, suntan lotion, paper cartons, streamers, plastic toys, vari-colored garments of synthetic fiber, home remedies, beauty aids, popular music, greeting cards ... At the next corner he stopped, looking down the silent streets. Nothing moved. Brett went to a window in a grey concrete wall, pulled himself up to peer through the dusty pane, saw a room filled with tailor's forms, garment racks, a bicycle, bundled back issues of magazines without covers.

He went along to a door. It was solid, painted shut. The next door looked easier. He wrenched at the tarnished brass nob, then stepped back and kicked the door. With a hollow sound the door fell inward, taking with it the jamb. Brett stood staring at the gaping opening. A fragment of masonry dropped with a dry clink. Brett stepped through the breach in the grey facade. The black pool at the bottom of the pit winked a flicker of light back at him in the deep gloom.

* * *

Around him, the high walls of the block of buildings loomed in silhouette; the squares of the windows were ranks of luminous blue against the dark. Dust motes danced in shafts of sunlight. Far above, the roof was dimly visible, a spidery tangle of trusswork. And below was the abyss.

At Brett's feet the stump of a heavy brass rail projected an inch from the floor. It was long enough, Brett thought, to give firm anchor to a rope. Somewhere below, Dhuva--a stranger who had befriended him--lay in the grip of the Gels. He would do what he could--but he needed equipment--and help. First he would find a store with rope, guns, knives. He would--

The broken edge of masonry where the door had been caught his eye. The shell of the wall, exposed where the
door frame had torn away, was wafer-thin. Brett reached up, broke off a piece. The outer face--the side that showed on the street--was smooth, solid-looking. The back was porous, nibbled. Brett stepped outside, examined the wall. He kicked at the grey surface. A great piece of wall, six feet high, broke into fragments, fell on the sidewalk with a crash, driving out a puff of dust. Another section fell. One piece of it skidded away, clattered down into the depths. Brett heard a distant splash. He looked at the great jagged opening in the wall--like a jigsaw picture with a piece missing. He turned and started off at a trot, his mouth dry, his pulse thumping painfully in his chest.

Two blocks from the hollow building, Brett slowed to a walk, his footsteps echoing in the empty street. He looked into each store window as he passed. There were artificial legs, bottles of colored water, immense dolls, wigs, glass eyes--but no rope. Brett tried to think. What kind of store would handle rope? A marine supply company, maybe. But where would he find one?

Perhaps it would be easiest to look in a telephone book. Ahead he saw a sign lettered HOTEL. Brett went up to the revolving door, pushed inside. He was in a dim, marble-panelled lobby, with double doors leading into a beige-carpeted bar on his right, the brass-painted cage of an elevator directly before him, flanked by tall urns of sand and an ascending staircase. On the left was a dark mahogany-finished reception desk. Behind the desk a man stood silently, waiting. Brett felt a wild surge of relief.

"Those things, those Gels!" he called, starting across the room. "My friend--"

He broke off. The clerk stood, staring over Brett's shoulder, holding a pen poised over a book. Brett reached out, took the pen. The man's finger curled stiffly around nothing. A golem.

* * *

Brett turned away, went into the bar. Vacant stools were ranged before a dark mirror. At the tables empty glasses stood before empty chairs. Brett started as he heard the revolving door thump-thump. Suddenly soft light bathed the lobby behind him. Somewhere a piano tinkled More Than You Know. With a distant clatter of closing doors the elevator came to life.

Brett hugged a shadowed corner, saw a fat man in a limp seersucker suit cross to the reception desk. He had a red face, a bald scalp blotched with large brown freckles. The clerk inclined his head blandly.

"Ah, yes, sir, a nice double with bath ..." Brett heard the unctuous voice of the clerk as he offered the pen. The fat man took it, scrawled something in the register. "... at fourteen dollars," the clerk murmured. He smiled, dinged the bell. A boy in tight green tunic and trousers and a pillbox cap with a chin strap pushed through a door beside the desk, took the key, led the way to the elevator. The fat man entered. Through the openwork of the shaft Brett watched as the elevator car rose, greasy cables trembling and swaying. He started back across the lobby--and stopped dead.

A wet brown shape had appeared in the entrance. It flowed across the rug to the bellhop. Face blank, the golem turned back to its door. Above, Brett heard the elevator stop. Doors clashed. The clerk stood poised behind the desk. The Gel hovered, then flowed away. The piano was silent now. The lights burned, a soft glow, then winked out. Brett thought about the fat man. He had seen him before ...

He went up the stairs. In the second floor corridor Brett felt his way along in near-darkness, guided by the dim light coming through transoms. He tried a door. It opened. He stepped into a large bedroom with a double bed, an easy chair, a chest of drawers. He crossed the room, looked out across an alley. Twenty feet away white curtains hung at windows in a brick wall. There was nothing behind the windows.

There were sounds in the corridor. Brett dropped to the floor behind the bed.

"All right, you two," a drunken voice bellowed. "And may all your troubles be little ones." There was laughter, squeals, a dry clash of beads flung against the door. A key grated. The door swung wide. Lights blazed in the hall, silhouetting the figures of a man in black jacket and trousers, a woman in a white bridal dress and veil, flowers in her hand.

"Take care, Mel!"

"... do anything I wouldn't do!"

"... kiss the bride, now!"

The couple backed into the room, pushed the door shut, stood against it. Brett crouched behind the bed, not breathing, waiting. The couple stood at the door, in the dark, heads down ...

* * *

Brett stood, rounded the foot of the bed, approached the two unmoving figures. The girl looked young, sleek, perfect-featured, with soft dark hair. Her eyes were half-open; Brett caught a glint of light reflected from the eyeball. The man was bronzed, broad-shouldered, his hair wavy and blond. His lips were parted, showing even white teeth. The two stood, not breathing, sightless eyes fixed on nothing.

Brett took the bouquet from the woman's hand. The flowers seemed real--except that they had no perfume. He dropped them on the floor, pulled at the male golem to clear the door. The figure pivoted, toppled, hit with a heavy
thump. Brett raised the woman in his arms and propped her against the bed. Back at the door he listened. All was quiet now. He started to open the door, then hesitated. He went back to the bed, undid the tiny pearl buttons down the front of the bridal gown, pulled it open. The breasts were rounded, smooth, an unbroken creamy white ...

In the hall, he started toward the stair. A tall Gel rippled into view ahead, its shape flowing and wavering, now billowing out, then rising up. The shifting form undulated toward Brett. He made a move to run, then remembered Dhuva, stood motionless. The Gel wobbled past him, slumped suddenly, flowed under a door. Brett let out a breath. Never mind the fat man. There were too many Gels here. He started back along the corridor.

Soft music came from double doors which stood open on a landing. Brett went to them, risked a look inside. Graceful couples moved sedately on a polished floor, diners sat at tables, black-clad waiters moving among them. At the far side of the room, near a dusty rubber plant, sat the fat man, studying a menu. As Brett watched he shook out a napkin, ran it around inside his collar, then mopped his face.

Never disturb a scene, Dhuva had said. But perhaps he could blend with it. Brett brushed at his suit, straightened his tie, stepped into the room. A waiter approached, eyed him dubiously. Brett got out his wallet, took out a five-dollar bill.

"A quiet table in the corner," he said. He glanced back. There were no Gels in sight. He followed the waiter to a table near the fat man.

* * *

Seated, he looked around. He wanted to talk to the fat man, but he couldn't afford to attract attention. He would watch, and wait his chance.

At the nearby tables men with well-pressed suits, clean collars, and carefully shaved faces murmured to sleekly gowned women who fingered wine glasses, smiled archly. He caught fragments of conversation:

"My dear, have you heard ..."
"... in the low eighties ..."
"... quite impossible. One must ...
"... for this time of year."

The waiter returned with a shallow bowl of milky soup. Brett looked at the array of spoons, forks, knives, glanced sideways at the diners at the next table. It was important to follow the correct ritual. He put his napkin in his lap, careful to shake out all the folds. He looked at the spoons again, picked a large one, glanced at the waiter. So far so good ...

"Wine, sir?"

Brett indicated the neighboring couple. "The same as they're having." The waiter turned away, returned holding a wine bottle, label toward Brett. He looked at it, nodded. The waiter busied himself with the cork, removing it with many flourishes, setting a glass before Brett, pouring half an inch of wine. He waited expectantly.

Brett picked up the glass, tasted it. It tasted like wine. He nodded. The waiter poured. Brett wondered what would have happened if he had made a face and spurned it. But it would be too risky to try. No one ever did it.

Couples danced, resumed their seats; others rose and took the floor. A string ensemble in a distant corner played restrained tunes that seemed to speak of the gentle faded melancholy of decorous tea dances on long-forgotten afternoons. Brett glanced toward the fat man. He was eating soup noisily, his napkin tied under his chin.

The waiter was back with a plate. "Lovely day, sir," he said.

"Great," Brett agreed.

The waiter placed a covered platter on the table, removed the cover, stood with carving knife and fork poised.

"A bit of the crispy, sir?"

Brett nodded. He eyed the waiter surreptitiously. He looked real. Some golems seemed realer than others; or perhaps it merely depended on the parts they were playing. The man who had fallen at the parade had been only a sort of extra, a crowd member. The waiter, on the other hand, was able to converse. Perhaps it would be possible to learn something from him ...  

"What's...uh... how do you spell the name of this town?" Brett asked.

"I was never much of a one for spelling, sir," the waiter said.

"Try it."

"Gravy, sir?"

"Sure. Try to spell the name."

"Perhaps I'd better call the headwaiter, sir," the golem said stiffly.

From the corner of an eye Brett caught a flicker of motion. He whirled, saw nothing. Had it been a Gel?

"Never mind," he said. The waiter served potatoes, peas, refilled the wine glass, moved off silently. The question had been a little too unorthodox, Brett decided. Perhaps if he led up to the subject more obliquely ...  

* * *
When the waiter returned Brett said, "Nice day."
"Very nice, sir."
"Better than yesterday."
"Yes indeed, sir."
"I wonder what tomorrow'll be like."
"Perhaps we'll have a bit of rain, sir."
Brett nodded toward the dance floor. "Nice orchestra."
"They're very popular, sir."
"From here in town?"
"I wouldn't know as to that, sir."
"Lived here long yourself?"
"Oh, yes, sir." The waiter's expression showed disapproval. "Would there be anything else, sir?"
"I'm a newcomer here," Brett said. "I wonder if you could tell me--"
"Excuse me, sir." The waiter was gone. Brett poked at the mashed potatoes. Quizzing golems was hopeless. He would have to find out for himself. He turned to look at the fat man. As Brett watched he took a large handkerchief from a pocket, blew his nose loudly. No one turned to look. The orchestra played softly. The couples danced. Now was as good a time as any ...
Brett rose, crossed to the other's table. The man looked up.
"Mind if I sit down?" Brett said. "I'd like to talk to you."
The fat man blinked, motioned to a chair. Brett sat down, leaned across the table. "Maybe I'm wrong," he said quietly, "but I think you're real."
The fat man blinked again. "What's that?" he snapped. He had a high petulant voice.
"You're not like the rest of them. I think I can talk to you. I think you're another outsider."
The fat man looked down at his rumpled suit. "I ... ah ... was caught a little short today. Didn't have time to change. I'm a busy man. And what business is it of yours?" He clamped his jaw shut, eyed Brett warily.
"I'm a stranger here," Brett said. "I want to find out what's going on in this place--"
"Buy an amusement guide. Lists all the shows--"
"I don't mean that. I mean these dummies all over the place, and the Gels--"
"I love Jello. I don't--"
"Just ask the waiter. He'll bring you your Jello. Any flavor you like. Now if you'll excuse me ..."
"I'm talking about the brown things; they look like muddy water. They come around if you interfere with a scene."
The fat man looked nervous. "Please. Go away."
"If I make a disturbance, the Gels will come. Is that what you're afraid of?"
"Now, now. Be calm. No need for you to get excited."
"I won't make a scene," Brett said. "Just talk to me. How long have you been here?"
"I dislike scenes. I dislike them intensely."
"When did you come here?"
"Just ten minutes ago. I just sat down. I haven't had my dinner yet. Please, young man. Go back to your table."
The fat man watched Brett warily. Sweat glistened on his bald head.
"I mean this town. How long have you been here? Where did you come from?"
"Why, I was born here. Where did I come from? What sort of question is that? Just consider that the stork brought me."
"You were born here?"
"Certainly."
"What's the name of the town?"
* * *
"Are you trying to make a fool of me?" The fat man was getting angry. His voice was rising.
"Shhh," Brett cautioned. "You'll attract the Gels."
"Blast the Jilts, whatever that is!" the fat man snapped. "Now, get along with you. I'll call the manager."
"Don't you know?" Brett said, staring at the fat man. "They're all dummies; golems, they're called. They're not real."
"Who're not real?"
"All these imitation people at the tables and on the dance floor. Surely you realize--"
"I realize you're in need of medical attention." The fat man pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "You keep
the table," he said. "I'll dine elsewhere."

"Wait!" Brett got up, seized the fat man's arm.

"Take your hands off me--" The fat man went toward the door. Brett followed. At the cashier's desk Brett turned suddenly, saw a fluid brown shape flicker--

"Look!" He pulled at the fat man's arm--

"Look at what?" The Gel was gone.

"It was there: a Gel."

The fat man flung down a bill, hurried away. Brett fumbled out a ten, waited for change. "Wait!" he called. He heard the fat man's feet receding down the stairs.

"Hurry," he said to the cashier. The woman sat glassy-eyed, staring at nothing. The music died. The lights flickered, went off. In the gloom Brett saw a fluid shape rise up--

He ran, pounding down the stairs. The fat man was just rounding the corner. Brett opened his mouth to call--and went rigid, as a translucent shape of mud shot from the door, rose up to tower before him. Brett stood, mouth half open, eyes staring, leaning forward with hands outflung. The Gel loomed, its surface flickering--waiting. Brett caught an acrid odor of geraniums.

A minute passed. Brett's cheek itched. He fought a desire to blink, to swallow--to turn and run. The high sun beat down on the silent street, the still window displays.

Then the Gel broke form, slumped, flashed away. Brett tottered back against the wall, let his breath out in a harsh sigh.

Across the street he saw a window with a display of camping equipment, portable stoves, boots, rifles. He crossed the street, tried the door. It was locked. He looked up and down the street. There was no one in sight. He kicked in the glass beside the latch, reached through and turned the knob. Inside he looked over the shelves, selected a heavy coil of nylon rope, a sheath knife, a canteen. He examined a Winchester repeating rifle with a telescopic sight, then put it back and strapped on a .22 revolver. He emptied two boxes of long rifle cartridges into his pocket, then loaded the pistol. He coiled the rope over his shoulder and went back out into the empty street.

* * *

The fat man was standing in front of a shop in the next block, picking at a blemish on his chin and eyeing the window display. He looked up with a frown, started away as Brett came up.

"Wait a minute," Brett called. "Didn't you see the Gel? the one that cornered me back there?"

The fat man looked back suspiciously, kept going.

"Wait!" Brett caught his arm. "I know you're real. I've seen you belch and sweat and scratch. You're the only one I can call on--and I need help. My friend is trapped--"

The fat man pulled away, his face flushed an even deeper red. "I'm warning you, you maniac: get away from me...!"

Brett stepped close, rammed the fat man hard in the ribs. He sank to his knees, gasping. The panama hat rolled away. Brett grabbed his arm, steadied him.

"Sorry," he said. "I had to be sure. You're real, all right. We've got to rescue my friend, Dhuva--"

The fat man leaned against the glass, rolling terrified eyes, rubbing his stomach. "I'll call the police!" he gasped.

"What police?" Brett waved an arm. "Look. Not a car in sight. Did you ever see the street that empty before?"

"Wednesday afternoon," the fat man gasped.

"Come with me. I want to show you. It's all hollow. There's nothing behind these walls--"

"Why doesn't somebody come along?" the fat man moaned.

"The masonry is only a quarter-inch thick," Brett said. "Come on; I'll show you."

"I don't like it," said the fat man. His face was pale and moist. "You're mad. What's wrong? It's so quiet ..."

"We've got to try to save him. The Gel took him down into this pit--"

"Let me go," the man whined. "I'm afraid. Can't you just let me lead my life in peace?"

"Don't you understand? The Gel took a man. They may be after you next."

"There's no one after me! I'm a business man ... a respectable citizen. I mind my own business, give to charity, go to church. All I want is to be left alone!"

* * *

Brett dropped his hands from the fat man's arms, stood looking at him: the blotched face, pale now, the damp forehead, the quivering jowls. The fat man stooped for his hat, slapped it against his leg, clamped it on his head.

"I think I understand now," said Brett. "This is your place, this imitation city. Everything's faked to fit your needs--like in the hotel. Wherever you go, the scene unrolls in front of you. You never see the Gels, never discover the secret of the golems--because you conform. You never do the unexpected."

"That's right. I'm law-abiding. I'm respectable. I don't pry. I don't nose into other people's business. Why should
I? Just let me alone ..."
    "Sure," Brett said. "Even if I dragged you down there and showed you, you wouldn't believe it. But you're not
in the scene now. I've taken you out of it--"
    Suddenly the fat man turned and ran a few yards, then looked back to see whether Brett was pursuing him. He
shook a round fist.
    "I've seen your kind before," he shouted. "Troublemakers."
    Brett took a step toward him. The fat man yelped and ran another fifty feet, his coat tails bobbing. He looked
back, stopped, a fat figure alone in the empty sunny street.
    "You haven't seen the last of me!" he shouted. "We know how to deal with your kind." He tugged at his vest,
went off along the sidewalk. Brett watched him go, then started back toward the hollow building.
* * * * *
    The jagged fragments of masonry Brett had knocked from the wall lay as he had left them. He stepped through
the opening, peered down into the murky pit, trying to judge its depth. A hundred feet at least. Perhaps a hundred
and fifty.
    He unslung the rope from his shoulder, tied one end to the brass stump, threw the coil down the precipitous
side. It fell away into darkness, hung swaying. It was impossible to tell whether the end reached any solid footing
below. He couldn't waste any more time looking for help. He would have to try it alone.
    There was a scrape of shoe leather on the pavement outside. He turned, stepped out into the white sunlight. The
fat man rounded the corner, recoiled as he saw Brett. He flung out a pudgy forefinger, his protruding eyes wide in
his blotchy red face.
    "There he is! I told you he came this way!" Two uniformed policemen came into view. One eyed the gun at
Brett's side, put a hand on his own.
    "Better take that off, sir."
    "Look!" Brett said to the fat man. He stooped, picked up a crust of masonry. "Look at this--just a shell--"
    "He's blasted a hole right in that building, officer!" the fat man shrilled. "He's dangerous."
    The cop ignored the gaping hole in the wall. "You'll have to come along with me, sir. This gentleman registered
a complaint ...?"
    Brett stood staring into the cop's eyes. They were pale blue eyes, looking steadily back at him from a bland
face. Could the cop be real? Or would he be able to push him over, as he had other golems?
    "The fellow's not right in the head," the fat man was saying to the cop. "You should have heard his crazy talk.
A troublemaker. His kind have got to be locked up!"
    The cop nodded. "Can't have anyone causing trouble."
    "Only a young fellow," said the fat man. He mopped at his forehead with a large handkerchief. "Tragic. But I'm
sure that you men know how to handle him."
    "Better give me the gun, sir."
    The cop held out a hand. Brett moved suddenly, rammed stiff fingers into the
cop's ribs. He stiffened, toppled, lay rigid, staring up at nothing.
    "You ... you killed him," the fat man gasped, backing. The second cop tugged at his gun. Brett leaped at him,
sent him down with a blow to the ribs. He turned to face the fat man.
    "I didn't kill them! I just turned them off. They're not real, they're just golems."
    "A killer! And right in the city, in broad daylight."
    "You've got to help me!" Brett cried. "This whole scene: don't you see? It has the air of something improvised
in a hurry, to deal with the unexpected factor; that's me. The Gels know something's wrong, but they can't quite
figure out what. When you called the cops the Gels obliged--"
* * * *
    Startlingly the fat man burst into tears. He fell to his knees.
    "Don't kill me ... oh, don't kill me ..."
    "Nobody's going to kill you, you fool!" Brett snapped. "Look! I want to show you!" He seized the fat man's
lapel, dragged him to his feet and across the sidewalk, through the opening. The fat man stopped dead, stumbled
back--
    "What's this? What kind of place is this?" He scrambled for the opening.
    "It's what I've been trying to tell you. This city you live in--it's a hollow shell. There's nothing inside. None of
it's real. Only you ... and me. There was another man: Dhuva. I was in a cafe with him. A Gel came. He tried to run.
It caught him. Now he's ... down there."
    "I'm not alone," the fat man babbled. "I have my friends, my clubs, my business associates. I'm insured. Lately
I've been thinking a lot about Jesus--"
    He broke off, whirled, and jumped for the doorway. Brett leaped after him, caught his coat. It ripped. The fat
man stumbled over one of the cop-golems, went to hands and knees. Brett stood over him.

"Get up, damn it!" he snapped. "I need help and you're going to help me!" He hauled the fat man to his feet. "All you have to do is stand by the rope. Dhuva may be unconscious when I find him. You'll have to help me haul him up. If anybody comes along, any Gels, I mean--give me a signal. A whistle ... like this--" Brett demonstrated. "And if I get in trouble, do what you can. Here ..." Brett started to offer the fat man the gun, then handed him the hunting knife. "If anybody interferes, this may not do any good, but it's something. I'm going down now."

The fat man watched as Brett gripped the rope, let himself over the edge. Brett looked up at the glistening face, the damp strands of hair across the freckled scalp. Brett had no assurance that the man would stay at his post, but he had done what he could.

"Remember," said Brett. "It's a real man they've got, like you and me ... not a golem. We owe it to him." The fat man's hands trembled. He watched Brett, licked his lips. Brett started down.

* * * * *

The descent was easy. The rough face of the excavation gave footholds. The end of a decaying timber projected; below it was the stump of a crumbling concrete pipe two feet in diameter. Brett was ten feet below the rim of floor now. Above, the broad figure of the fat man was visible in silhouette against the jagged opening in the wall.

Now the cliff shelved back; the rope hung free. Brett eased past the cut end of a rusted water pipe, went down hand over hand. If there were nothing at the bottom to give him footing, it would be a long climb back ...

Twenty feet below he could see the still black water, pockmarked with expanding rings where bits of debris dislodged by his passage peppered the surface.

There was a rhythmic vibration in the rope. Brett felt it through his hands, a fine sawing sensation ...

He was falling, gripping the limp rope ...

He slammed on his back in three feet of oily water. The coils of rope collapsed around him with a sustained splashing. He got to his feet, groped for the end of the rope. The glossy nylon strands had been cleanly cut.

* * * *

For half an hour Brett waded in waist-deep water along a wall of damp clay that rose sheer above him. Far above, bars of dim sunlight crossed the upper reaches of the cavern. He had seen no sign of Dhuva ... or the Gels.

He encountered a sodden timber that projected above the surface of the pool, clung to it to rest. Bits of flotsam—a plastic pistol, bridge tallies, a golf bag—floated in the black water. A tunnel extended through the clay wall ahead; beyond, Brett could see a second great cavern rising. He pictured the city, silent and empty above, and the honey-combed earth beneath. He moved on.

An hour later Brett had traversed the second cavern. Now he clung to an outthrust spur of granite directly beneath the point at which Dhuva had disappeared. Far above he could see the green-clad waitress standing stiffly on her ledge. He was tired. Walking in water, his feet floundering in soft mud, was exhausting. He was no closer to escape, or to finding Dhuva, than he had been when the fat man cut the rope. He had been a fool to leave the man alone, with a knife ... but he had had no choice.

He would have to find another way out. Endlessly wading at the bottom of the pit was useless. He would have to climb. One spot was as good as another. He stepped back and scanned the wall of clay looming over him. Twenty feet up, water dripped from the broken end of a four-inch water main. Brett uncoiled the rope from his shoulder, tied a loop in the end, whirled it and cast upward. It missed, fell back with a splash. He gathered it in, tried again. On the third try it caught. He tested it, then started up. His hands were slippery with mud and water. He twined the rope around his legs, inched higher. The slender cable was smooth as glass. He slipped back two feet, then inched upward, slipped again, painfully climbed, slipped, climbed.

After the first ten feet he found toe-holds in the muddy wall. He worked his way up, his hands aching and raw. A projecting tangle of power cable gave a secure purchase for a foot. He rested. Nearby, an opening two feet in diameter gaped in the clay: a tunnel. It might be possible to swing sideways across the face of the clay and reach the opening. It was worth a try. His stiff, clay-slimed hands would pull him no higher.

He gripped the rope, kicked off sideways, hooked a foot in the tunnel mouth, half jumped, half fell into the mouth of the tunnel. He clung to the rope, shook it loose from the pipe above, coiled it and looped it over his shoulder. On hands and knees he started into the narrow passage.

* * *

The tunnel curved left, then right, dipped, then angled up. Brett crawled steadily, the smooth stiff clay yielding and cold against his hands and sodden knees. Another smaller tunnel joined from the left. Another angled in from above. The tunnel widened to three feet, then four. Brett got to his feet, walked in a crouch. Here and there, barely visible in the near-darkness, objects lay imbedded in the mud: a silver-plated spoon, its handle bent; the rusted engine of an electric train; a portable radio, green with corrosion from burst batteries.

At a distance, Brett estimated, of a hundred yards from the pit, the tunnel opened into a vast cave, green-lit
from tiny discs of frosted glass set in the ceiling far above. A row of discolored concrete piles, the foundations of the building above, protruded against the near wall, their surfaces nibbled and pitted. Between Brett and the concrete columns the floor was littered with pale sticks and stones, gleaming dully in the gloom.

Brett started across the floor. One of the sticks snapped underfoot. He kicked a melon-sized stone. It rolled lightly, came to rest with hollow eyes staring toward him. A human skull.

* * * * *

The floor of the cave covered an area the size of a city block. It was blanketed with human bones, with here and there a small cat skeleton or the fanged snout-bones of a dog. There was a constant rustling of rats that played among the rib cages, sat atop crania, scuttled behind shin-bones. Brett picked his way, stepping over imitation pearl necklaces, zircon rings, plastic buttons, hearing aids, lipsticks, compacts, corset stays, prosthetic devices, rubber heels, wrist watches, lapel watches, pocket watches with corroded brass chains.

Ahead Brett saw a patch of color: a blur of pale yellow. He hurried, stumbling over bone heaps, crunching eyeglasses underfoot. He reached the still figure where it lay slackly, face down. Gingerly he squatted, turned it on its back. It was Dhuva.

Brett slapped the cold wrists, rubbed the clammy hands. Dhuva stirred, moaned weakly. Brett pulled him to a sitting position. "Wake up!" he whispered. "Wake up!"

Dhuva's eyelids fluttered. He blinked dully at Brett.

"The Gels may turn up any minute," Brett hissed. "We have to get away from here. Can you walk?"

"I saw it," said Dhuva faintly. "But it moved so fast ..."

"You're safe here for the moment," Brett said. "There are none of them around. But they may be back. We've got to find a way out!"

Dhuva started up, staring around. "Where am I?" he said hoarsely. Brett seized his arm, steadied him on his feet.

"We're in a hollowed-out cave," he said. "The whole city is undermined with them. They're connected by tunnels. We have to find one leading back to the surface."

Dhuva gazed around at the acres of bones. "It left me here for dead."

"Or to die," said Brett.

"Look at them," Dhuva breathed. "Hundreds ... thousands ..."

"The whole population, it looks like. The Gels must have whisked them down here one by one."

"But why?"

"For interfering with the scenes. But that doesn't matter now. What matters is getting out. Come on. I see tunnels on the other side."

They crossed the broad floor, around them the white bones, the rustle of rats. They reached the far side of the cave, picked a six-foot tunnel which trended upward, a trickle of water seeping out of the dark mouth. They started up the slope.

* * *

"We have to have a weapon against the Gels," said Brett.

"Why? I don't want to fight them." Dhuva's voice was thin, frightened. "I want to get away from here ... even back to Wavly. I'd rather face the Duke."

"This was a real town, once," said Brett. "The Gels have taken it over, hollowed out the buildings, mined the earth under it, killed off the people, and put imitation people in their place. And nobody ever knew. I met a man who's lived here all his life. He doesn't know. But we know ... and we have to do something about it."

"It's not our business. I've had enough. I want to get away."

"The Gels must stay down below, somewhere in that maze of tunnels. For some reason they try to keep up appearances ... but only for the people who belong here. They play out scenes for the fat man, wherever he goes. And he never goes anywhere he isn't expected to."

"We'll get over the wall somehow," said Dhuva. "We may starve, crossing the dry fields, but that's better than this."

They emerged from the tunnel into a coal bin, crossed to a sagging door, found themselves in a boiler room. Stairs led up to sunlight. In the street, in the shadow of tall buildings, a boxy sedan was parked at the curb. Brett went to it, tried the door. It opened. Keys dangled from the ignition switch. He slid into the dusty seat. Behind him there was a hoarse scream. Brett looked up. Through the streaked windshield he saw a mighty Gel rear up before Dhuva, who crouched back against the blackened brick front of the building.

"Don't move, Dhuva!" Brett shouted. Dhuva stood frozen, flattened against the wall. The Gel towered, its surface rippling.

Brett eased from the seat. He stood on the pavement, fifteen feet from the Gel. The rank Gel odor came in
waves from the creature. Beyond it he could see Dhuva's white terrified face.

Silently Brett turned the latch of the old-fashioned auto hood, raised it. The copper fuel line curved down from the firewall to a glass sediment cup. The knurled retaining screw turned easily; the cup dropped into Brett's hand. Gasoline ran down in an amber stream. Brett pulled off his damp coat, wadded it, jammed it under the flow. Over his shoulder he saw Dhuva, still rigid—and the Gel, hovering, uncertain.

The coat was saturated with gasoline now. Brett fumbled a match box from his pocket. Wet. He threw the sodden container aside. The battery caught his eye, clamped in a rusted frame under the hood. He jerked the pistol from its holster, used it to short the terminals. Tiny blue sparks jumped. He jammed the coat near, rasped the gun against the soft lead poles. With a whoosh! the coat caught; yellow flames leaped, soot-rimmed. Brett snatched at a sleeve, whirled the coat high. The great Gel, attracted by the sudden motion, rushed at him. He flung the blazing garment over the monster, leaped aside.

The creature went mad. It slumped, lashed itself against the pavement. The burning coat was thrown clear. The Gel threw itself across the pavement, into the gutter, sending a splatter of filthy water over Brett. From the corner of his eye, Brett saw Dhuva seize the burning coat, hurl it into the pooled gasoline in the gutter. Fire leaped twenty feet high; in its center the great Gel bucked and writhed. The ancient car shuddered as the frantic monster struck it. Black smoke boiled up; an unbelievable stench came to Brett's nostrils. He backed, coughing. Flames roared around the front of the car. Paint blistered and burned. A tire burst. In a final frenzy, the Gel whipped clear, lay, a great blackened shape of melting rubber, twitching, then still.

"They've tunneled under everything," Brett said. "They've cut through power lines and water lines, concrete, steel, earth; they've left the shell, shored up with spidery-looking trusswork. Somehow they've kept water and power flowing to wherever they needed it—"

"I don't care about your theories," Dhuva said; "I only want to get away."

"It's bound to work, Dhuva. I need your help."

"No."

"Then I'll have to try alone." He turned away.

"Wait," Dhuva called. He came up to Brett. "I owe you a life; you saved mine. I can't let you down now. But if this doesn't work ... or if you can't find what you want—"

"Then we'll go."

Together they turned down a side street, walking rapidly. At the next corner Brett pointed.

"There's one!" They crossed to the service station at a run. Brett tried the door. Locked. He kicked at it, splintered the wood around the lock. He glanced around inside. "No good," he called. "Try the next building. I'll check the one behind."

He crossed the wide drive, battered in a door, looked in at a floor covered with wood shavings. It ended ten feet from the door. Brett went to the edge, looked down. Diagonally, forty feet away, the underground fifty-thousand-gallon storage tank which supplied the gasoline pumps of the station perched, isolated, on a column of striated clay, ribbed with chitinous Gel buttresses. The truncated feed lines ended six feet from the tank. From Brett's position, it was impossible to say whether the ends were plugged.

Across the dark cavern a square of light appeared. Dhuva stood in a doorway looking toward Brett.

"Over here, Dhuva!" Brett uncoiled his rope, arranged a slip-noose. He measured the distance with his eye, tossed the loop. It slapped the top of the tank, caught on a massive fitting. He smashed the glass from a window, tied the end of the rope to the center post. Dhuva arrived, watched as Brett went to the edge, hooked his legs over the rope, and started across to the tank.

It was an easy crossing. Brett's feet clanged against the tank. He straddled the six-foot cylinder, worked his way to the end, then clambered down to the two two-inch feed lines. He tested their resilience, then lay flat, eased out on them. There were plugs of hard waxy material in the cut ends of the pipes. Brett poked at them with the pistol. Chunks loosened and fell. He worked for fifteen minutes before the first trickle came. Two minutes later, two thick streams of gasoline were pouring down into the darkness.

Brett and Dhuva piled sticks, scraps of paper, shavings, and lumps of coal around a core of gasoline-soaked rags. Directly above the heaped tinder a taut rope stretched from the window post to a child's wagon, the steel bed of which contained a second heap of combustibles. The wagon hung half over the ragged edge of the floor.

"It should take about fifteen minutes for the fire to burn through the rope," Brett said. "Then the wagon will fall and dump the hot coals in the gasoline. By then it will have spread all over the surface and flowed down side tunnels into other parts of the cavern system."

"But it may not get them all."
"It will get some of them. It's the best we can do right now. You get the fire going in the wagon; I'll start this one up."
Dhuva sniffed the air. "That fluid," he said. "We know it in Wavly as phlogistoneum. The wealthy use it for cooking."
"We'll use it to cook Gels." Brett struck a match. The fire leaped up, smoking. Dhuva watched, struck his match awkwardly, started his blaze. They stood for a moment watching. The nylon curled and blackened, melting in the heat.
"We'd better get moving," Brett said. "It doesn't look as though it will last fifteen minutes."
They stepped out into the street. Behind them wisps of smoke curled from the door. Dhuva seized Brett's arm. "Look!"
Half a block away the fat man in the panama hat strode toward them at the head of a group of men in grey flannel. "That's him!" the fat man shouted, "the one I told you about. I knew the scoundrel would be back!" He slowed, eyeing Brett and Dhuva warily.
"You'd better get away from here, fast!" Brett called. "There'll be an explosion in a few minutes--"
"Smoke!" the fat man yelled. "Fire! They've set fire to the city! There it is! pouring out of the window ... and the door!" He started forward. Brett yanked the pistol from the holster, thumbed back the hammer.
"Stop right there!" he barked. "For your own good I'm telling you to run. I don't care about that crowd of golems you've collected, but I'd hate to see a real human get hurt—even a cowardly one like you."
"These are honest citizens," the fat man gasped, standing, staring at the gun. "You won't get away with this. We all know you. You'll be dealt with ..."
"We're going now. And you're going too."
"You can't kill us all," the fat man said. He licked his lips. "We won't let you destroy our city."
* * *
As the fat man turned to exhort his followers Brett fired, once twice, three times. Three golems fell on their faces. The fat man whirled.
"Devil!" he shrieked. "A killer is abroad!" He charged, mouth open. Brett ducked aside, tripped the fat man. He fell heavily, slamming his face against the pavement. The golems surged forward. Brett and Dhuva slammed punches to the sternum, took clumsy blows on the shoulder, back, chest. Golems fell. Brett ducked a wild swing, toppled his attacker, turned to see Dhuva deal with the last of the dummies. The fat man sat in the street, dabbing at his bleeding nose, the panama still in place.
"Get up," Brett commanded. "There's no time left."
"You've killed them. Killed them all ..." The fat man got to his feet, then turned suddenly and plunged for the door from which a cloud of smoke poured. Brett hauled him back. He and Dhuva started off, dragging the struggling man between them. They had gone a block when their prisoner, with a sudden frantic jerk, freed himself, set off at a run for the fire.
"Let him go!" Dhuva cried. "It's too late to go back!"
The fat man leaped fallen golems, wrestled with the door, disappeared into the smoke. Brett and Dhuva sprinted for the corner. As they rounded it a tremendous blast shook the street. The pavement before them quivered, opened in a wide crack. A ten-foot section dropped from view. They skirted the gaping hole, dashed for safety as the façades along the street cracked, fell in clouds of dust. The street trembled under a second explosion. Cracks opened, dust rising in puffs from the long wavering lines. Masonry collapsed around them. They put their heads down and ran.
* * * * *
Winded, Brett and Dhuva walked through the empty streets of the city. Behind them, smoke blackened the sky. Embers floated down around them. The odor of burning Gel was carried on the wind. The late sun shone on the blank pavement. A lone golem in a tasseled fez, left over from the morning's parade, leaned stiffly against a lamp post, eyes blank. Empty cars sat in driveways. TV antennae stood forlornly against the sunset.
"That place looks lived-in," said Brett, indicating an open apartment window with a curtain billowing above a potted geranium. "I'll take a look."
He came back shaking his head. "They were all in the TV room. They looked so natural at first; I mean, they didn't look up or anything when I walked in. I turned the set off. The electricity is still working anyway. Wonder how long it will last?"
They turned down a residential street. Underfoot the pavement trembled at a distant blast. They skirted a crack, kept going. Occasional golems stood in awkward poses or lay across sidewalks. One, clad in black, tilted awkwardly in a gothic entry of fretted stone work. "I guess there won't be any church this Sunday," said Brett.
He halted before a brown brick apartment house. An untended hose welled on a patch of sickly lawn. Brett
went to the door, stood listening, then went in. Across the room the still figure of a woman sat in a rocker. A curl stirred on her smooth forehead. A flicker of expression seemed to cross the lined face. Brett started forward. "Don't be afraid. You can come with us--"

He stopped. A flapping window-shade cast restless shadows on the still golem features on which dust was already settling. Brett turned away, shaking his head.

"All of them," he said. "It's as though they were snipped out of paper. When the Gels died their dummies died with them."

"Why?" said Dhuva. "What does it all mean?"

"Mean?" said Brett. He shook his head, started off again along the street. "It doesn't mean anything. It's just the way things are."

* * *

Brett sat in a deserted Cadillac, tuning the radio.

"... anybody hear me?" said a plaintive voice from the speaker. "This is Ab Gullorian, at the Twin Spires. Looks like I'm the only one left alive. Can anybody hear me?"

Brett tuned. "... been asking the wrong questions... looking for the Final Fact. Now these are strange matters, brothers. But if a flower blooms, what man shall ask why? What lore do we seek in a symphony...?"

He twisted the knob again. "... Kansas City. Not more than half a dozen of us. And the dead! Piled all over the place. But it's a funny thing: Doc Potter started to do an autopsy--"

Brett turned the knob. "... CQ, CQ, CQ. This is Hollip Quate, calling CQ, CQ. There's been a disaster here at Port Wanderlust. We need--"

"Take Jesus into your hearts," another station urged.

"... to base," the radio said faintly, with much crackling. "Lunar Observatory to base. Come in, Lunar Control. This is Commander McVee of the Lunar Detachment, sole survivor--"

"... hello, Hollip Quate? Hollip Quate? This is Kansas City calling. Say, where did you say you were calling from...?"

"It looks as though both of us had a lot of mistaken ideas about the world outside," said Brett. "Most of these stations sound as though they might as well be coming from Mars."

"I don't understand where the voices come from," Dhuva said. "But all the places they name are strange to me except the Twin Spires."

"I've heard of Kansas City," Brett said, "but none of the other ones."

The ground trembled. A low rumble rolled. "Another one," Brett said. He switched off the radio, tried the starter. It groaned, turned over. The engine caught, sputtered, then ran smoothly.

"Get in, Dhuva. We might as well ride. Which way do we go to get out of this place?"

"The wall lies in that direction," said Dhuva. "But I don't know about a gate."

"We'll worry about that when we get to it," said Brett. "This whole place is going to collapse before long. We really started something. I suppose other underground storage tanks caught--and gas lines, too."

A building ahead cracked, fell in a heap of pulverized plaster. The car bucked as a blast sent a ripple down the street. A manhole cover popped up, cluttered a few feet, dropped from sight. Brett swerved, gunned the car. It leaped over rubble, roared along the littered pavement. Brett looked in the rear-view mirror. A block behind them the street ended. Smoke and dust rose from the immense pit.

"We just missed it that time!" he called. "How far to the wall?"

"Not far! Turn here..."

Brett rounded the corner with a shrieking of tires. Ahead the grey wall rose up, blank, featureless.

"This is a dead end!" Brett shouted.

"We'd better get out and run for it--"

"No time! I'm going to ram the wall! Maybe I can knock a hole in it."

* * *

Dhuva crouched; teeth gritted, Brett held the accelerator to the floor, roared straight toward the wall. The heavy car shot across the last few yards, struck--

And burst through a curtain of canvas into a field of dry stalks.

Brett steered the car in a wide curve to halt and look back. A blackened panama hat floated down, settled among the stalks. Smoke poured up in a dense cloud from behind the canvas wall. A fetid stench pervaded the air.

"That finishes that, I guess," Brett said.

"I don't know. Look there."

Brett turned. Far across the dry field columns of smoke rose from the ground.

"The whole thing's undermined," Brett said. "How far does it go?"
"No telling. But we'd better be off. Perhaps we can get beyond the edge of it. Not that it matters. We're all that's left ..."

"You sound like the fat man," Brett said. "But why should we be so surprised to find out the truth? After all, we never saw it before. All we knew—or thought we knew—was what they told us. The moon, the other side of the world, a distant city ... or even the next town. How do we really know what's there ... unless we go and see for ourselves? Does a goldfish in his bowl know what the ocean is like?"

"Where did they come from, those Gels? How much of the world have they undermined? What about Wavly? Is it a golem country too? The Duke ... and all the people I knew?"

"I don't know, Dhuva. I've been wondering about the people in Casperton. Like Doc Welch. I used to see him in the street with his little black bag. I always thought it was full of pills and scalpels; but maybe it really had zebra's tails and toad's eyes in it. Maybe he's really a magician on his way to cast spells against demons. Maybe the people I used to see hurrying to catch the bus every morning weren't really going to the office. Maybe they go down into caves and chip away at the foundations of things. Maybe they go up on rooftops and put on rainbow-colored robes and fly away. I used to pass by a bank in Casperton: a big grey stone building with little curtains over the bottom half of the windows. I never go in there. I don't have anything to do in a bank. I've always thought it was full of bankers, banking ... Now I don't know. It could be anything ..."

"That's why I'm afraid," Dhuva said. "It could be anything."

"Things aren't really any different than they were," said Brett, "... except that now we know." He turned the big car out across the field toward Casperton.

"I don't know what we'll find when we get back. Aunt Haicey, Pretty-Lee ... But there's only one way to find out."

The moon rose as the car bumped westward, raising a trail of dust against the luminous sky of evening.

THE END
WHAT'S HE DOING IN THERE?
By FRITZ LEIBER

He went where no Martian ever went before--but would he come out--or had he gone for good?

The Professor was congratulating Earth's first visitor from another planet on his wisdom in getting in touch with a cultural anthropologist before contacting any other scientists (or governments, God forbid!), and in learning English from radio and TV before landing from his orbit-parked rocket, when the Martian stood up and said hesitantly, "Excuse me, please, but where is it?"

That baffled the Professor and the Martian seemed to grow anxious--at least his long mouth curved upward, and he had earlier explained that it curling downward was his smile--and he repeated, "Please, where is it?"

He was surprisingly humanoid in most respects, but his complexion was textured so like the rich dark armchair he'd just been occupying that the Professor's pin-striped gray suit, which he had eagerly consented to wear, seemed an arbitrary interruption between him and the chair--a sort of Mother Hubbard dress on a phantom conjured from its leather.

The Professor's Wife, always a perceptive hostess, came to her husband's rescue by saying with equal rapidity, "Top of the stairs, end of the hall, last door."

The Martian's mouth curled happily downward and he said, "Thank you very much," and was off.

Comprehension burst on the Professor. He caught up with his guest at the foot of the stairs.

"Here, I'll show you the way," he said.

"No, I can find it myself, thank you," the Martian assured him.

* * * * *

Something rather final in the Martian's tone made the Professor desist, and after watching his visitor sway up the stairs with an almost hypnotic softly jogging movement, he rejoined his wife in the study, saying wonderingly, "Who'd have thought it, by George! Function taboos as strict as our own!"

"I'm glad some of your professional visitors maintain 'em," his wife said darkly.

"But this one's from Mars, darling, and to find out he's--well, similar in an aspect of his life is as thrilling as the discovery that water is burned hydrogen. When I think of the day not far distant when I'll put his entries in the cross-cultural index ..."

He was still rhapsodizing when the Professor's Little Son raced in.

"Pop, the Martian's gone to the bathroom!"

"Hush, dear. Manners."

"Now it's perfectly natural, darling, that the boy should notice and be excited. Yes, Son, the Martian's not so very different from us."

"Oh, certainly," the Professor's Wife said with a trace of bitterness. "I don't imagine his turquoise complexion will cause any comment at all when you bring him to a faculty reception. They'll just figure he's had a hard night--and that he got that baby-elephant nose sniffing around for assistant professorships."

"Really, darling! He probably thinks of our noses as disagreeably amputated and paralyzed."

"Well, anyway, Pop, he's in the bathroom. I followed him when he squiggled upstairs."

"Now, Son, you shouldn't have done that. He's on a strange planet and it might make him nervous if he thought he was being spied on. We must show him every courtesy. By George, I can't wait to discuss these things with Ackerly-Ramsbottom! When I think of how much more this encounter has to give the anthropologist than even the physicist or astronomer ..."

He was still going strong on his second rhapsody when he was interrupted by another high-speed entrance. It was the Professor's Coltish Daughter.

"Mom, Pop, the Martian's--"

"Hush, dear. We know."

The Professor's Coltish Daughter regained her adolescent poise, which was considerable. "Well, he's still in there," she said. "I just tried the door and it was locked."

"I'm glad it was!" the Professor said while his wife added, "Yes, you can't be sure what--" and caught herself.

"Really, dear, that was very bad manners."

"I thought he'd come downstairs long ago," her daughter explained. "He's been in there an awfully long time. It must have been a half hour ago that I saw him gyre and gimbal upstairs in that real gone way he has, with Nosy here
“following him.” The Professor’s Coltish Daughter was currently soaking up both jive and Alice.

* * * * *

When the Professor checked his wristwatch, his expression grew troubled. "By George, he is taking his time! Though, of course, we don't know how much time Martians ... I wonder."

"I listened for a while, Pop," his son volunteered. "He was running the water a lot."

"Running the water, eh? We know Mars is a water-starved planet. I suppose that in the presence of unlimited water, he might be seized by a kind of madness and ... But he seemed so well adjusted."

Then his wife spoke, voicing all their thoughts. Her outlook on life gave her a naturally sepulchral voice.

"What's he doing in there?"

Twenty minutes and at least as many fantastic suggestions later, the Professor glanced again at his watch and nervied himself for action. Motioning his family aside, he mounted the stairs and tiptoed down the hall.

He paused only once to shake his head and mutter under his breath, "By George, I wish I had Fenchurch or von Gottschalk here. They're a shade better than I am on intercultural contracts, especially taboo-breakings and affronts ..."

His family followed him at a short distance.

The Professor stopped in front of the bathroom door. Everything was quiet as death.

He listened for a minute and then rapped measuredly, steadying his hand by clutching its wrist with the other. There was a faint splashing, but no other sound.

Another minute passed. The Professor rapped again. Now there was no response at all. He very gingerly tried the knob. The door was still locked.

When they had retreated to the stairs, it was the Professor's Wife who once more voiced their thoughts. This time her voice carried overtones of supernatural horror.

"What's he doing in there?"

"He may be dead or dying," the Professor's Coltish Daughter suggested briskly. "Maybe we ought to call the Fire Department, like they did for old Mrs. Frisbee."

The Professor winced. "I'm afraid you haven't visualized the complications, dear," he said gently. "No one but ourselves knows that the Martian is on Earth, or has even the slightest inkling that interplanetary travel has been achieved. Whatever we do, it will have to be on our own. But to break in on a creature engaged in--well, we don't know what primal private activity--is against all anthropological practice. Still--"

"Dying's a primal activity," his daughter said crisply.

"So's ritual bathing before mass murder," his wife added.

"Please! Still, as I was about to say, we do have the moral duty to succor him if, as you all too reasonably suggest, he has been incapacitated by a germ or virus or, more likely, by some simple environmental factor such as Earth's greater gravity."

"Tell you what, Pop--I can look in the bathroom window and see what he's doing. All I have to do is crawl out my bedroom window and along the gutter a little ways. It's safe as houses."

* * * * *

The Professor's question beginning with, "Son, how do you know--" died unuttered and he refused to notice the words his daughter was voicing silently at her brother. He glanced at his wife's sardonically composed face, thought once more of the Fire Department and of other and larger and even more jealous--or would it be skeptical?--government agencies, and clutched at the straw offered him.

Ten minutes later, he was quite unnecessarily assisting his son back through the bedroom window.

"Gee, Pop, I couldn't see a sign of him. That's why I took so long. Hey, Pop, don't look so scared. He's in there, sure enough. It's just that the bathtub's under the window and you have to get real close up to see into it."

"The Martian's taking a bath?"

"Yep. Got it full up and just the end of his little old schnozzle sticking out. Your suit, Pop, was hanging on the door."

The one word the Professor's Wife spoke was like a death knell.

"Drowned!"

"No, Ma, I don't think so. His schnozzle was opening and closing regular like."

"Maybe he's a shape-changer," the Professor's Coltish Daughter said in a burst of evil fantasy. "Maybe he softens in water and thins out after a while until he's like an eel and then he'll go exploring through the sewer pipes. Wouldn't it be funny if he went under the street and knocked on the stopper from underneath and crawled into the bathtub with President Rexford, or Mrs. President Rexford, or maybe right into the middle of one of Janey Rexford's Oh-I'm-so-sexy bubble baths?"

"Please!" The Professor put his hand to his eyebrows and kept it there, cuddling the elbow in his other hand.
"Well, have you thought of something?" the Professor's Wife asked him after a bit. "What are you going to do?"

The Professor dropped his hand and blinked his eyes hard and took a deep breath.

"Telegraph Fenchurch and Ackerly-Ramsbottom and then break in," he said in a resigned voice, into which, nevertheless, a note of hope seemed also to have come. "First, however, I'm going to wait until morning."

And he sat down cross-legged in the hall a few yards from the bathroom door and folded his arms.

* * * * *

So the long vigil commenced.

The Professor's family shared it and he offered no objection. Other and stern men, he told himself, might claim to be able successfully to order their children to go to bed when there was a Martian locked in the bathroom, but he would like to see them faced with the situation.

Finally dawn began to seep from the bedrooms. When the bulb in the hall had grown quite dim, the Professor unfolded his arms.

Just then, there was a loud splashing in the bathroom. The Professor's family looked toward the door. The splashing stopped and they heard the Martian moving around. Then the door opened and the Martian appeared in the Professor's gray pin-stripe suit. His mouth curled sharply downward in a broad alien smile as he saw the Professor.

"Good morning!" the Martian said happily. "I never slept better in my life, even in my own little wet bed back on Mars."

He looked around more closely and his mouth straightened. "But where did you all sleep?" he asked. "Don't tell me you stayed dry all night! You didn't give up your only bed to me?"

His mouth curled upward in misery. "Oh, dear," he said, "I'm afraid I've made a mistake somehow. Yet I don't understand how. Before I studied you, I didn't know what your sleeping habits would be, but that question was answered for me--in fact, it looked so reassuringly homelike--when I saw those brief TV scenes of your females ready for sleep in their little tubs. Of course, on Mars, only the fortunate can always be sure of sleeping wet, but here, with your abundance of water, I thought there would be wet beds for all."

He paused. "It's true I had some doubts last night, wondering if I'd used the right words and all, but then when you rapped 'Good night' to me, I splashed the sentiment back at you and went to sleep in a wink. But I'm afraid that somewhere I've blundered and--"

"No, no, dear chap," the Professor managed to say. He had been waving his hand in a gentle circle for some time in token that he wanted to interrupt. "Everything is quite all right. It's true we stayed up all night, but please consider that as a watch--an honor guard, by George!--which we kept to indicate our esteem."

Contents

EVIDENCE
by Murray Leinster

It was hot. My pony jogged listlessly along, without interest or animation, while I was only concerned with the problem of getting to shade and water, but especially shade. The sun was hot enough to fry any one's brains in his skull, and my saddle burned my hand if I touched it where the sun struck it. There was a trickling stream of perspiration down either cheek, and a third stream down my nose. From time to time I smudged the dust across my face in an attempt to stop the streams, but the action merely interrupted their course.

It was in this peculiarly Texan atmosphere that I came upon Jimmy Calton.

He was standing by the open hood of one of those mechanical miracles known as a "tin lizzy," holding a sooted spark-plug in a cloth in one hand and attempting to clean it with the other. He was swearing the while, dispassionately, in a curious mingling of good Anglo-Saxon and 'dobe Spanish.

"Hello, Jimmy," I said listlessly.

He looked up and nodded.

"Say, you look hot," he observed. "Come on an' ride a ways with me. Lizzy heah'll be runnin' in a minute, an' you can tie yo' pony on behind."

"Going anywhere in particular?" I asked.

"Over t' see th' coroner," he told me. "Ol' Abe Martin got shot th' other day an' folks are sayin' Harry Temple done it. They got 'im locked up, anyways."

I dismounted stiffly and tied my pony to the rear of the machine, allowing him plenty of lead-rope. Jimmy
finished wiping the last of the spark-plugs, apostrophizing the car in the mean time.

"You creakin', growlin', spark-plug-foulin', blasted hunka tin," he finished lyrically, and put down the hood.

He went to the crank and turned it half a dozen times. The engine caught, sputtered, and began to run with a pretentious roar.

Jimmy hastily reached for the wheel and adjusted the spark and throttle, then climbed in leisurely. With a grinding and a lurch we started off, my pony following docilely behind.

"Yes, tin, tin, tin," said Jimmy, doing mysterious things with his feet:
I have scorned yuh and I've flayed yuh,
But by the guy who made yuh,
You are bettuh than a big car,
Hunka tin!

We slipped into the car's second and highest speed, and began to run more smoothly. Jimmy looked behind to see that my pony was all right and began to roll a cigarette with his left hand, while expertly guiding the car around the numerous runs and rocks in the roadway. I watched the process of cigarette-rolling without interest.

"I can't seem to get the knack of that," I remarked, when he had finished and was licking the edge of the paper to hold it in place.

"Imitatinit," said Jimmy casually. "There ain't any way that everybody can do. Nobody else I know rolls 'em like this. It's jus' easiest fo' me. You'll have to mess around till you find a way that fits yo' fingers."

"I'll smoke tailor-made," I said, "rather than bother with learning."

"Jus' like th' new generation," said Jimmy severely. Jimmy, it may be said, is thirty, but affects the authority of a man of eighty. "Wantin' everything done by somebody else, or else by machin'ry. They even want thee thinkin' done fo' them."

"It's too hot to think down here." I took off my hat and wiped the moisture off the sweat-band.

"Judgin' by the little bit of it people do," Jimmy remarked acidly, "most folks agree with you. Most people look at thinkin' as somethin' they was taught to do in schools, an', as such, somethin' t' forget as soon as possible. From th' folks that don't think about th' spigoty revoltosos jus' across th' border an' are pained an' surprised when th' spigoties run off some o' their cattle, down to th' folks that ud rather buy cigarettes than bother thinkin' up a way to roll 'em one- handed fo' themselves, everybody's jus' th' same. Why, 'twouldn't surprise me none at all if most folks tol' th' truth jus' because it's too much trouble t' think up a lie."

I accepted his rebuke in the matter of cigarettes meekly and said nothing.

"It's a fac'," said Jimmy, with an air of mournful pity for a race fallen so low. "I saw in a book th' other day that th' best lyin' is th' lie that's near th' truth. Ain't that ridiculous? That's jus' justifyin' laziness. Ef folks've got th' goods on yuh, an' yuh can't get away from th' truth, then it's all right t' dilute th' truth until it's harmless, but otherwise a good lie beats th' almost-truth nine ways from Sunday."

"Only it's a lot o' trouble thinkin' up a good lie, an' fortifyin' it with accumulative evidence"--Jimmy rolled those two words off his tongue with some satisfaction--"accumulative evidence like a good lie ought t' have."

He fell silent for a while, doing marvels of steering in the avoidance of obstacles and depressions in the really horrible road.

"An' thinkin'," he said suddenly, presently. "Folks don't like thinkin'. Anybody with any sense ud know Harry Temple wouldn't've shot ol' Abe Martin. Harry Temple has got a bank-account in th' Farmers and Ranchers Bank, an' it ain't in reason that he'd go an' shoot anybody t' steal their roll."

"Ol' Abe sold off six hundred steers, an' got th' money fo' them. He was ol'-fashioned an' didn't believe in banks, so he took th' money home with 'im. An' somebody went an' shot him an' took th' roll. But Harry Temple, with a bank-account in th' Farmers and Ranchers Bank--it ain't reasonable that he'd go an' shoot anybody fo' to steal their money. Ef he's any like I am, he's too busy wonderin' ef somebody is goin' t' steal his money to go stealin' somebody else's."

Jimmy said this last with an air of virtue that made me smile. Jimmy is much too good a poker-player to be worried about his money. I know he owns one small ranch he never goes near, bought out of the proceeds of a colossal game still remembered along the border.

"But they think he did it?" I asked.

"Sho they do," said Jimmy scornfully. "They's goin' aroun' sayin' they know he did. That's toro, o' course."

One of Jimmy's individualities is his habit of translating American slang into 'dobe Spanish and using it in his conversation.

"What are you going to see the coroner for?"

"They's holdin' a inquest," said Jimmy. "I'm sort o' goin' t' horn in a little, I reck'n. These folks are too lazy t' do any thinkin'. Ef I see a chance, I'm goin' to do some head-work fo' them. Theah's Abe Martin's place right ahead."
We turned in the gate and swung up to the house. Half a dozen cars, most of them of the same make as Jimmy's, clustered about the front, and there were a dozen or more ponies tethered close by the porch, dozing in the baking heat. It was quite a pretentious place, built in the old-fashioned style of the days when a rancher was almost a baron in his own right. Two big barns and a huge stable behind the house almost dwarfed the dwelling proper, and quite hid it from the rear.

Jimmy eased his car in among the others, snapped the switch, and alighted. Three or four of the men about the door nodded to him and told him the inquest had not started, but that it would begin shortly. Once he found that out, Jimmy plunged into an intricate and technical discussion of patented attachments for his machine, and I drifted off into the house.

It was a very old house, and built with old-fashioned disregard for space. I gathered, however, that the housekeeping done in it was but sketchy. Half a dozen of his riders made it their headquarters, with old Abe Martin. They bunked there, and a cook prepared the meals for all of them. There was a long table with a checked, red tablecloth on it—the room was empty now except for buzzing flies—where they had their meals. On the day of the shooting, I learned, the men had all been away on their duties, and the cook had gone into town for supplies, so Abe Martin had been alone.

Presently I went out to look at the stables. They were huge, but not much used. Three or four ponies were in their stalls, and several more stalls seemed to be used from time to time, but most of them were without signs of recent use.

There had been a time when the place was the headquarters of a busy ranch, but since the time of fences the activity had lessened until only Abe Martin, his half-dozen riders, and the cook lived there. It was curious to see the dwelling-place, large in itself, dwarfed by its outbuildings.

A stir in the house called me inside. The inquest was evidently to be more or less of an informal affair, but there was none the less a determined and businesslike air behind it all. Those men meant to get at the bottom of the matter. The coroner seemed to be a conscientious individual, who took the evidence of the first witness with great exactitude, though he knew perfectly well beforehand just what the testimony would be. The whole inquiry, as a matter of fact, promised to be cut and dried in spite of Jimmy's announced intention of "horning in."

The first witness was the cook, who had discovered the body. He had come back from town, entered the house and discovered his employer dead on the floor of the hall.

He had been shot through the heart. A rider, whom the cook had hastily summoned, corroborated his testimony and added that the body was cold when he was called, proving that death had occurred some time before.

"Th' evidence shows," said the coroner casually, "that Abe was shot when there wasn't nobody else in th' house but him an' th' murderer. Th' cashier of th' Farmers and Ranchers Bank ain't heah, but he has give me th' information that Abe had over four thousan' dollars on him when he was killed.

"That's gone. Evidently he was shot fo' his money. It's part of th' duties of a coroner's jury t' uncover any evidence that will help in solvin' th' problem of who th' murderer might be. Mist' Joe Harkness will take th' stand."

There was a movement of interest in the small crowd packed into the one room. I had managed to get beside Jimmy Calton, and his face became extraordinarily mild and gentle. It hinted at some expectation of excitement, if I knew Jimmy. Every one had heard Harkness's story before, so it was simply a recapitulation.

"I ain't got a thing t' say," announced Harkness bluntly, "cept that I seen Harry Temple come out o' this here house 'bout three o'clock, jus' after Abe Martin was shot.

"I was havin' trouble with my sparkplugs down the road a ways, when I seen Harry. He come out o' th' kitchen door, looked all aroun' as ef he was lookin' t' see ef anybody seen him, an' then he went down to'd the stables. He went inside theah, then he come out o' that an' went over to th' quarters an' got a drink at th' pump by th' do'. I was wonderin' what he was doin', but it looks t' me like he was makin' sho' teh wasn't nobody aroun' that could 'a' tol' that he'd been aroun'.

"An' teh's one mo' thing. When he come out o' th' house--he come out th' kitchen do'--he was puttin' somethin' in his breas' pocket."

I glanced at Jimmy Calton. He was looking at Harkness with a gentle, placid smile. His face did not change when Harry Temple stood up, pale beneath his tan.

"Eve'ything Harkness says is so," said Harry Temple determinedly. "Eve'y single word, only I didn't shoot ol' Abe. I come out heah t' see him 'bout sellin' him some yearlin's. He wasn't heah, so I went in th' kitchen t' see ef I couldn' leave word with th' cook.

"Th' cook was missin', too, but I thought I heard somebody movin' aroun' somewhere, an' I went jus' where Harkness said, an' jus' in th' order he said. He must'v'n seen me first when I come out o' the kitchen. When I couldn't find nobody, I cranked up an' lef."

Harkness stood up.
"I hate to contradict Harry," he said sharply, "but he's made a mistake. He didn't crank up and leave. He was drivin' somebody else's car, ain't it had a self-starter on it."

Harry Temple flushed slightly. "That's a fact," he acknowledged. "I'd forgotten that. I was drivin' a car they lent me at the garage. I'd let my own theah have some repairs made."

"Of course," said Harkness sarcastically, "nobody suspected that you were drivin' a strange car, with strange tires, so they couldn't prove nothin' on you by th' tracks." Jimmy put a question in a gentle voice.

"There's another question," he said softly. "What was Harry puttin' in his pocket when Harkness saw him comin' out o' th' house?"

"I don't remember puttin' anything in my pocket," said Temple, beginning to be worried. "It was probably my handkerchief."

There was a moment's silence. One or two of the men in the room stirred uneasily.

Jimmy Calton smiled sweetly to himself.

"Mister Coroner," he said slowly, "may I make an observation or so? It looks like somebody ought to point out two or three facts."

"Go ahead, Jimmy," said the coroner. It seemed to be bothering him that so much seemed to point to the guilt of Harry Temple. Temple did seem to be quite a decent sort, and the coroner evidently hated to bring out so much to his discredit without anything to counteract the impression thus made.

Knowing Jimmy, he knew Jimmy would not interfere unless he thought things were going the wrong way, and that meant in this case that he had something to say in Temple's favor.

"Mister Coroner an' gentlemen," said Jimmy formally, "it don't seem hardly fair to bring out all this heah evidence against a man without any evidence th' other way. I want to point out two things about this heah case. Th' first is that Harry Temple has got money in bank, an' th' second is that he never disputed a single thing Harkness said about him. You know, an' I know, that a man with money in bank ain't goin' aroun' doin' highway robbery an' murder. He can't afford to. You jus' think about that a while.

"An' heah's somethin' else I think about. Did you notice that Harry Temple said right off that he done jus' what Harkness said? Now ef he'd shot ol' Abe Martin, you know he'd've tried to make some o' that stuff sound a little less incriminatin'. He'd've said he didn't go in th' house, jus' to th' door an' knocked, and he'd've tried to weaken everythin' Harkness said, jus' that way.

"But he didn't. He's tellin' th' truth so hard he can't seem to see it's puttin' a rope aroun' his neck, in spite of his bein' jus' as innocent as he says. As for his puttin' somethin' in his breast pocket, nobody puts money there--an' especially stolen money--but mos' everybody puts theah handkerchief theah."

"But--that ain't evidence," said the coroner disappointedly. "I tho't you had some facts to give us."

"I'll give you one fact," Jimmy offered. "Harry Temple didn't shoot Abe Martin. Looka heah, Harkness himself don't believe he did. Do you?" he demanded, turning to that person.

Harkness sat stolidly in his chair.


"Sho I did," Jimmy admitted readily, "but you know he didn't shoot Abe."

Jimmy seemed to be making a fool of himself. I tugged at his sleeve for him to sit down, but he paid no attention.

"What do you mean?" demanded Harkness suspiciously.

"Nothin' whatever," said Jimmy with a gentleness I suddenly recognized as dangerous. "Nothin' whatever, except what I said. You know Harry Temple didn't shoot Abe."

"You mean t' tell me I'm lyin'," snapped Harkness angrily.

"No," said Jimmy in a cooing drawl. "Nothin' so harmless. I'm accusin' you o' somethin' a damn sight mo' dangerous than lyin'. I'm accusin' you o' tellin' th' truth--th' exact truth."

There was a puzzled pause. I noticed, however, that Harkness was watching Jimmy with a curious alertness.

"It's always mo' dangerous t' tell th' truth in a case like this, Harkness," said Jimmy, still in that gentle drawl.

"You tol' th' absolute truth about what you saw Harry do, an' that's th' mos' dangerous thing you could've told, because there ain't but one man could've tol' that."

"Mister Coroner, ef you'll look out o' the window, you'll see jus' wheah Harry Temple walked down th' kitchen steps, jus' wheah he went back to th' stables, jus' wheah he went into th' big barn, an' jus' wheah he got a drink. An' then, ef you look, you'll see wheah he stopped his car, so Harkness could see that it had a self-starter on it, instead of a crank."

I saw a light break on the coroner's face, as he looked from place to place in the yard behind the house. He faced about, just as Jimmy deliberately pulled a revolver out of his pocket.

"Harkness tol' th' truth," said Jimmy softly. "He tol' th' absolute truth, but--th' ain't but one place you can see
all them things from. With all them barns outside, theh ain't but one place that you c'n see th' do' of th' stables, an' th' big barn an' th' pump by th' quarters an' th' kitchen do' all at once. An' theh wasn't but one man in th' world who could've seen Harry Temple do all them things, because theh wasn't but one man in that place.

"Th' only place you c'n see all them places from is this heah room, an' th' only man in th' house when Harry Temple did them things was th' man who'd shot Abe Martin an' hadn't had time t' get away when Harry Temple come drivin' in!

"Harkness"--Jimmy's voice was suddenly like steel--"ef you pull that gun on me I'll blow a hole right th'ough th' place yo' brains ought t' be!"

Content

THE MAN THE MARTIANS MADE
By Frank Belknap Long

No mortal had ever seen the Martians, but they had heard their whisperings--without knowing the terrible secret they kept hidden.

There was death in the camp.
I knew when I awoke that it had come to stand with us in the night and was waiting now for the day to break and flood the desert with light. There was a prickling at the base of my scalp and I was drenched with cold sweat. I had an impulse to leap up and go stumbling about in the darkness. But I disciplined myself. I crossed my arms and waited for the sky to grow bright.

Daybreak on Mars is like nothing you've ever dreamed about. You wake up in the morning, and there it is--bright and clear and shining. You pinch yourself, you sit up straight, but it doesn't vanish.

Then you stare at your hands with the big callouses. You reach for a mirror to take a look at your face. That's not so good. That's where ugliness enters the picture. You look around and you see Ralph. You see Harry. You see the women.

On Earth a woman may not look her glamorous best in the harsh light of early dawn, but if she's really beautiful she doesn't look too bad. On Mars even the most beautiful woman looks angry on arising, too weary and tormented by human shortcomings to take a prefabricated metal shack and turn it into a real home for a man.

You have to make allowances for a lot of things on Mars. You have to start right off by accepting hardship and privation as your daily lot. You have to get accustomed to living in construction camps in the desert, with the red dust making you feel all hollow and dried up inside. Making you feel like a drum, a shriveled pea pod, a salted fish hung up to dry. Dust inside of you, rattling around, canal water seepage rotting the soles of your boots.

So you wake up and you stare. The night before you'd collected driftwood and stacked it by the fire. The driftwood has disappeared. Someone has stolen your very precious driftwood. The Martians? Guess again.

You get up and you walk straight up to Ralph with your shoulders squared. You say, "Ralph, why in hell did you have to steal my driftwood?"

In your mind you say that. You say it to Dick, you say it to Harry. But what you really say is, "Larsen was here again last night!"

You say, I put a fish on to boil and Larsen ate it. I had a nice deck of cards, all shiny and new, and Larsen marked them up. It wasn't me cheating. It was Larsen hoping I'd win so that he could waylay me in the desert and get all of the money away from me.

You have a girl. There aren't too many girls in the camps with laughter and light and fire in them. But there are a few, and if you're lucky you take a fancy to one particular girl--her full red lips and her spun gold hair. All of a sudden she disappears. Somebody runs off with her. It's Larsen.

In every man there is a slumbering giant. When life roars about you on a world that's rugged and new you've got to go on respecting the lads who have thrown in their lot with you, even when their impulses are as harsh as the glint of sunlight on a desert-polished tombstone.

You think of a name--Larsen. You start from scratch and you build Larsen up until you have a clear picture of him in your mind. You build him up until he's a great shouting, brawling, golden man like Paul Bunyon.

Even a wicked legend can seem golden on Mars. Larsen wasn't just my slumbering giant--or Dick's, or Harry's. He was the slumbering giant in all of us, and that's what made him so tremendous. Anything gigantic has beauty and power and drive to it.
Alone we couldn't do anything with Larsen's gusto, so when some great act of wickedness was done with gusto how could it be us? Here comes Larsen! He'll shoulder all the guilt, but he won't feel guilty because he's the first man in Eden, the child who never grew up, the laughing boy, Hercules balancing the world on his shoulders and looking for a woman with long shining tresses and eyes like the stars of heaven to bend to his will.

If such a woman came to life in Hercules' arms would you like the job of stopping him from sending the world crashing? Would you care to try?

Don't you see? Larsen was closer to us than breathing and as necessary as food and drink and our dreams of a brighter tomorrow. Don't think we didn't hate him at times. Don't think we didn't curse and revile him. You may glorify a legend from here to eternity, but the luster never remains completely untarnished.

Larsen wouldn't have seemed completely real to us if we hadn't given him muscles that could tire and eyes that could blink shut in weariness. Larsen had to sleep, just as we did. He'd disappear for days.

We'd wink and say, "Larsen's getting a good long rest this time. But he'll be back with something new up his sleeve, don't you worry!"

We could joke about it, sure. When Larsen stole or cheated we could pretend we were playing a game with loaded dice—not really a deadly game, but a game full of sound and fury with a great rousing outburst of merriment at the end of it.

But there are deadlier games by far. I lay motionless, my arms locked across my chest, sweating from every pore. I stared at Harry. We'd been working all night digging a well, and in a few days water would be bubbling up sweet and cool and we wouldn't have to go to the canal to fill our cooking utensils. Harry was blinking and stirring and I could tell just by looking at him that he was uneasy too. I looked beyond him at the circle of shacks.

Most of us were sleeping in the open, but there were a few youngsters in the shacks and women too worn out with drudgery to care much whether they slept in smothering darkness or under the clear cold light of the stars.

I got slowly to my knees, scooped up a handful of sand, and let it dribble slowly through my fingers. Harry looked straight at me and his eyes widened in alarm. It must have been the look on my face. He arose and crossed to where I was sitting, his mouth twitching slightly. There was nothing very reassuring about Harry. Life had not been kind to him and he had resigned himself to accepting the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune without protest. He had one of those emaciated, almost skull-like faces which terrify children, and make women want to cry.

"You don't look well, Tom," he said. "You've been driving yourself too hard."

I looked away quickly. I had to tell him, but anything terrifying could demoralize Harry and make him throw his arm before his face in blind panic. But I couldn't keep it locked up inside me an instant longer.

"Sit down, Harry," I whispered. "I want to talk to you. No sense in waking the others."

"Oh," he said.

He squatted beside me on the sand, his eyes searching my face. "What is it, Tom?"

"I heard a scream," I said. "It was pretty awful. Somebody has been hurt--bad. It woke me up, and that takes some doing."

Harry nodded. "You sleep like a log," he said.

"I just lay still and listened," I said, "with my eyes wide open. Something moved out from the well--a two-legged something. It didn't make a sound. It was big, Harry, and it seemed to melt into the shadows. I don't know what kept me from leaping up and going after it. It had something to do with the way I felt. All frozen up inside."

Harry appeared to understand. He nodded, his eyes darting toward the well. "How long ago was that?"

"Ten--fifteen minutes."

"You just waited for me to wake up?"

"That's right," I said. "There was something about the scream that made me want to put off finding out. Two's company--and when you're alone with something like that it's best to talk it over before you act."

I could see that Harry was pleased. Unnerved too, and horribly shaken. But he was pleased that I had turned to him as a friend I could trust. When you can't depend on life for anything else it's good to know you have a friend.

I brushed sand from my trousers and got up. "Come on," I said. "We'll take a look."

It was an ordeal for him. His face twitched and his eyes wavered. He knew I hadn't lied about the scream. If a single scream could unnerv me that much it had to be bad.

We walked to the well in complete silence. There were shadows everywhere, chill and forbidding. Almost like people they seemed, whispering together, huddling close in ominous gossipy silence, aware of what we would find. It was a sixty-foot walk from the fire to the well. A walk in the sun--a walk in the bright hot sun of Mars, with utter horror perhaps at the end of it.

The horror was there. Harry made a little choking noise deep in his throat, and my heart started pounding like a bass drum.

II
The man on the sand had no top to his head. His skull had been crushed and flattened so hideously that he seemed like a wooden figure resting there—an anatomical dummy with its skull-case lifted off.

We looked around for the skull-case, hoping we'd find it, hoping we'd made a mistake and stumbled by accident into an open-air dissecting laboratory and were looking at ghastly props made of plastic and glittering metal instead of bone and muscle and flesh.

But the man on the sand had a name. We'd known him for weeks and talked to him. He wasn't a medical dummy, but a corpse. His limbs were hideously convulsed, his eyes wide and staring. The sand beneath his head was clotted with dried blood. We looked for the weapon which had crushed his skull but couldn't find it.

We looked for the weapon before we saw the footprints in the sand. Big they were—incredibly large and massive. A man with a size-twelve shoe might have left such prints if the leather had become a little soggy and spread out around the soles.

"The poor guy," Harry whispered.

I knew how he felt. We had all liked Ned. A harmless little guy with a great love of solitude, a guy who hadn't a malicious hair in his head. A happy little guy who liked to sing and dance in the light of a high-leaping fire. He had a banjo and was good at music making. Who could have hated Ned with a rage so primitive and savage? I looked at Harry and saw that he was wondering the same thing.

Harry looked pretty bad, about ready to cave in. He was leaning against the well, a tormented fury in his eyes.

"The murderous bastard," he muttered. "I'd like to get him by the throat and choke the breath out of him. Who'd want to do a thing like that to Ned."

"I can't figure it either," I said.

Then I remembered. I don't think Molly Egan really could have loved Ned. The curious thing about it was that Ned didn't even need the kind of love she could have given him. He was a self-sufficient little guy despite his frailness and didn't really need a woman to look after him. But Molly must have seen something pathetic in him.

Molly was a beautiful woman in her own right, and there wasn't a man in the camp who hadn't envied Ned. It was puzzling, but it could have explained why Ned was lying slumped on the sand with a bashed-in skull. It could have explained why someone had hated him enough to kill him.

Without lifting a finger Ned had won Molly's love. That could make some other guy as mad as a caged hyena—the wrong sort of other guy. Even a small man could have shattered Ned's skull, but the prints on the sand were big.

How many men in the camp wore size-twelve shoes? That was the sixty-four dollar question, and it hung in the shimmering air between Harry and myself like an unspoken challenge. We could almost see the curve of the big question mark suspended in the dazzle.

I thought awhile, looking at Harry. Then I took a long, deep breath and said, "We'd better talk it over with Bill Seaton first. If it gets around too fast those footprints will be trampled flat. And if tempers start rising anything could happen."

Harry nodded. Bill was the kind of guy you could depend on in an emergency. Cool, poised, efficient, with an air of authority that commanded respect. He could be pigheaded at times, but his sense of justice was as keen as a whip.

Harry and I walked very quietly across a stretch of tumbled sand and halted at the door to Bill's shack. Bill was a bachelor and we knew there'd be no woman inside to put her foot down and tell him he'd be a fool to act as a lawman. Or would there be? We had to chance it.

Law-enforcement is a thankless job whether on Earth or on Mars. That's why it attracts the worst—and the best. If you're a power-drunk sadist you'll take the job just for the pleasure it gives you. But if you're really interested in keeping violence within bounds so that fairly decent lads get a fighting chance to build for the future, you'll take the job with no thought of reward beyond the simple satisfaction of lending a helping hand.

Bill Seaton was such a man, even if he did enjoy the limelight and liked to be in a position of command.

"Come on, Harry," I said. "We may as well wake him up and get it over with."

We went into the shack. Bill was sleeping on the floor with his long legs drawn up. His mouth was open and he was snoring lustily. I couldn't help thinking how much he looked like an overgrown grasshopper. But that was just a first impression springing from overwrought nerves.

I bent down and shook Bill awake. I grabbed his arm and shook him until his jaw snapped shut and he shot up straight, suddenly galvanized. Instantly the grotesque aspect fell from him. Dignity came upon him and enveloped him like a cloak.

"Ned, you say? The poor little cuss! So help me—if I get my hands on the rat who did it I'll roast him over a slow fire!"

He got up, staggered to an equipment locker, and took out a sun helmet and a pair of shorts. He dressed quickly, swearing constantly and staring out the door at the bright dawn glow as if he wanted to send both of his fists
crashing into the first suspicious guy to cross his path.

"We can't have those footprints trampled," he muttered. "There are a lot of dumb bastards here who don't know the first thing about keeping pointers intact. Those prints may be the only thing we'll have to go on."

"Just the three of us can handle it, Bill," I said. "When you decide what should be done we can wake the others."

Bill nodded. "Keeping it quiet is the important thing. We'll carry him back here. When we break the news I want that body out of sight."

Harry and Bill and I--we took another walk in the sun. I looked at Harry, and the greenish tinge which had crept into his face gave me a jolt. He's taking this pretty hard, I thought. If I hadn't known him so well I might have jumped to an ugly conclusion. But I just couldn't imagine Harry quarreling with Ned over Molly.

How was I taking it myself? I raised my hand and looked at it. There was no tremor. Nerves steady, brain clear. No pleasure in enforcing the law--pass that buck to Bill. But there was a gruesome job ahead, and I was standing up to it as well as could be expected.

Ever try lifting a corpse? The corpse of a stranger is easier to lift than the corpse of a man you've known and liked. Harry and I lifted him together. Between us the dead weight didn't seem too intolerable--not at first. But it quickly became a terrible, heavy limpness that dragged at our arms like some soggy log dredged up from the dark waters of the canal.

We carried him into the shack and eased him down on the floor. His head fell back and his eyes lolled.

Death is always shameful. It strips away all human reticences and makes a mockery of human dignity and man's rebellion against the cruelty of fate.

For a moment we stood staring down at all that was left of Ned. I looked at Bill. "How many men in the camp wear number-twelve shoes?"

"We'll find out soon enough."

All this time we hadn't mentioned Larsen. Not one word about Larsen, not one spoken word. Cheating, yes. Lying, and treacherous disloyalty, and viciousness, and spite. Fights around the campfires at midnight, battered faces and broken wrists and a cursing that never ceased. All that we could blame on Larsen. But a harmless little guy lying dead by a well in a spreading pool of blood--that was an outrage that stopped us dead in our legend-making tracks.

There is something in the human mind which recoils from too outrageous a deception. How wonderful it would have been to say, "Larsen was here again last night. He found a little guy who had never harmed anyone standing by a well in the moonlight. Just for sheer delight he decided to kill the little guy right then and there." Just to add luster to the legend, just to send a thrill of excitement about the camp.

No, that would have been the lie colossal which no sane man could have quite believed.

Something happened then to further unnerve us.

The most disturbing sound you can hear on Mars is the whispering. Usually it begins as a barely audible murmur and swells in volume with every shift of the wind. But now it started off high pitched and insistent and did not stop.

It was the whispering of a dying race. The Martians are as elusive as elves and all the pitiless logic of science had failed to draw them forth into the sunlight to stand before men in uncompromising arrogance as peers of the human race.

That failure was a tragedy in itself. If man's supremacy is to be challenged at all let it be by a creature of flesh-and-blood, a big-brained biped who must kill to live. Better that by far than a ghostly flickering in the deepening dusk, a whispering and a flapping and a long-drawn sighing prophesying death.

Oh, the Martians were real enough. A flitting vampire bat is real, or a stinging ray in the depths of a blue lagoon. But who could point to a Martian and say, "I have seen you plain, in broad daylight. I have looked into your owlish eyes and watched you go flitting over the sand on your thin, stalklike legs? I know there is nothing mysterious about you. You are like a water insect skimming the surface of a pond in a familiar meadow on Earth. You are quick and alert, but no match for a man. You are no more than an interesting insect."

Who could say that, when there were ruins buried deep beneath the sand to give the lie to any such idea. First the ruins, and then the Martians themselves, always elusive, gnomelike, goblinlike, flitting away into the dissolving dusk.

You're a comparative archaeologist and you're on Mars with the first batch of rugged youngsters to come tumbling out of a spaceship with stardust in their eyes. You see those youngsters digging wells and sweating in the desert. You see the prefabricated housing units go up, the tangle of machinery, the camp sites growing lusty with midnight brawls and skull-cracking escapades. You see the towns in the desert, the law-enforcement committees, the camp followers, the reform fanatics.
You're a sober-minded scholar, so you start digging in the ruins. You bring up odd-looking cylinders, rolls of threaded film, instruments of science so complex they make you giddy.

You wonder about the Martians—what they were like when they were a young and proud race. If you're an archaeologist you wonder. But Bill and I—we were youngsters still. Oh, sure, we were in our thirties, but who would have suspected that? Bill looked twenty-seven and I hadn't a gray hair in my head.

III

Bill nodded at Harry. "You'd better stay here. Tom and I will be asking some pointed questions, and our first move will depend on the answers we get. Don't let anyone come snooping around this shack. If anyone sticks his head in and starts to turn ugly, warn him just once—then shoot to kill." He handed Harry a gun.

Harry nodded grimly and settled himself on the floor close to Ned. For the first time since I'd known him, Harry looked completely sure of himself.

As we emerged from the shack the whispering was so loud the entire camp had been placed on the alert. There would be no need for us to go into shack after shack, watching surprise and shock come into their eyes.

A dozen or more men were between Bill's shack and the well. They were staring grimly at the dawn, as if they could already see blood on the sky, spilling over on the sand and spreading out in a sinister pool at their feet. A mirage-like pool mirroring their own hidden forebodings, mirroring a knotted rope and the straining shoulders of men too vengeful to know the meaning of restraint.

Jim Kenny stood apart and alone, about forty feet from the well, staring straight at us. His shirt was open at the throat, exposing a patch of hairy chest, and his big hands were wedged deeply into his belt. He stood about six feet three, very powerful, and with large feet.

I nudged Bill's arm. "What do you think?" I asked.

Kenny did seem a likely suspect. Molly had caught his eye right from the start, and he had lost no time in pursuing her. A guy like Kenny would have felt that losing out to a man of his own breed would have been a terrible blow to his pride. But just imagine Kenny losing out to a little guy like Ned. It would have infuriated him and glazed his eyes with a red film of hate.

Bill answered my question slowly, his eyes on Kenny's cropped head. "I think we'd better take a look at his shoes," he said.

We edged up slowly, taking care not to disturb the others, pretending we were sauntering toward the well on a before-breakfast stroll.

It was then that Molly came out of her shack. She stood blinking for an instant in the dawn glare, her unbound hair falling in a tumbled dark mass to her shoulders, her eyes still drowsy with sleep. She wore rust-colored slippers and a form-fitted yellow robe, belted in at the waist.

Molly wasn't beautiful exactly. But there was something pulse-stirring about her and it was easy to understand how a man like Kenny might find her difficult to resist.

Bill slanted a glance at Kenny, then shrugged and looked straight at Molly. He turned to me, his voice almost a whisper, "She's got to be told, Tom. You do it. She likes you a lot."

I'd been wondering about that myself—just how much she liked me. It was hard to be sure.

Bill saw my hesitation, and frowned. "You can tell if she's covering up. Her reaction may give us a lead."

Molly looked startled when she saw me approaching without the mask I usually wore when I waltzed her around and grinned and ruffled her hair and told her that she was the cutest kid imaginable and would make some man—not me—a fine wife.

That made telling her all the harder. The hardest part was at the end—when she stared at me dry-eyed and threw her arms around me as if I was the last support left to her on Earth.

For a moment I almost forgot we were not on Earth. On Earth I might have been able to comfort her in a completely sane way. But on Mars when a woman comes into your arms your emotions can turn molten in a matter of seconds.

"Steady," I whispered. "We're just good friends, remember?"

"I'd be willing to forget, Tom," she said.

"You've had a terrible shock," I whispered. "You really loved that little guy—more than you know. It's natural enough that you should feel a certain warmth toward me. I just happened to be here—so you kissed me."

"No, Tom. It isn't that way at all—"

I might have let myself go a little then if Kenny hadn't seen us. He stood very still for an instant, staring at Molly. Then his eyes narrowed and he walked slowly toward us, his hands still wedged in his belt.

I looked quickly at Molly, and saw that her features had hardened. There was a look of dark suspicion in her eyes. Bill had been watching Kenny, too, waiting for him to move. He measured footsteps with Kenny, advancing in the same direction from a different angle at a pace so calculated that they seemed to meet by accident directly in
front of us.

Bill didn't draw but his hand never left his hip. His voice came clear and sharp and edged with cold insistence. "Know anything about it, Kenny?"

Strain seemed to tighten Kenny's face, but there was no panic in his eyes, no actual glint of fear. "What made you think I'd know?" he asked.

Bill didn't say a word. He just started staring at Kenny's shoes. He stood back a bit and continued to stare as if something vitally important had escaped him and taken refuge beneath the soggy leather around Kenny's feet.

"What size shoes do you wear, Jim?" he asked.

Kenny must have suspected that the question was charged with as much explosive risk as a detonating wire set to go off at the faintest jar. His eyes grew shrewd and mocking.

"So the guy who did it left prints in the sand?" he said. "Prints made by big shoes?"

"That's right," Bill said. "You have a very active mind."

Kenny laughed then, the mockery deepening in his stare. "Well," he said, "suppose we have a look at those prints, and if it will ease your mind I'll take off my shoes and you can try them out for size."

Kenny and Bill and I walked slowly from Molly's shack to the well in the hot and blazing glare, and the whispering went right on, getting under our skin in a tormenting sort of way.

Kenny still wore that disturbing grin. He looked at the prints and grunted. "Yeah," he said, "they sure are big. Biggest prints I've ever seen."

He sat down and started unlacing his shoes. First the right shoe, then the left. He pulled off both shoes and handed them to Bill.

"Fit them in," he said. "Measure them for size. Measure me for size, and to hell with you!"

Bill made a careful check. There were eight prints, and he fitted the shoes painstakingly into each of them. There was space to spare at each try.

It cleared Kenny completely. He wasn't a killer--this time. We might have roused the camp to a lynching fury and Kenny would have died for a crime another man had committed. I shut my eyes and saw Larsen swinging from a roof top, a black hood over his face. I saw Molly standing in the sunlight by my side, her face a stony mask.

I opened my eyes and there was Kenny, grinning contemptuously at us. He'd called our bluff and won out. Now the shoe was on the other foot.

A cold chill ran up my spine. It was Kenny who was doing the staring now, and he was looking directly at my shoes. He stood back a bit and continued to stare. He was dramatizing his sudden triumph in a way that turned my blood to ice.

Then I saw that Bill was staring too--straight at the shoes of a man he had known for three years and grown to like and trust. But underlying the warmth and friendliness in Bill was a granite-like integrity which nothing could shake.

It was Bill who spoke first. "I guess you'd better take them off, Tom," he said. "We may as well be thorough about this."

Sure, I was big. I grew up fast as a kid and at eighteen I weighed two hundred and thirty pounds, all lean flesh. If shoes ran large I could sometimes cram my feet into size twelves, but I felt much more comfortable in a size or two larger than that.

What made it worse, Molly liked me. I was involved with her, but no one knew how much. No one knew whether we'd quarreled or not, or how insanely jealous I could be. No one knew whether Molly had only pretended to like Ned while carrying a torch for me, and how dangerously complex the situation might have become all along the line.

I stood very still, listening. The whispering was so loud now it drowned out the sighing of the wind. I looked down at my shoes. They were caked with mud and soggy and discolored. Day after day I'd trudge back and forth from the canal to the shacks in the blazing sunlight without giving my feet a thought until the ache in them had become intolerable, rest an absolute necessity.

There was only one thing to do--call Kenny's bluff so fast he wouldn't have time to hurl another accusation at me.

I handed Bill both of my shoes. He looked at me and nodded. I waited, listening to the whispering rise and fall, watching him stoop and fit the shoes into the prints on the sand.

He straightened suddenly. His face was expressionless, but I could see that he was waging a terrible inward struggle with himself.

"Your shoes come pretty close to filling out those prints, Tom," he said. "I can't be sure--but a wax impression test should pretty well clear this up." He gripped my arm and nodded toward the shacks. "Better stick close to me."

Kenny took a slow step backward, his jaw tightening, his eyes searching Bill's face. "Wax impression test,
"hell!" he said. "You've got your murderer. I'm going to see he gets what's coming to him--right now!"

Bill shook his head. "I'll do this my way," he said.

Kenny glared at him, then laughed harshly. "You won't have a chance," he said. "The boys won't stand for it. I'm going to spread the word around, and you'd better not try to stop me."

That did it. I'd been holding myself in, but I had a sudden, overpowering urge to send my fist crashing into Kenny's face, to send him crashing to the sand. I started for him, but he jumped back and started shouting.

I can't remember exactly what he shouted. But he said just enough to put a noose around my neck. Every man and woman between the shacks and the well swung about to stare at me. I saw shock and rage flare in the eyes of men who usually had steady nerves. They were not calm now--not one of them.

IV

It all happened so fast I was caught off balance. In the harsh Martian sunlight human emotions can be as unstable as a wind-lashed dune.

A crazy thought flashed through my mind: Will Molly believe this too? Will she join these madmen in their wild thirst for vengeance? My need for her was suddenly overwhelming. Just seeing her face would have helped, but now more men had emerged from the shacks and I couldn't see beyond them. They were heading straight for me and I knew that even Bill would be powerless to stop them.

You can't argue with an avalanche. It was rolling straight toward me, gathering momentum as it came--not one man or a dozen, but a solid wall of human hate and unreason.

Bill stood his ground. He had drawn his gun, and he started shouting that the prints couldn't have been made by my shoes. I chalked that up to his credit and resolved never to forget it.

I knew I'd have to make a dash for it. I ran as fast as I could, keeping my eyes on the glimmer of sunlight on rising dunes, and deep hollows which a carefully placed bullet could have quickly changed into a burial mound.

A sudden crackling burst of gunfire ripped through the air. Directly in my path the sand geysered up as the bullets ripped and tore at it. Somebody wasn't a good marksman, or had let blind rage unnerve him and spoil his aim. A lot of somebodies--for the firing increased and became almost continuous for an instant, a dull crackling which drowned out the whispering and the sighing of the wind.

Then abruptly all sound ceased. Utter stillness descended on the desert--an unnatural, terrifying stillness, as if nature herself had stopped breathing and was waiting for someone to scream.

I must have been mad to turn. A weaving target has a chance, but a target standing motionless is a sitting duck and his life hangs by a hair. But still I turned.

Something was happening between the well and the shacks which halted the pursuit dead in its tracks. One of the shacks was wrapped in darting tongues of flame, and a woman was screaming, and a man close to her was grappling with something huge and misshapen which loomed starkly against the dawn glow.

A human shape? I could not be sure. It seemed monstrous, with a bulge between its shoulders which gave a grotesque and distorted aspect to the shadow which its weaving bulk cast upon the sand. I could see the shadow clearly across three hundred feet of sand. It lengthened and shortened, as if an octopus-like ferocity had given it the power to distort itself at will, lengthening its tentacles and then whipping them back again.

But it was not an octopus. It had legs and arms, and it was crushing the man in a grip of steel. I could see that now. I stared as the others were staring, their backs turned to me, their blind hatred for me blotted out by that greater horror.

I suddenly realized that the shape was human. It had the head and shoulders of a man, and a torso that could twist with muscular purpose, and massive hands that could maul and maim. It threw the hapless man from it with a sudden convulsive contraction of its entire bulk. I had never seen a human being move in quite that way, but even as its violence flared its manlike aspect became more pronounced.

A frightful thing happened then. The woman screamed and rushed toward the brutish maniac with her fingers splayed. The swaying figure bent, grabbed her about the waist, and lifted her high into the air. I thought for a moment he was about to crush her as he had crushed the man. But I was wrong. She was hurled to the sand, but with a violence so brutal that she went instantly limp.

Then the brutal madman turned, and I saw his face. If ever monstrous cruelty and malign cunning looked out of a human countenance it looked out of the eyes that stared in my direction, remorseless in their hate.

I could not tear my gaze from his face. The hate in it could be sensed, even across a blinding haze of sunlight that blotted out the sharp contours of physical things. But more than hate could be sensed. There was something tremendous about that face, as if the evil which had ravaged it had left the searing brand of Lucifer himself!

For an instant the madman stood motionless, his ghastly brutality unchallenged. Then Jeff Winters started for it. Jeff had come to Mars alone and grown more solitary with every passing day. He was a brooding, ingrown man, secretive and sullen, with a streak of wildness which he usually managed to control. He went for the madman like a
gigantic terrier pup, shaggy and ferocious and contemptuous of death.

The big figure turned quickly, raised his arm, and brought his closed fist down on Jeff's skull. Jeff collapsed like a shattered plaster cast. His body seemed to break and splinter, and he sprawled forward on the sand.

He did not get up.

Frank Anders had guns on both hips, and he drew them fast. No one knew what kind of man Anders was. He hardly ever complained or made a spectacle of himself. A little guy with sandy hair and cold blue eyes, he had an accuracy of aim that did his talking for him.

His guns suddenly roared. For an instant the air between his hands and the maniac was a crackling wall of flame. The brute swayed a little but did not turn aside. He went straight for Anders with both arms spread wide.

He caught Anders about the waist, lifted him up, and slammed his body down against the sand. A sickness came over me as I stared. The madman bashed Anders' head against the ground again and again. Then suddenly the big arms relaxed and Anders sagged limply to the ground.

For an instant the madman swayed slowly back and forth, like a blood-stained marionette on a wire. Then he moved forward with a terrible, shambling gait, his head lowered, a dark, misshapen shadow seeming to lengthen before him on the sand like a spindle of flame.

The clearing was abruptly tumultuous with sound. The fury which had been unleashed against me turned upon the monster and became a closed circle of deadly, intent purpose hemming him in--and he was caught in a crossfire that hurled him backwards to the sand.

He jumped up and lunged straight for the well. What happened then was like the awakening stages of some horrible dream. The madman shambled past the well, the air at his back a crackling sheet of flame. The barrage behind him was continuous and merciless. The men were organized now, standing together in a solid wall, firing with deadly accuracy and a grim purpose which transcended fear.

The madman went clumping on past me and climbed a dune with his shoulders held straight. With a sunset glare deepening about him, he went striding over the dune and out of sight.

* * * * *

I turned and stared back at the camp. The pursuit had passed the well and was headed for me. But no one paid the slightest attention to me. Twelve men passed me, walking three abreast. Bill came along in their wake, his eyes stony hard. He reached out as he passed me, gripping my shoulder, giving me a foot-of-the-gallows kind of smile.

"We know now who killed Ned," he whispered. "We know, fella. Take it easy, relax."

My head was throbbing, but I could see the big prints from where I stood--the prints of a murderer betrayed by his insatiable urge to slay.

I saw Kenny pass, and he gave me a contemptuous grin. He had done his best to destroy me, but there was no longer any hate left in me.

I took a slow step forward--and fell flat on my face....

I woke up with my head in Molly's lap. She was looking down into my face, sobbing in a funny sort of way and running her fingers through my hair.

She looked startled when she saw that I was wide awake. She blinked furiously and started fumbling at her waist for a handkerchief.

"I must have passed out cold," I said. "It's quite a strain to be at the receiving end of a lynching bee. And what I saw afterwards wasn't exactly pleasant."

"Darling," she whispered, "don't move, don't say a word. You're going to be all right."

"You bet I am!" I said. "Right now I feel great."

My arm went around her shoulder, and I drew her head down until her breath was warm on my face. I kissed her hair and lips and eyes for a full minute in utter recklessness.

When I released her her eyes were shining, and she was laughing a little and crying too. "You've changed your mind," she said. "You believe me now, don't you?"

"Don't talk," I said. "Don't say another word. I just want to look at you."

"It was you right from the start," she said. "Not Ned--or anyone else."

"I was a blind fool," I said.

"You never gave me a second glance."

"One glance was enough," I whispered. "But when I saw how it seemed to be between you and Ned--"

"I was never in love with him. It was just--"

"Never mind, don't say it," I said. "It's over and done with."

I stopped, remembering. Her eyes grew wide and startled, and I could see that she was remembering too.

"What happened?" I asked. "Did they catch that vicious rat?"

She brushed back her hair, the sunlight suddenly harsh on her face. "He fell into the canal. The bullets brought
him down, and he collapsed on the bank."

Her hand tightened on my wrist. "Bill told me. He tried to swim, but the current carried him under. He went
down and never came up."

"I'm glad," I said. "Did anyone in the camp ever see him before?"

Molly shook her head. "Bill said he was a drifter--a dangerous maniac who must have been crazed by the sun."

"I see," I said.

I reached out and drew her into my arms again, and we rested for a moment stretched out side by side on the
sand.

"It's funny," I said after a while.

"What is?"

"You know what they say about the whispering. Sometimes when you listen intently you seem to hear words
deep in your mind. As if the Martians had telepathic powers."

"Perhaps they have," she said.

I glanced sideways at her. "Remember," I said. "There were cities on Mars when our ancestors were hairy apes.
The Martian civilization was flourishing and great fifty million years before the pyramids arose as a monument to
human solidarity and worth. A bad monument, built by slave labor. But at least it was a start."

"Now you're being poetic, Tom," she said.

"Perhaps I am. The Martians must have had their pyramids too. And at the pyramid stage they must have had
their Larsens, to shoulder all the guilt. To them we may still be in the pyramid stage. Suppose--"

"Suppose what?"

"Suppose they wanted to warn us, to give us a lesson we couldn't forget. How can we say with certainty that a
dying race couldn't still make use of certain techniques that are far beyond us."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she said, puzzled.

"Someday," I said, "our own science will take a tiny fragment of human tissue from the body of a dead man,
put it into an incubating machine, and a new man will arise again from that tiny shred of flesh. A man who can walk
and live and breathe again, and love again, and die again after another full lifetime.

"Perhaps the Martian science was once as great as that. And the Martians might still remember a few of the
techniques. Perhaps from our human brains, from our buried memories and desires, they could filch the key and
bring to horrible life a thing so monstrous and so terrible--"

Her hand went suddenly cold in mine. "Tom, you can't honestly think--"

"No," I said. "It's nonsense, of course. Forget it."

I didn't tell her what the whispering had seemed to say, deep in my mind.

We've brought you Larsen! You wanted Larsen, and we've made him for you! His flesh and his mind--his cruel
strength and his wicked heart! Here he comes, here he is! Larsen, Larsen, Larsen!
Again it was the wrong thing to say. The professor wagged a finger in front of his face and gave Danny a sly look. "Don't you," he said, "don't you indeed? I was beginning to think you had been willed H. G. Wells' famous literary invention, young man." That one had the class all but rolling in the aisles.

Danny said desperately, "No! No, I mean, they don't even know for sure if Columbus was born in Genoa. They just think he was. So they also could be wrong about—"

Abruptly the professor's face went serious. "My dear Mr. Jones," he said slowly, acidly, "don't you think we've had enough of fantasy? Don't you think we ought to return to history?"

Danny sat down and for a moment shut his eyes but remained conscious of everyone looking at him, staring at him, evaluating. It wasn't so easy, he decided, being a sophomore transfer student from a big city college, where almost everything went and there was a certain amount of anonymity in the very size of the classes, to a small town college where every face, after a week or so, was familiar. Danny wished he had kept his big yap shut about Columbus, but it was too late now. They'd be ribbing him for weeks....

On his way back to the dorm after classes he was hailed by a student who lived down the hall from him, a fellow named Groves, who said, "How's the boy, Danny. Next thing you'll tell us is that Cortez was really a sexy Spanish broad with a thirty-eight bust who conquered Montezuma and his Indians with sex appeal. Get it, boy. I said—"

"Aw, lay off," Danny grumbled.

The other boy laughed, then shrugged, then said, "Oh yeah, forgot to tell you. There's a telegram waiting for you in the dorm. House-mother's got it. Well, see you, Vasco da Gama."

Danny trudged on to the Georgian-style dormitory and went inside, through the lobby and behind the stairs to the house-mother's office at the rear of the building. She was a kindly-looking old woman with a halo of white hair and a smile which made her a good copy of everyone's grandmother. But now her face was set in unexpectedly grim lines. "Telegram for you, Danny," she said slowly. "They read it over the telephone first, then delivered it." She held out a yellow envelope. "I'm afraid it's some bad news, Danny." She seemed somehow reluctant to part with the little yellow envelope.

"What is it?" Danny said.

"You'd better read it yourself. Here, sit down."

Danny nodded, took the envelope, sat down and opened it. He read, MR. DANNY JONES, WHITNEY COLLEGE, WHITNEY, VIRGINIA. REGRET TO INFORM YOU UNCLE AVERILL PASSED AWAY LAST NIGHT PEACEFULLY IN HIS SLEEP LEAVING UNSPECIFIED PROPERTY TO YOU. It was signed with a name Danny did not recognize.

"I'm terribly sorry," the house-mother said, placing her hand on Danny's shoulder.

"Oh, that's all right, Mrs. Grange. It's all right. You see, Uncle Averill wasn't a young man. He must have been in his eighties."

"Were you very close to him, Danny?"

"No, not for a long time. When I was a kid—"

Mrs. Grange smiled.

"Well, when I was eight or nine, I used to see him all the time. We stayed at his place on the coast near St. Augustine, Florida, for a year. I—I feel sorry about Uncle Averill, Mrs. Grange, but I feel better about something that happened in class today. I—I think Uncle Averill would have approved of how I acted."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Well, it's just he always said never to take any so-called fact for granted, especially in history. I can almost remember his voice now, the way he used to say, 'if ever there's an argument in history, sonny, all you ever get is the propaganda report of the side which won.' You know, Mrs. Grange, I think he was right. Of course, a lot of folks thought old Uncle Averill was a little queer. Touched in the head is what they said."

"They oughtn't to say such things."

"Always tinkering around in his basement. Funny, nobody ever knew on what. He wouldn't let anybody near the place. He had a time lock and everything. What nobody could figure out is if he was trying so hard to guard something that was in the basement, why did he sometimes disappear for weeks on end without even telling anybody where he went. And I remember," Danny went on musing, "every time he came back he went into that harangue about history, as if somehow he had confirmed his suspicions. He was a funny old guy but I liked him."

"You remembering him so vividly after all these years will be the best epitaph your uncle could have, Danny. But what are you going to do? About what he left you, I mean."

"Uncle Averill always liked promptness. If he left something for me, he'd want me to pick it up immediately. I guess I ought to go down there to St. Augustine as fast as I can."
"But your classes—"
"I'll have to take an emergency leave of absence."
"Under the circumstances, I'm sure the college will approve. Do you think your uncle left you anything—well—important?"
"Important?" Danny repeated the word. "No, I don't think so. Not by the world's standards. But it must have been important to Uncle Averill. He was a—you know, an image-breaker—"
"An iconoclast," supplied Mrs. Grange.
"Yes'm, an iconoclast. But I liked him."
Mrs. Grange nodded. "You'd better get over and see the Dean."
An hour later, Danny was at the bus depot, waiting for the Greyhound that would take him over to Richmond, where he would meet a train for the south and Florida.
It was a rambling white stucco house with a red tile roof and a pleasant grove of palm trees in front and flame-red hibiscus climbing the stucco. The lawyer, whose name was Tartalion, met him at the door.
"I'll get right down to business, Mr. Jones," Tartalion said after they had entered the house. "Your uncle wanted it that way."
"Wait a minute," Danny said, "don't tell me they already had the funeral?"
"Your uncle didn't believe in funerals. His will stipulated cremation."
"But, it was so—"
"Sudden? I know, the will wasn't officially probated. But your uncle had a judge for a friend, and under the circumstances, his wishes were granted. Now, then, you know why you're here?"
"You mean, what he left me? I thought I'd at least get to see his—"
"His body? Not your uncle, not old Averill Jones. You ought to know better. Sonny," the lawyer asked abruptly, "how well did you know the old man?"
The sonny rankled. After all, Danny thought, I'm nineteen. I like beer and girls and I'm no sonny anymore. He sighed and thought of his history class, then thought of Uncle Averill's opinion of history, and felt better. He explained the relationship to Mr. Tartalion and waited for the lawyer to speak.
"Well, it beats me," Tartalion admitted. "Why he left it to a nephew he hasn't seen in ten or eleven years, I mean. Don't just look at me like that. You know that contraption he had in the basement, don't you? How he wouldn't let a soul near it, ever? Then tell me something, Danny. Why did he leave it to you?"
"You're joking!" Danny cried.
"I was your uncle's lawyer. I wouldn't joke about it. He said it was the only thing he had worth willing. He said he willed it to you. Want me to read you the clause?"
Danny nodded. He felt strangely flattered, because the contraption in Averill Jones' basement—a contraption which no one but Averill Jones had ever seen—had been the dearest thing in the old bachelor's life. Actually, he was not Danny's uncle, but his grand-uncle. He had lived alone in St. Augustine and had liked living alone. The only relative he had tolerated was Danny, when Danny was a small boy. Then, as Danny approached his ninth birthday, the old man had said, "They're teaching you too much at school, son. Too many wrong things, too many highfalutin' notions, too much just plain old hogwash. Why don't you kind of make yourself scarce for a few years?" It had been blunt and to the point. It had made Danny cry. He hadn't thought of what had happened that last day he'd seen his grand-uncle for years, but he thought of it now.
"But why can't I come back and see you?" he had asked tearfully.
"On account of the machine, son."
"But why, uncle?"
"Hey, come on now and stop your blubbering all over me. If you can't you can't."
"You have to tell me why!"
"Stubborn little critter. Well, I like that. All right, I'll tell you why. Because the machine has a funny kind of fuel, that's why. It doesn't run on gasoline, Danny, or anything like that."
"What does it do, uncle?"
But the old man had shaken his head. "Maybe someday after I'm gone you'll find out. If anyone finds out, it will be you, and that's a promise."
"You still didn't tell me why I have to go away."
"Because—well, don't go telling this to your folks, son, or they'll think old Uncle Averill has a screw loose somewheres—because that machine I have downstairs runs on faith. On faith, you understand? Oh, not the kind of faith they think is important and do a lot of talking and sermoning about, but a different kind of faith. Personal faith, you might say. Faith in a dream or a belief, no matter what people think. And—you know what ruins that faith?"
"No," Danny had said, his eyes very big.
"Knowledge!" cried his uncle. "Too much so-called knowledge which isn't knowledge at all, but hearsay. That's what they're teaching you. In school, other places, every day of your life. I'll tell you when you can come back, Danny: when you're ready to throw most of it overboard. All right?"

He had had to say all right. It was the last time he had ever seen his uncle, but those weren't the last words Averill Jones had spoken to him, for the old man had added as he got up to go: "Don't forget, son. Don't let them pull the wool over your eyes. History is propaganda—from a winner's point of view. If a side lost the war and got stamped on, you never see the war from its point of view. If an idea got out of favor and stamped on, the idea is ridiculed. Don't forget it, son. If you believe something, if you know it's right, have faith in it and don't give a mind what people say. Promise?"

Danny, his eyes stinging with tears because somehow he could sense he would never see Uncle Averill again, had said that he promised.

"... to my nephew, Danny Jones," the lawyer was reading. "So, you see, you'll have to go right down there and look the thing over. Naturally, I'll have to leave the house while you do so and I won't be able to return until you tell me I can—"

"But why?"

"Weren't you listening?"

"I guess I was thinking about my uncle."

"Well, the clause says you're to examine the machine alone, with no one else in the house. It's perfectly legal. If that's what your uncle wanted, that's what he'll get. Are you all set?"

Danny nodded and Tartalion shook his hand solemnly, then left the room. Danny heard the lawyer's footsteps receding, heard the front door open and close, heard a car engine start. Then, slowly, he walked through the living room of his dead uncle's house and across the long, narrow kitchen and to the basement stairs. His hands were very dry and he felt his heart thudding. He was nervous, which surprised him.

But why? he thought, why should it surprise me? All my life, Uncle Averill's basement has been a mystery. Let's face it, Danny-boy, you haven't exactly had an adventurous life. Maybe Uncle Averill was the biggest adventure in it, with his secret machine and strange disappearances. And maybe Uncle Averill did a good selling job when you were small, but you want to believe it is, don't you? And you're nervous because the way Uncle Averill kept you and anyone else away from his basement when you were a kid makes it a kind of frightening place, even now.

He opened the basement door with a key which the lawyer had given him. Beyond the door were five steps and another door—this one of metal. It had had a time lock in the old days, Danny remembered, but the lock was gone now. The metal door swung ponderously, like the door to a bank vault, and then Danny was on the other side. It was dark down there, but faint light seeped in through small high windows and in a few moments Danny's eyes grew accustomed to the gloom.

The basement was empty except for what looked like a big old steamer trunk in the center of the dusty cement floor.

Danny was disappointed. He had childhood visions of an intricate maze of machinery cluttering up every available square foot of basement space, but now he knew that whatever it was which had taken up so much of Uncle Averill's time could fit in the odd-looking steamer trunk in the center of the floor and thus wasn't too much bigger than a good-size TV set. He walked slowly to the trunk and stood for a few moments over the lid. It was an ancient-looking steamer: Uncle Averill must have owned it since his own youth. Still, just a plain trunk.

Danny was in no hurry to open the lid, which did not seem to be locked. For a few moments, at least, he could shield himself from further disappointment—because now he had a hunch that Uncle Averill's machine was going to be a first-class dud. Maybe, he thought gloomily, Uncle Averill had simply not liked to be with people and had used the ruse of a bank-vault door and an empty steamer trunk to achieve privacy whenever he felt the need for it.

Remembering the history class, Danny decided that—after all—sometimes that wasn't a bad idea. Finally, he called himself a fool for waiting and threw up the trunk-lid.

A small case was all he saw inside, although the interior of the trunk was larger than he had expected. A man could probably curl up in there quite comfortably. But the case—the case looked exactly like it ought to house a tape-recorder.

Danny reached in and hauled out the case. It was heavy, about as heavy as a tape-recorder ought to be. Danny placed it down on the floor and opened it.

What he saw was a battery-powered tape-recorder. His disappointment increased: Uncle Averill had left a message for him, that was all. Dutifully, however, he set the spools and snapped on the switch.

A voice from yesterday—Uncle Averill's voice—spoke to him.

"Hallo, Danny," it said. "The way the years roll by, I forget exactly how old you are, boy. Seventeen?
Eighteen? Twenty? Well, it doesn't matter—if you still believe. If you have faith. Faith in what? Maybe now you're old enough to know. I mean faith in—not having faith. That is, faith in not taking faithfully all the silly items of knowledge they try to cram down your throat in school. See what I mean? Remember what I always said about history, Danny: you get propaganda, is all, from the winning side. If you got faith enough in yourself, Danny, faith enough not to believe everything the history books tell you, that's the kind of faith I mean. Because such a faith gave me the most interesting life a man ever lived, make no mistake about that.

"I'm dead, Danny. Yep, old Uncle Averill is dead. Because this tape-recorder won't be left you in my will until I am dead. But, no regrets, boy. I had a great life. How great—nobody knows. Only you, you're about to find out. Do you believe? Do you believe the way I have in mind? Make no mistake about it now, son. If you don't believe, you might as well burn these spools and go home."

Danny considered. He remembered what had happened in his history class. Wasn't that the sort of faith Uncle Averill had in mind? Faith not to believe in historical fairy tales? Faith to doubt when one ought to doubt? Faith to be skeptical....

"Good," said the voice from the past. "Then you're still here. Look in front of you, Danny-boy. The trunk. The old steamer. Know what it is?"

"No," Danny said, then clamped a hand over his mouth. For a moment he had actually believed he was talking to the dead man.

"It's a time machine," said his Uncle's voice.

There was a silence. The tape went on winding. For a moment, Danny thought that was all. Then the voice continued: "No, your old grand-uncle isn't nuts, Danny. It's a time machine. I know it's a time machine because I used it all my life. You expected some kind of complicated gadget down here, I know. I made everybody think it was a gadget. Going down to your basement and tinkering with a gadget is fine in our culture. Hell's fire, boy, it's approved behavior. But locking a bank-vault door behind you and curling up in a steamer trunk, that isn't approved. Now, is it?"

"I'll tell you about this here time machine, sonny. It isn't a machine at all, in the strict sense of the word. You can see that. It's just—well, an empty box. But it works, and what else ought a fellow to care about.

"Funny how I got it. I was eighteen or twenty, maybe. And my Grand-uncle Daniel gave it to me. Daniel, get me. Daniel to Averill to Daniel. So when you have a grand-nephew, see that his name's Averill, understand? Keep it going, Danny. Because this trunk is old. A lot older than you think.

"And you can travel through time in it. Don't look at me like that, I know what you're thinking. There isn't any such thing as time travel. In the strict sense of the word, it's impossible. You can't resurrect the past or peek into the unborn future. Well, I don't know about the future, but I do know about the past. But you got to have faith, you got to be a kid at heart, Danny. You got to have this dream, see?"

"Because you don't travel anywhere. But your mind does, and it's like you wake up in somebody else's body, drawn to him like a magnet, somebody else—somewhen else. Your body stays right here, you see. In the trunk. In what they called suspended animation. But you—the real you, the you that knows how to dream and to believe—you go back.

"Don't make the mistake I made at first. It's no dream in the usual sense of the word. It's real, Danny. You're somebody else back there, all right, but if he gets hurt, you get hurt. If he dies—taps for Danny Jones! You get me?"

The dead man's voice chuckled. "But don't think this means automatically you'll be able to travel through time. Because you got to have the proper attitude. You've got to believe in yourself, and not in all the historical fictions they give you. Now do you understand? If you're skeptical enough and if at the same time you like to dream enough—that's all it takes. Want to try it?"

Suddenly the voice was gone. That was all there was and at first Danny could not believe it. A sense of bitter disappointment enveloped him—not because Uncle Averill had left him nothing but an old steamer trunk but because Uncle Averill had been, to say the least, off his rocker.

The fabulous machine in the basement was—nothing.

Just a steamer trunk and an incredible story about time-traveling.

Danny sighed and began to walk back toward the cellar stairs. He paused. He turned around uncertainly and looked at the trunk. After all, he had promised; at least he'd promised himself that he'd carry out his peculiar uncle's wishes. Besides, he'd come all the way down here from Whitney College and he ought to at least try the machine.

But there wasn't any machine.

Try the trunk then? There was nothing to try except curling up in it and maybe closing the lid. Uncle Averill was a practical joker, too. It might be just like Uncle Averill to have the lid snap shut and lock automatically so Danny would have to pound his knuckles black and blue until the lawyer heard and came for him.

You see, sonny? would be Uncle Averill's point. You believed me, and you should have known better.
Danny cursed himself and returned to the trunk. He gazed down at the yawning interior for a few seconds, then put first one foot, then the other over the side. He sat down and stared at a peeling blue-paper liner. He rolled over and curled up. The bottom of the trunk was a good fit. He reached up and found a rope dangling down toward him. He pulled the lid down, smiling at his own credulity, and was engulfed in total darkness.

But it would be wonderful, he found himself thinking. It would be the most wonderful thing in the world, to be able to travel through time and see for yourself what really had happened in all the world's colorful ages and to take part in the wildest, proudest adventures of mankind.

He thought, I want to believe. It would be so wonderful to believe.

He also thought about his history class. He did not know it, but his history class was very important. It was crucial. Everything depended on his history class. Because he doubted. He did not want to take Columbus' bravery and intelligence for granted. There were no surviving documents, so why should he?

Maybe Columbus was a third-rater!
Maybe—at least you didn't have to worship him as a hero just because he happened to discover ...
Now, what did he discover?
In absolute darkness and a ringing in the ears and far away a dim glowing light and larger and brighter and the whirling whirling spinning flashing I don't believe but strangely somehow I have faith, faith in myself, buzzing, humming, glowing ...

The world exploded.

There was a great deal of laughter in the tavern.

At first he thought the laughter was directed at him. Giddily, he raised his head. He saw raw wood rafters, a leaded glass window, a stained and greasy wall, heavy wood-plank tables with heavy chairs and a barbarous-looking crew drinking from heavy clay mugs. One of the mugs was in front of him and he raised it to his lips without thinking.

It was ale, the strongest ale he had ever tasted. He got it down somehow without gagging. The laughter came again, rolling over him like a wave. A serving girl scurried by, skirts flashing, a rough tray of clay mugs balanced expertly on one hand. A man with a sword dangling at his side staggered to his feet drunkenly and clawed at the girl, but she shoved him back into his seat and kept walking.

The third wave of laughter rolled and then there was a brief silence.

"Drink too much, Martin Pinzon?" Danny's companion at the long board-table asked. He was an evil-looking old man with a patch over one eye and a small white spade-shaped beard and unshaven cheeks.

"Not me," Danny said, amazed because the language was unfamiliar to him yet he could both understand and speak it. "What's so funny?" he asked. "Why's everyone laughing?"

The old man's hand slapped his back and the mouth parted to show ugly blackened teeth and the old man laughed so hard spittle spotted his beard. "As if you didn't know," he managed to say. "As if you didn't know, Martin Pinzon. It's that weak-minded sailor again, the one who claims to have a charter for three caravels from the Queen herself. Drunk as Bacchus and there's his pretty little daughter trying to get him to come home again. I tell you, Martin Pinzon, if he isn't ..."

But now Danny wasn't listening. He looked around the tavern until he saw the butt of all the laughter. Slowly, drawn irresistibly, Martin Pinzon—or Danny Jones—got up and walked over there.

The man was drunk as Bacchus, all right. He was a man perhaps somewhat taller than average. He had a large head with an arrogant beak of a nose dominating the face, but the mouth was weak and irresolute. He stared drunkenly at a beautiful girl who could not have been more than seventeen.

The girl was saying, "Please, papa. Come back to the hotel with me. Papa, don't you realize you're sailing tomorrow?"

"Gowanamlemebe," the man mumbled.

"Papa. Please. The Queen's charter—"

"I was drunk when I took it and drunk when I examined those three stinking caravels and—" he leaned forward as if to speak in deepest confidence, but his drunken voice was still very loud—"and drunk when I said the world was round. I—"

"You hear that?" someone cried. "Old Chris was drunk when he said the world was round!"

"He must a' been!" someone else shouted. Everyone laughed.

"Come on, papa," the girl pleaded. She wore a shawl over her dress and another shawl on her head. Her blonde hair barely peeked out, and she was beautiful. She tried to drag her father to his feet by one arm, but he was too heavy for her.

She looked around the room defiantly as the laughter surged again. "Brave men!" she mocked. "A bunch of stay-at-homes. Won't somebody help me? Papa sails tomorrow."
“Papa sails tomorrow,” said someone, miming her desperate tones. “Didn’t you know that papa sails tomorrow?”

“Not sailing anyplace at all,” the father mumbled. “World isn’t round. Drunk. Think I want to fall over the edge? Think I—”

“Oh, papa,” moaned the girl. “Won’t someone help me to—” And she tugged again at the man’s arm—“to get him to bed.”

A big man nearby boomed, “I’ll help you t’bed, me lass, but it won’t be with your old father. Eh, mates?” he cried, and the tavern echoed with laughter. The big man got up and went over to the girl. “Now, listen, lass,” he said, taking hold of her arm. “Why don’t you forget this drunken slob of a father and—”

Crack! Her hand blurred at his cheek, struck it like a pistol shot. The big man blinked his eyes and grinned. “So you have spirit, do you? Well, it’s more than I can say for that father of yours, too yellow and too drunk to carry out the Queen of Castile’s bid—”

The hand flashed out again but this time the big man caught it in one of his own and twisted sideways against the girl, forcing her back against the table’s edge. “I like my girls to struggle,” he said, and the girl’s face went white as she suddenly let herself go limp in his arms.

The man grinned. “Oh I like ‘em limp, me lass. When they’re pretty as a rose, like you, who’s to care?”

“Papa!” the girl screamed. The big man’s face hovered over hers, blotting out the oil-lamp lights, the thick lips all but slavering....

“Just a minute, man!” Danny cried, striding boldly to them. Hardly pausing in his efforts to kiss the again struggling girl, the big man swatted back with one enormous arm and sent Danny reeling. Whoever he was, he was a popular figure. The laughter was still louder now. Everyone was having a great time, at Danny’s expense now.

Danny crashed into a chair, upending it. A bowl of soup came crashing down, the heavy bowl splintering, the hot contents scalding him. He stood up and heard the girl scream. Instinctively, he grasped two legs of the heavy chair and hefted it. Then he sprinted back across the room.

“Behind you, Pietro!” a voice cried, and at the last moment the big man whirled and faced Danny, then lunged to one side, taking the girl with him.

Danny couldn’t check his arms, which had carried the heavy chair overhead. It came down with a crash against the edge of the big plank table. The chair shattered in Danny’s arms. One leg flew up and struck the big man in the face, though, bringing blood just below the cheek bone. He bellowed in surprise and pain and came lumbering toward Danny.

Danny was aware of the girl cowering to one side, aware that another of the chair’s legs was still grasped in his right hand. He was but a boy, he found himself thinking quickly, desperate. If the giant grabbed him, grabbed him just once, the fight would be over. The man was twice his size, twice his weight. Yet he had to do something to help the girl....

The giant came at him. The big arms lifted over the heavy, brutal face.... And Danny drove under them with the chair-leg, jabbing the tip of it against the man’s enormous middle. Pietro—for such was the man’s name—sagged a few inches, the breath rushing, heavy with garlic, from his mouth. But still, he got his great hands about Danny’s throat and began to squeeze.

Dannysaw the wood rafters, the window, a bargirl standing, mouth open, watching them, the drunken man and his daughter, then a blurry, watery confusion as his eyes went dim. He was conscious of swinging the club, of striking something, of extending the club out as far as it would go and then slamming it back toward himself, striking something which he hoped was Pietro’s head. He felt his mouth going slack and wondered if his tongue were hanging out. Exerting all his strength he struck numbly, mechanically, desperately with the chair-leg.

And slowly, the constriction left his throat. Something struck against his middle, almost knocking him down. Something pushed against his legs, backing him against the table. He looked down. His eyes were watery, his throat burning. The giant Pietro lay, breathing stertorously, at his feet.

A small hand grabbed his. "Father will come now," a voice said. "I don’t—don’t even know who you are, but I want to thank you. I thank you for myself and the Queen, and God, senor. You better come quickly, with us. Does it hurt much?"

Danny tried to talk. His voice rasped in his throat. The girl squeezed his hand and together with her and the drunken man who was her father, he left the tavern. The giant Pietro was just getting up and shaking his fist at them slowly....

It was a small top-floor room in an old waterfront building in the Spanish port of Palos. Or, Danny corrected himself, the Castillian port of Palos. Because, in this year of our Lord 1492, Spain had barely become a unified country.

"Are you feeling better, Martin Pinzon?" the beautiful girl asked him.
He had given the name he had heard, Martin Pinzon, as his own. The room was very hot. The August night outside was hot too and sultry and starless. The girl's father was resting now, breathing unevenly. The girl's name was Nina. One of the small caravels in her father's three-ship fleet was named after her. Her full name was Nina Columbus.

Nina brought another wet cloth and covered Danny's swollen throat with it. "Does it hurt much?" she said, and, for the tenth time, "we have no money to thank you with, senor."

"Any man would have—"

"But you were the only one. The only—never mind. Martin, listen. I have no right to trouble you, but ... it's father. Tomorrow is the second day of August, you see, and it is all over Palos that tomorrow he sails with the Queen's charter...."

"Then if you're worrying about that big man, Pietro, you can forget it. If you're sailing, I mean."

"That's just it," Nina said desperately. "Father doesn't want to sail. Martin, tell me, do you believe the world is round?"

Danny nodded very soberly. "Yes, Nina," he told her softly. "The world is round. I believe it."

"My father doesn't! Funny, isn't it, Martin?" she said in a voice which told him she did not think it was funny at all. "All Spain—and Genoa too—think that tomorrow morning my father, Christopher Columbus, will journey to the unexplored west confident that he will arrive, after a long voyage, in the East—when really my father, this same Christopher Columbus, lies here in a drunken stupor because he lacks the courage to face his convictions and ... oh, Martin!" Her voice broke, her pretty face crumpled. She sobbed into her hands. Gently, Danny stroked her back.

"There now, take it easy," he said. "Your father will sail. I know he'll sail. Do you believe the world to be round, little Nina?"

"Yes. Oh yes, yes, yes!"

"He will sail. He will prove it and be famous. I know he will."

"Oh, Martin. You sound so sure of yourself. I wish I could ..."

"Nina, listen. Your father will sail."

"You'll help us you mean?"

"Yes. All right, I'll help you. Now, get some sleep if you want to wake up and say goodbye to him in the morning. Because I'll be getting him up before the sun to—"

"Are you a sailing man too? Are you going with him?"

"Well ..."

"Wait! Martin, I remember you now. Martin Pinzon. At the meeting of the organization to prove the Earth's round shape. You! You were there. And once, once when he was not drunk, father said that a Don Pinzon would command one of our three ships, the Nina it was, the caravel which bears my name. Are you this Don Pinzon?"

Slowly, Danny nodded. He remembered his history now. The Nina had been commanded by one Don Pinzon, Don Martin Pinzon! And he was now this Martin Pinzon, he, Danny Jones. Which meant he was going with Columbus to discover a new world! A nineteen-year-old American youth going to witness the single most important event in American history....

"Yes," Danny said slowly, "I am Don Pinzon."

"But—but you're so young!"

Danny shrugged. "I have seen more of the world than you would believe, Nina."

"The Western Sea? You have been out on the Western Sea, as far as the Canary Islands, perhaps?" she asked in an awed voice.

"I know the Western Sea," he said. "Trust me."

She came very close. She looked long in his eyes. "I trust you, Martin. Oh yes, I trust you. Listen, Martin. I'm going. I'm going with you. I have to go with you."

"But a girl—"

"He is my father. I love him, Martin. He needs me. Martin, don't try to stop me. I want you to help me aboard, to see that he ... oh, Martin, you'll have so much to do. Because the rest of our crew—some of them being hired even now by the three caravel pursers—will be a crew of cut-throats and ne'er-do-wells embarking into the unknown because they have utterly nothing to lose. Father needs you because the others won't care."

"The three caravels will sail west," Danny told her. "Believe me, they'll sail west. Now, get some sleep."

Her face was still very close. Her eyes filled with tears, but they were not tears of sadness. She took his cheeks in her hands and kissed him softly on the lips. She smiled at him, her own lips trembling.

"Martin," she said.

His arms moved. They went around her, drew the softness of her close. She murmured something, but he did not hear it. His lips found hers a second time, fiercely. His hands her shoulder, her throat, her ...
"Flat," Columbus mumbled. "Flat. Abs'lutely flat. The Earth is—flat as a pancake...."

"Oh, Martin!" Nina cried.

It was raining in the morning. A hard, driving rain, pelting down on the seaport of Palos. The three caravels floated side by side in the little harbor and a large, derisive crowd had gathered. The crowd erupted into noisy laughter when Columbus and his little party appeared on foot.

"I need a drink," Columbus whispered. "I can't go through with it."

"Father," Nina said. "We're with you. I'm here. Martin is here."

"I can't go—"

"You've got to go through with it! For yourself and for the world. Now, stand straight, father. They're looking at you. They're all looking at you."

Columbus, thought Danny. The intrepid voyager who had discovered a new world! He smiled grimly. Columbus, the history books should have said, the drunken sot who didn't even have the courage to face his own convictions.

They walked ahead through the ridiculing crowd. Danny's throat was still sore. He was not frightened, though. He possibly was the only man in the crew who was not frightened. The others didn't care what their destination was, true: but they wanted to reach it alive. Danny knew the journey would end in success. The end of the journey meant nothing to him. It was written in history. It was...

Unless, he suddenly found himself thinking, he came back here to write it. He grinned at his own bravado. What would they have said in freshman psych—that was practically paranoid thinking. As if Danny Jones, Whitney College, Virginia, U.S.A., could have anything to do with the success or failure of Columbus' journey.

They reached the small skiff that would take them out to the tiny fleet of caravels. The crowd hooted and jeered.

"... going to drop off the edge of the world, Columbus."

"If the monsters don't get you first."

"Or the storms and whirlpools."

Columbus gripped Nina's hand. Martin-Danny took his other arm firmly and steered him toward the prow of the skiff. "Easy now, skipper," Danny said.

"I can't—"

"There's wine on the Santa Maria," Danny whispered. "Much wine—to make you forget. Come on!"

"And I'm going, father," Nina said. "Whether you go or not."

"You!" Columbus gasped. "A girl. You, going—"

"With Martin Pinzon. If—if my own father can't look after me, then Martin can."

"But you—" Danny began.

"Be quiet, please," she whispered as Columbus climbed stiffly into the skiff. "It may be the only way, Martin. He—he loves me. I guess I'm the only thing he cares about. If he knows I'm going."

"To the Santa Maria!" Columbus told the rowers as Danny and Nina got into the skiff.

"To the New World!" cried Danny melodramatically.

"What did you say?" Nina asked him.

His face colored. "I mean, to the Indies! To the Indies!"

The skiff bobbed out across the harbor toward the three waiting caravels. Departure time had arrived.

Two hours later, they were underway.

The sea was calm as glass, green as emerald. The three caravels, after a journey of several days, had reached the Canary Islands where additional provisions and fresh water were to be had.

"This," said Columbus, waving his arms to take in the chain of islands. "This is as far as a mere man has a right to go. There is nothing further, can't you see? Can't you?"

He was sober. Danny had come over in a skiff from the Nina to see that he remained sober at least for the loading and the departure. It was as if he, Danny, was going to preserve Columbus' name for history—single-handed if necessary.

"We will not go on," Columbus said. "We're going back. The only way to the Indies is around the Cape of Storms, around Africa. I tell you—"

"That's enough, father," Nina said. "We ...

"I'm in command here," Columbus told them. It surprised Danny. Usually, the drunken sailor was not so self-assertive. Then it occurred to Danny that it wasn't merely self-assertiveness: it was fear.

Danny called over the mate, a one-legged man named Juan, who walked with a jaunty stride despite his peg leg. "You take orders from Columbus?" Danny said. "Would you take orders from me?"

Juan shook his head, smiling. "You command aboard the Nina only, Martin Pinzon. I heard what the Captain
said. If he wants to go back and give up this fool scheme, it's all right with me. And you know the rest of the crew will say the same.

Nina looked at Danny hopelessly. She said, "Then, then it's no use?"

Danny whispered fiercely, "Your father loves you very much?"

"Yes, but—"

"And doesn't want to see anything happen to you?"

"But—"

"And believes the world is flat and if you sail far enough west you'll fall off?"

"But I—"

"Then you're coming with me aboard the Nina!"

Columbus gasped, "What did you say?"

"She's coming with me, on the Nina. If you don't want to find the western route to the Indies, we will. Right, Nina?" he said, taking her hand and moving to where the rope-ladder dangled over the side of the Santa María to the skiff below.

"Don't take her from this deck," Columbus ordered.

Danny ignored him. "Don Juan!" cried Columbus, and the peg-leg came toward Danny.

"I'm sorry, Don Martin," he said, "but—"

Still holding Nina's hand, Martin stiff-armed him out of the way and ran for the side. Someone jerked the rope-ladder out of reach and someone else leaped on Martin. For, he was Martin now, Martin Pinzon. His own identity seemed submerged far below the surface, as if somehow he could look on all this without risking anything. He knew that he was merely a defense mechanism, to ward off fear: for, it wasn't true. If Martin Pinzon were hurt, he would be hurt.

He hurled the man from his back. Nina screamed as a cutlass flashed in the sun. Martin-Danny ducked, felt the blade whizz by overhead.

"Jump!" Martin-Danny cried.

"But I can't swim!"

"I can. I'll save you." It was Danny again, completely Danny. He felt himself arise to the surface, submerging Martin Pinzon. Because the Spaniard probably couldn't swim at all, and if Danny made promises, it was Danny who must fulfill them.

He squeezed Nina's hand. He went up on the side—and over. The water seemed a very long way down. They hit it finally with a great splash.

Down they went and down, into the warm murky green depths. Down—and finally up. Danny's head broke surface. He was only yards from the skiff. He had never let go of Nina's hand, but now he did, getting a lifeguard's hold on her. He struck out for the skiff.

Fifteen minutes later, they were aboard the Nina. "I command here," Danny told the crew. "Is that correct?"

"Aye, sir," said Don Hernan, the mate.

"Even if Columbus tells you different?"

"Columbus?" spat Don Hernan. "That drunkard is in command of the Santa María, not the Nina. We follow Martin Pinzon here."

"Even if I give one set of orders and Columbus another?"

"Even then, my commander. Yes."

"Then we're sailing west," Danny cried. "Up anchor! Hurry."

"But I—" Nina began.

"Don't you see? He thinks I'm abducting you. Or he thinks I'm sailing west with you to certain death. He will follow with the Santa María and the Pinta, trying to rescue you. And we'll reach the Indies. Columbus will sail across the Western Sea to save his daughter, but what's the difference why he'll sail. The important thing is, Queen Isabella gave him the charter and the caravels and with them he's making history. You see?"

"I ... I think so," Nina said doubtfully.

A heady wind sprang up. The square-rigged sails billowed. The Nina began to surge forward—into the unknown West.

Tackle creaked aboard the nearby Santa María and Pinta. The two other caravels came in pursuit. But they won't catch us, Martin knew. They won't catch us until we reach—Hispaniola. And then, pursuit will be no more. Then, it will no longer matter and we'll all be heroes....

Which is the way it turned out—almost.

The Santa María and Pinta pursued all through August and September and into October, but the Nina kept its slim lead. The ships were never out of sight of one another and once or twice Columbus even hailed them, imploring
them to return to Spain with him. When they ignored him, his deep voice boomed to his own crew and the crew of
the Pinta: "Then sail on, sail on!" It was these words, Danny knew, that history would record. Not the others.
One morning in October, he awoke with a start. Something had disturbed his sleep—something ...
"Good morning, captain," a voice said.
He looked up. It was a giant of a man, with a hard face and brutal-looking eyes. He knew that face. Pietro! The
giant of the tavern.
"But you—"
"I was aboard all the time, my captain," Pietro said. "An auxiliary rower. You never knew." He said nothing
else. He lunged at Martin's bunk—for I'm Martin again, Danny thought—a knife gleaming in his big hand.
Martin-Danny sat up, bringing the covers with him, hurling them like a cloak at Pietro. The giant's knife-hand
caught in the covers and Danny swung to his feet, shoving the big man. Pietro stumbled into the bunk, then lashed
around quickly, unexpectedly, the knife loose again. Danny felt it grating across his ribs hotly, searingly. He
staggered and almost fell, but somehow made it to the door and on deck. He needed room. Facing that knife in the
close confines of the cabin, he was a dead man and knew it.
He hit the stairs and headed for the deck. He reached the door—tugged. It held fast. He heard Pietro's laughter,
then threw himself to one side. The knife thudded into the wood alongside Danny's shoulder.
Then the door came open, throwing him back. He stumbled, regained his balance, plunged outside. With a roar,
Pietro followed him, knife again in hand.
Danny backed away slowly. Only a few crew members were on deck now, and a watch high up in the crow's
nest. The watch was crying in an almost-delirious voice: "Land, land! Land ho-o-o!" But Martin-Danny hardly heard
the words. Pietro came at him—
Suddenly Don Hernan was in front of him. Don Hernan's hand nipped up and then down and a knife arced
toward Danny. He caught it by the haft, swung to face the giant. But, he thought, I don't know how to use a knife.
I'm Danny Jones, I ...
Pietro leaped, the knife down, held loosely at his side, underhanded, ready to slash and rip. Danny sidestepped
and Pietro went by in a rush. Danny waited.
Pietro came back carefully this time, crouching, balanced easily on the balls of his feet. For all his size, he
fought with the grace of a dancer.
Danny felt warm wetness where the blood was seeping from his ribs. Feet pounded as more of the crew came
on deck in response to the watch's delirious words. Instead of crowding at the prow, though, they formed a circle
around Danny and Pietro. Danny thought: But I'm the captain. The captain. They ought to help me ... they ... He
knew though that they would not. They were a fierce, proud people and the law of single combat would apply even
to the captain who had piloted them across an unknown ocean.
Pietro came by, attempting to slash with his knife from outside. Danny moved quickly—not quick enough. The
knife point caught his arm this time. He felt his hand go numb. His own knife clattered to the deck as blood oozed
from his biceps.
Once more Pietro charged him. Weaponless, Danny waited. Pietro was laughing, sure of himself—
Careless.
Danny slipped aside as Pietro brought the knife around in a wicked swipe. He spun with it and when he came
around Danny was waiting for him. He drove his left fist into the great belly and his right to the big, bearded jaw.
Pietro slumped, disbelieving in his eyes. He swung the knife again but only succeeded in wrapping his giant arm around
Danny. He bent his head, shook it to clear it of the sting of Danny's blows. And Danny rabbit-punched him.
Pietro went down heavily and someone shouted. "The face! Kick him in the face!"
Wearily, Danny shook his head. He went with Nina to the rail and saw the green palm-fringed island of the
New World. Nina smiled at him, then ripped something from what she was wearing and began to bandage his ribs,
his arm.
They heard a splash. Danny looked around, saw Don Hernan and a member of the crew gazing serenely down.
Pietro was down there, where they had tossed him. For a while the body floated, then the limbs splashed wildly as
Pietro regained consciousness. He drifted back away from the ship. He went under, and came up. He went under
again, and stayed under....
"The Indies," Nina said.
"The Indies," Danny said. He did not make the distinction between east and west. They must learn for
themselves.
The Pinta and the Santa Maria came up alongside. All thoughts of pursuit were gone. Columbus waved. He was
very close now on the deck of the Santa Maria. There was something in his face, something changed. Columbus was
a new man now. He had been shamed. He had followed his daughter and Martin Pinzon across an unknown ocean
and he was changed now. Somehow, Danny knew he could now make voyages on his own.

"Martin," Nina whispered. "They may say it was father. But it was you. I'll know in my heart, it was you."

Danny nodded. She put her arm around his shoulder, and kissed him. He liked this slim girl—he liked her immensely, and it wasn't right. She wasn't his, not really. She was Martin Pinzon's. He let the Spaniard come to the surface, willed his own mind back and down and away. She's all yours, Pinzon, he told the other mind in his body. She—and this world. I'm a—stranger here.

But once more he kissed Nina, fiercely, with passion and longing.

"Goodbye, my darling," he said.

"Goodbye! What—"

He let Martin Pinzon take it from there. "Hello," said Martin Pinzon. "I mean, hello forever, darling."

She laughed. "Goodbye to your bachelorhood, you mean."

"Yes," he said. "Yes."

But it was Martin Pinzon talking now. Completely Martin Pinzon.

He was back in his grand-uncle's basement. He was in the trunk and he felt stiff. Mostly, his right arm and the right ribs felt stiff. He felt his shirt. It was caked with blood.

Proof, he thought. If I needed proof. What happened to Pinzon happened to me.

He stood up. He felt weak, but knew he would be all right. He knew about Columbus now. At first, a weak drunkard. But after the first voyage, thanks to Martin Pinzon and Nina, an intrepid voyager. For history said Columbus would make four voyages to the New World—and four he would make.

Danny went outside, to where the lawyer was waiting for him. The trunk was Danny's now, the time trunk. And he would use it again, often. He knew that now, and it was wrong to deflate a dream.

Columbus was a hero. He would never say otherwise again.

THE END

Contents

COLD LIGHT
By Capt. S. P. Meek

How could a human body be found actually splintered—broken into sharp fragments like a shattered glass!
Once again Dr. Bird probes deep into an amazing mystery.

"Confound it, Carnes, I am on my vacation!"

"I know it, Doctor, and I hate to disturb you, but I felt that I simply had to. I have one of the weirdest cases on my hands that I have ever been mixed up in and I think that you'll forgive me for calling you when I tell you about it."

Dr. Bird groaned into the telephone transmitter.

"I took a vacation last summer, or tried to, and you hauled me away from the best fishing I have found in years to help you on a case. This year I traveled all the way from Washington to San Francisco to get away from you and the very day that I get here you are after me. I won't have anything to do with it. Where are you, anyway?"

"I am at Fallon, Nevada, Doctor. I'm sorry that you won't help me out because the case promises to be unusually interesting. Let me at least tell you about it."

Dr. Bird groaned louder than ever into the telephone transmitter.

"All right, go ahead and tell me about it if it will relieve your mind, but I have given you my final answer. I am not a bit interested in it."

"That is quite all right, Doctor, I don't expect you to touch it. I hope, however, that you will be able to give me an idea of where to start. Did you ever see a man's body broken in pieces?"

"Do you mean badly smashed up?"

"No indeed, I mean just what I said, broken in pieces. Legs snapped off as though the entire flesh had become brittle."

"No, I didn't, and neither did anyone else."

"I have seen it, Doctor."

"Hooey! What had you been drinking?"

Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service chuckled softly to himself. The voice of the famous
scientist of the Bureau of Standards plainly showed an interest which was quite at variance with his words.

"I was quite sober, Doctor, and so was Hughes, and we both saw it."

"Who is Hughes?"

"He is an air mail pilot, one of the crack fliers of the Transcontinental Airmail Corporation. Let me tell you the whole thing in order."

"All right. I have a few minutes to spare, but I'll warn you again that I don't intend to touch the case."

"Suit yourself, Doctor. I have no authority to requisition your services. As you know, the T. A. C. has been handling a great deal of the transcontinental air mail with a pretty clean record on accidents. The day before yesterday, a special plane left Washington to carry two packages from there to San Francisco. One of them was a shipment of jewels valued at a quarter of a million, consigned to a San Francisco firm and the other was a sealed packet from the War Department. No one was supposed to know the contents of that packet except the Chief of Staff who delivered it to the plane personally, but rumors got out, as usual, and it was popularly supposed to contain certain essential features of the Army's war plans. This much is certain: The plane carried not only the regular T. A. C. pilot and courier, but also an army courier, and it was guarded during the trip by an army plane armed with small bombs and a machine-gun. I rode in it. My orders were simply to guard the ship until it landed at Mills Field and then to guard the courier from there to the Presidio of San Francisco until his packet was delivered personally into the hands of the Commanding General of the Ninth Corps Area.

"The trip was quiet and monotonous until after we left Salt Lake City at dawn this morning. Nothing happened until we were about a hundred miles east of Reno. We had taken elevation to cross the Stillwater Mountains and were skimming low over them, my plane trailing the T. A. C. plane by about half a mile. I was not paying any particular attention to the other ship when I suddenly felt our plane leap ahead. It was a fast Douglas and the pilot gave it the gun and made it move, I can tell you. I yelled into the speaking tube and asked what was the reason. My pilot yelled back that the plane ahead was in trouble.

"As soon as it was called to my attention I could see myself that it wasn't acting normally. It was losing elevation and was pursuing a very erratic course. Before we could reach it it lost flying speed and fell into a spinning nose dive and headed for the ground. I watched, expecting every minute to see the crew make parachute jumps, but they didn't and the plane hit the ground with a terrific crash."

"It caught fire, of course?"

"No, Doctor, that is one of the funny things about the accident. It didn't. It hit the ground in an open place free from brush and literally burst into pieces, but it didn't flame up. We headed directly for the scene of the crash and we encountered another funny thing. We almost froze to death."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. Of course, it's pretty cold at that altitude all the time, but this cold was like nothing I had ever encountered. It seemed to freeze the blood in our veins and it congealed frost on the windshields and made the motor miss for a moment. It was only momentary and it only existed directly over the wrecked plane. We went past it and swung around in a circle and came back over the wreck, but we didn't feel the cold again.

"The next thing we tried to do was to find a landing place. That country is pretty rugged and rough and there wasn't a flat place for miles that was large enough to land a ship on. Hughes and I talked it over and there didn't seem to be much of anything that we could do except to go on until we found a landing place. I had had no experience in parachute jumping and I couldn't pilot the plane if Hughes jumped. We swooped down over the wreck as close as we dared and that was when we saw the condition of the bodies. The whole plane was cracked up pretty badly, but the weird part of it was the fact that the bodies of the crew had broken into pieces, as though they had been made of glass. Arms and legs were detached from the torsos and lying at a distance. There was no sign of blood on the ground. We saw all this with our naked eyes from close at hand and verified it by observations through binoculars from a greater height.

"When we had made our observations and marked the location of the wreck as closely as we could, we headed east until we found a landing place near Fallon. Hughes dropped me here and went on to Reno, or to San Francisco if necessary, to report the accident and get more planes to aid in the search. I was wholly at sea, but it seemed to be in your line and as I knew that you were at the St. Francis, I called you up."

"What are your plans?"

"I made none until I talked with you. The country where the wreck occurred is unbelievably wild and we can't get near it with any transportation other than burros. The only thing that I can see to do is to gather together what transportation I can and head for the wreck on foot to rescue the packets and to bring out the bodies. Can you
suggest anything better?"

"When do you expect to start?"

"As soon as I can get my pack train together. Possibly in three or four hours."

"Carnes, are you sure that those bodies were broken into bits? An arm or a leg might easily be torn off in a complete crash."

"They were smashed into bits as nearly as I could tell, Doctor. Hughes is an old flier and he has seen plenty of crashes but he never saw anything like this. It beats anything that I ever saw."

"If your observations were accurate, there could be only one cause and that one is a patent impossibility. I haven't a bit of equipment here, but I expect that I can get most of the stuff I want from the University of California across the bay at Berkeley. I can get a plane at Crissy Field. I'll tell you what to do, Carnes. Get your burro train together and start as soon as you can, but leave me half a dozen burros and a guide at Fallon. I'll get up there as soon as I can and I'll try to overtake you before you get to the wreck. If I don't, don't disturb anything any more than you can help until my arrival. Do you understand?"

"I thought that you were on your vacation, Doctor."

"Oh shut up! Like most of my vacations, this one will have to be postponed. I'll move as swiftly as I can and I ought to be at Fallon to-night if I'm lucky and don't run into any obstacles. Burros are fairly slow, but I'll make the best time possible."

"I rather expected you would, Doctor. I can't get my pack train together until evening, so I'll wait for you right here. I'm mighty glad that you are going to get in on it."

* * * * *

Silently Carnes and Dr. Bird surveyed the wreck of the T. A. C. plane. The observations of the secret service operative had been correct. The bodies of the unfortunate crew had been broken into fragments. Their limbs had not been twisted off as a freak of the fall but had been cleanly broken off, as though the bodies had suddenly become brittle and had shattered on their impact with the ground. Not only the bodies, but the ship itself had been broken up. Even the clothing of the men was in pieces or had long splits in the fabric whose edges were as clean as though they had been cut with a knife.

Dr. Bird picked up an arm which had belonged to the pilot and examined it. The brittleness, if it had ever existed, was gone and the arm was limp.

"No rigor mortis," commented the Doctor. "How long ago was the wreck?"

"About seventy-two hours ago."

"Hmm! What about those packets that were on the plane?"

Carnes stepped forward and gingerly inspected first the body of the army courier and then that of the courier of the T. A. C.

"Both gone, Doctor," he reported, straightening up.

Dr. Bird's face fell into grim lines.

"There is more to this case than appears on the surface, Carnes," he said. "This was no ordinary wreck. Bring up that third burro; I want to examine these fragments a little. Bill," he went on to one of the two guides who had accompanied them from Fallon, "you and Walter scout around the ground and see what you can find out. I especially wish to know whether anyone has visited the scene of the wreck."

* * * * *

The guides consulted a moment and started out. Carnes drove up the burro the Doctor had indicated and Dr. Bird unpacked it. He opened a mahogany case and took from it a high powered microscope. Setting the instrument up on a convenient rock, he subjected several portions of the wreck, including several fragments of flesh, to a careful scrutiny. When he had completed his observations he fell into a brown study, from which he was aroused by Carnes.

"What did you find out about the cause of the wreck, Doctor?"

"I don't know what to think. The immediate cause was that everything was frozen. The plane ran into a belt of cold which froze up the motor and which probably killed the crew instantly. It was undoubtedly the aftermath of that cold which you felt when you swooped down over the wreck."

"It seems impossible that it could have suddenly got cold enough to freeze everything up like that."

"It does, and yet I am confident that that is what happened. It was no ordinary cold, Carnes; it was cold of the type that infests interstellar space; cold beyond any conception you have of cold, cold near the range of the absolute zero of temperature, nearly four hundred and fifty degrees below zero on the Fahrenheit scale. At such temperatures, things which are ordinarily quite flexible and elastic, such as rubber, or flesh, become as brittle as glass and would break in the manner which these bodies have broken. An examination of the tissues of the flesh shows that it has been submitted to some temperature that is very low in the scale, probably below that of liquid air. Such a temperature would produce instant death and the other phenomena which we can observe."
"What could cause such a low temperature, Doctor?"

"I don't know yet, although I hope to find out before we are finished. Cold is a funny thing, Carnes. Ordinarily it is considered as simply the absence of heat; and yet I have always held it to be a definite negative quantity. All through nature we observe that every force has its opposite or negative force to oppose it. We have positive and negative electrical charges, positive and negative, or north and south, magnetic poles. We have gravity and its opposite apery, and I believe cold is really negative heat."

"I never heard of anything like that, Doctor. I always thought that things were cold because heat was taken from them—not because cold was added. It sounds preposterous."

* * * * *

"Such is the common idea, and yet I cannot accept it, for it does not explain all the recorded phenomena. You are familiar with a searchlight, are you not?"

"In a general way, yes."

"A searchlight is merely a source of light, and of course, of heat, which is placed at the focus of a parabolic reflector so that all of the rays emanating from the source travel in parallel lines. A searchlight, of course, gives off heat. If we place a lens of the same size as the searchlight aperture in the path of the beam and concentrate all the light, and heat, at one spot, the focal point of the lens, the temperature at that point is the same as the temperature of the source of the light, less what has been lost by radiation. You understand that, do you not?"

"Certainly."

"Suppose that we place at the center of the aperture of the searchlight a small opaque disc which is permeable neither to heat nor light, in such a manner as to interrupt the central portion of the beam. As a result, the beam will go out in the form of a hollow rod, or pipe, of heat and light with a dark, cold core. This core will have the temperature of the surrounding air plus the small amount which has radiated into it from the surrounding pipe. If we now pass this beam of light through a lens in order to concentrate the beam, both the pipe of heat and the cold core will focus. If we place a temperature measuring device near the focus of the dark core, we will find that the temperature is lower than the surrounding air. This means that we have focused or concentrated cold."

"That sounds impossible. But I can offer no other criticism."

* * * * *

"Nevertheless, it is experimentally true. It is one of the facts which lead me to consider cold as negative heat. However, this is true of cold, as it is of the other negative forces; they exist and manifest themselves only in the presence of the positive forces. No one has yet concentrated cold except in the presence of heat, as I have outlined. How this cold belt which the T. A. C. plane encountered came to be there is another question. The thing which we have to determine is whether it was caused by natural or artificial forces."

"Both of the packets which the plane carried are gone, Doctor," observed Carnes."

"Yes, and that seems to add weight to the possibility that the cause was artificial, but it is far from conclusive. The packets might not have been on the men when the plane fell, or someone may have passed later and taken them for safekeeping."

The doctor's remarks were interrupted by the guides."

"Someone has been here since the wreck, Doctor," said Bill. "Walter and I found tracks where two men came up here and prowled around for some time and then left by the way they came. They went off toward the northwest, and we followed their trail for about forty rods and then lost it. We weren't able to pick it up again."

"Thanks, Bill," replied the doctor. "Well, Carnes, that seems to add more weight to the theory that the spot of cold was made and didn't just happen. If a prospecting party had just happened along they would either have left the wreck alone or would have made some attempt to inter the bodies. That cold belt must have been produced artificially by men who planned to rob this plane after bringing it down and who were near at hand to get their plunder. Is there any chance of following that trail?"

"I doubt it, Doc. Walter and I scouted around quite a little, but we couldn't pick it up again."

"Is there any power line passing within twenty miles of here?"

"None that Walter and I know of, Doc."

"Funny! Such a device as must have been used would need power and lots of it for operation. Well, I'll try my luck. Carnes, help me unpack and set up the rest of my apparatus."

* * * * *

With the aid of the operative, Dr. Bird unpacked two of the burros and extracted from cases where they were carefully packed and padded some elaborate electrical and optical apparatus. The first was a short telescope of large diameter which he mounted on a base in such a manner that it could be elevated or depressed and rotated in any direction. At the focal point of the telescope was fastened a small knot of wire from which one lead ran to the main piece of apparatus, which he sat on a flat rock. The other lead from the wire knot ran into a sealed container
surrounded by a water bath under which a spirit lamp burned. From the container another lead led to the main apparatus. This main piece consisted of a series of wire coils mounted on a frame and attached to the two leads. The doctor took from a padded case a tiny magnet suspended on a piece of wire of exceedingly small diameter which he fastened in place inside the coils. Cemented to the magnet was a tiny mirror.

"What is that apparatus?" asked Carnes as the doctor finished his set-up and surveyed it with satisfaction.

"Merely a thermocouple attached to a D'Arsonval galvanometer," replied the doctor. "This large, squat telescope catches and concentrates on the thermocouple and the galvanometer registers the temperature."

"You're out of my depth. What is a thermocouple?"

"A juncture of two wires made of dissimilar metals, in this case of platinum and of platinum-iridium alloy. There is another similar junction in this case, which is kept at a constant temperature by the water bath. When the temperatures of the two junctions are the same, the system is in equilibrium. When they are at different temperatures, an electrical potential is set up, which causes a current to flow from one to the other through the galvanometer. The galvanometer consists of a magnet set up inside coils through which the current I spoke of flows. This current causes the magnet to rotate and by watching the mirror, the rotation can be detected and measured."

"This device is one of the most sensitive ever made, and is used to measure the radiation from distant stars. Currents as small as .000000000000000000000000001 ampere have been detected and measured. This particular instrument is not that sensitive to begin with, and has its sensitivity further reduced by having a high resistance in one of the leads."

"What are you going to use it for?"

"I am going to try to locate somewhere in these hills a patch of local cold. It may not work, but I have hopes. If you will manipulate the telescope so as to search the hills around here, I will watch the galvanometer."

For several minutes Carnes swung the telescope around. Twice Dr. Bird stopped him and decreased the sensitiveness of his instrument by introducing more resistance in the lines in order to keep the magnet from twisting clear around, due to the fluctuations in the heats received on account of the varying conditions of reflection. As Carnes swung the telescope again the magnet swung around sharply, nearly to a right angle to its former position.

"Stop!" cried the doctor. "Read your azimuth."

Carnes read the compass bearing on the protractor attached to the frame which supported the telescope. Dr. Bird took a pair of binoculars and looked long and earnestly in the indicated direction. With a sigh he laid down the glasses.

"I can't see a thing, Carnes," he said. "We'll have to move over to the next crest and make a new set-up. Plant a rod on the hill so that we can get an azimuth bearing and get the airline distance with a range finder."

On the hilltop which Dr. Bird had pointed out the apparatus was again set up. For several minutes Carnes swept the hills before an exclamation from the doctor told him to pause. He read the new azimuth, and the doctor laid off the two readings on a sheet of paper with a protractor and made a few calculations.

"I don't know," he said reflectively when he had finished his computations. "This darned instrument is still so sensitive that you may have merely focused on a deep shadow or a cold spring or something of that sort, but the magnet kicked clear around and it may mean that we have located what we are looking for. It should be about two miles away and almost due west of here."

"There is no spring that I know of, Doc, and I think I know of every water hole in this country," remarked Bill. "There could hardly be a spring at this elevation, anyway," replied the doctor. "Maybe it is what we are seeking. We'll start out in that direction, anyway. Bill, you had better take the lead, for you know the country. Spread out a little so that we won't be too bunched if anything happens."

For three-quarters of an hour the little group of men made their way through the wilderness in the direction indicated by the doctor. Presently Bill, who was in the lead, held up his hand with a warning gesture. The other three closed up as rapidly as cautious progress would allow.

"What is it, Bill?" asked the doctor in an undertone.

"Slip up ahead and look over that crest."

The doctor obeyed instructions. As he glanced over he gave vent to a low whistle of surprise and motioned for Carnes to join him. The operative crawled up and glanced over the crest. In a hollow before them was a crude one-storied house, and erected on an open space before it was a massive piece of apparatus. It consisted of a number of huge metallic cylinders, from which lines ran to a silvery concave mirror mounted on an elaborate frame which would allow it to be rotated so as to point in any direction.

"What is it?" whispered Carnes.

"Some kind of a projector," muttered the doctor. "I never saw one quite like it, but it is meant to project
something. I can't make out the curve of that mirror. It isn't a parabola and it isn't an ellipse. It must be a high degree subcatenary or else built on a transcendental function."

He raised himself to get a clearer view, and as he did so a puff of smoke came from the house, to be followed in a moment by a sharp crack as a bullet flattened itself a few inches from his head. The doctor tumbled back over the crest out of sight of the house. Bill and Walter hurried forward, their rifles held ready for action.

"Get out on the flanks, men," directed the doctor. "The man we want is in a house in that hollow. He's armed, and he means business."

* * * * *

Bill and Walter crawled under the shelter of the rocks to a short distance away and then, rifles ready, advanced to the attack. A report came from the hollow and a bullet whined over Bill's head. Almost instantly a crack came from Walter's rifle and splinters flew from the building in the hollow a few inches from a loophole, through which projected the barrel of a rifle.

The rifle barrel swung rapidly in a circle and barked in Walter's direction; but as it did so, Bill's gun spoke and again splinters flew from the building.

"Good work!" ejaculated Dr. Bird as he watched the slow advance of the two guides. "If we just had rifles we could join in the party, but it's a little far for effective pistol work. Let's go ahead, and we may get close enough to do a little shooting."

Pistols in hand, Carnes and the doctor crawled over the crest and joined the advance. Again and again the rifle spoke from the hollow and was answered by the vicious barks of the rifles in the hands of the guides, Carnes and the doctor resting their pistols on rocks and sending an occasional bullet toward the loophole. The conditions of light and the moving target were not conducive to good marksmanship on the part of the besieged man, and none of the attackers were hit. Presently Walter succeeded in sending a bullet through the loophole. The rifle barrel suddenly disappeared. With a shout the four men rose from their cover and advanced toward the building at a run.

As they did so an ominous whirring sound came from the apparatus in front of the house and a sudden chill filled the air.

"Back!" shouted Dr. Bird. "Back below the hill if you value your lives!"

He turned and raced at full speed toward the sheltering crest of the hill, the others following him closely. The whirring sound continued, and the concave reflector turned with a grating sound on its gears. As the path of its rays struck the ground the rocks became white with frost and one rock split with a sharp report, one fragment rolling down the slope, carrying others in its trail.

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With panic-stricken faces the four men raced toward the sheltering crest, but remorselessly the reflector swung around in their direction. The intense cold numbed the racing men, cutting off their breath and impeding their efforts for speed.

"Stop!" cried the doctor suddenly. "Fire at that reflector! It's our only chance!"

He set the example by turning and emptying his pistol futilely at the turning mirror. Bill, Walter and Carnes followed his example. Nearer and nearer to them came the deadly ray. Bill was the nearest to its path, and he suddenly stiffened and fell forward, his useless gun still grasped in his hands. As his body struck the ground it rolled down hill for a few feet, the deadly ray following it. His head struck a rock, and Carnes gave a cry of horror as it broke into fragments.

Walter threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired again and again at the rotating disc. The cold had become intense and he could not control the actions of his muscles and his rifle wavered about. He threw himself flat on the ground, and, with an almost superhuman effort, steadied himself for a moment and fired. His aim was true, and with a terrific crash the reflector split into a thousand fragments. Dr. Bird staggered to his feet.

"It's out of order for a moment!" he cried. "To the house while we can!"

As swiftly as his numbed feet would allow him, he stumbled toward the house. The muzzle of the rifle again projected from the loophole and with its crack the doctor staggered for a moment and then fell. Walter's rifle spoke again and the rifle disappeared through the loophole with a spasmodic jerk. Carnes stumbled over the doctor.

"Are you hit badly?" he gasped through chattering teeth.

"I'm not hit at all," muttered the doctor. "I stumbled and fell just as he fired. Look out! He's going to shoot again!"

The rifle barrel came slowly into view through the loophole. Walter fired, but his bullet went wild. Carnes threw himself behind a rock for protection.

* * * * *

The rifle swung in Walter's direction and paused. As it did so, from the house came a strangled cry and a sound as of a blow. The rifle barrel disappeared, and the sounds of a struggle came from the building.
"Come on!" cried Carnes as he rose to his feet, and made his stumbling way forward, the others following at the best speed which their numbed limbs would allow.

As they reached the door they were aware of a struggle which was going on inside. With an oath the doctor threw his massive frame against the door. It creaked, but the solid oak of which it was composed was proof against the attack, and he drew back for another onslaught. From the house came a pistol shot, followed by a despairing cry and a guttural shout. Reinforced by Carnes, the doctor threw his weight against the door again. With a rending crash it gave, and they fell sprawling into the cabin. The doctor was the first one on his feet.

"Who are you?" asked a voice from one corner. The doctor whirled like a flash and covered the speaker with his pistol.

"Put them up!" he said tersely.

"I am unarmed," the voice replied. "Who are you?"

"We're from the United States Secret Service," replied Carnes who had gained his feet. "The game is up for you, and you'd better realize it."

"Secret Service! Thank God!" cried the voice. "Get Koskoff--he has the plans. He has gone out through the tunnel!"

"Where is it?" demanded Carnes.

"The entrance is that iron plate on the floor."

Carnes and the doctor jumped at the plate and tried to lift it, without result. There was no handle or projection on which they could take hold.

"Not that way," cried the voice. "That cover is fastened on the inside. Go outside the building; he'll come out about two hundred yards north. Shoot him as he appears or he'll get away."

The three men nearly tumbled over each other to get through the doorway into the bitter cold outside. As they emerged from the cabin the gaze of the guide swept the surrounding hills.

"There he goes!" he cried.

"Get him!" said Carnes sharply.

Walter ran forward a few feet and dropped prone on the ground, cuddling the stock of his rifle to his cheek. Two hundred yards ahead a figure was scurrying over the rocks away from the cabin. Walter drew in his breath and his hand suddenly grew steady as his keen gray eyes peered through the sights. Carnes and the doctor held their breath in sympathy.

* * * * *

Suddenly the rifle spoke, and the fleeing man threw up his arms and fell forward on his face.

"Got him," said Walter laconically.

"Go bring the body in, Carnes," exclaimed the doctor. "I'll take care of the chap inside."

"Did you get him?" asked the voice eagerly, as the doctor stepped inside.

"He's dead all right," replied the doctor grimly. "Who the devil are you, and what are you doing here?"

"There is a light switch on the left of the door as you come in," was the reply.

Dr. Bird found the switch and snapped on a light. He turned toward the corner from whence the voice had come and recoiled in horror. Propped in the corner was the body of a middle-aged man, daubed and splashed with blood which ran from a wound in the side of his head.

"Good Lord!" he ejaculated. "Let me help you."

"There's not much use," replied the man rather faintly. "I am about done in. This face wound doesn't amount to much, but I am shot through the body and am bleeding internally. If you try to move me, it may easily kill me. Leave me alone until your partners come."

The doctor drew a flask of brandy from his pocket and advanced toward the corner.

"Take a few drops of this," he advised.

With an effort the man lifted the flask to his lips and gulped down a little of the fiery spirit. A sound of tramping feet came from the outside and then a thud as though a body had been dropped. Carnes and Walter entered the cabin.

"He's dead as a mackerel," said Carnes in answer to the doctor's look. "Walter got him through the neck and broke his spinal cord. He never knew what hit him."

"The plans?" came in a gasping voice from the man in the corner.

"We got them, too," replied Carnes. "He had both packets inside his coat. They have been opened, but I guess they are all here. Who the devil are you?"

"Since Koskoff is dead, and I am dying, there is no reason why I shouldn't tell you," was the answer. "Leave that brandy handy to keep up my strength. I have only a short time and I can't repeat."

* * * * *
"As to who I am or what I was, it doesn't really matter. Koskoff knew me as John Smith, and it will pass as well as any other name. Let my past stay buried. I am, or was, a scientist of some ability; but fortune frowned on me, and I was driven out of the world. Money would rehabilitate me--money will do anything nowadays--so I set out to get it. In the course of my experimental work, I had discovered that cold was negative heat and reacted to the laws which governed heat."

"I knew that," cried Dr. Bird; "but I never could prove it."

"Who are you?" demanded John Smith.

"Dr. Bird, of the Bureau of Standards."

"Oh, Bird. I've heard of you. You can understand me when I say that as heat, positive heat is a concomitant of ordinary light. I have found that cold, negative heat, is a concomitant of cold light. Is my apparatus in good shape outside?"

"The reflector is smashed."

"I'm sorry. You would have enjoyed studying it. I presume that you saw that it was a catenary curve?"

"I rather thought so."

"It was, and it was also adjustable. I could vary the focal point from a few feet to several miles. With that apparatus I could throw a beam of negative heat with a focal point which I could adjust at will. Close to the apparatus, I could obtain a temperature almost down to absolute zero, but at the longer ranges it wasn't so cold, due to leakage into the atmosphere. Even at two miles I could produce a local temperature of three hundred degrees below zero."

"What was the source of your cold?"

"Liquid helium. Those cylinders contain, or rather did contain, for I expect that Koskoff has emptied them, helium in a liquid state."

"Where is your compressor?"

*I didn't have to use one. I developed a cold light under whose rays helium would liquefy and remain in a state of equilibrium until exposed to light rays. Those cylinders had merely enough pressure to force the liquid out to where the sun could hit it, and then it turned to a gas, dropping the temperature at the first focal point of the reflector to absolute zero. When I had this much done, Koskoff and I packed the whole apparatus here and were ready for work."

"We were on the path of the transcontinental air mail, and I bided my time until an especially valuable shipment was to be made. My plans, which worked perfectly, were to freeze the plane in midair and then rob the wreck. I heard of the jewel shipment the T. A. C. was to carry and I planned to get it. When the plane came over, Koskoff and I brought it down. The unsuspected presence of another plane upset us a little, and I started to bring it down. But we had been all over this country and knew there was no place that a plane could land. I let it go on in safety."

"Thank you," replied Carnes with a grimace.

"We robbed the wreck and we found two packets, one the jewels I was after, and the other a sealed packet, which proved to contain certain War Department plans. That was when I learned who Koskoff was. I had hired him in San Francisco as a good mechanic who had no principles. He was to get one-fourth of the loot. When we found these plans, he told me who he was. He was really a Russian secret agent and he wanted to deliver the plans to Russia. I may be a thief and a murderer, but I am not yet ready to betray my country, and I told him so. He offered me almost any price for the plans; but I wouldn't listen. We had a serious quarrel, and he overpowered me and bound me.

*I had a radio set here and he called San Francisco and sent some code message. I think he was waiting here for someone to come. Had we followed our original plans, we would have been miles from here before you arrived."

"He had me bound and helpless, as he thought, but I worked my bonds a little loose. I didn't let him know it, for I knew that the plane I had let get away would guide a party here and I thought I might be able to help out. When you came and attacked the house, I worked at my bonds until they were loose enough to throw off. I saw Koskoff start my cold apparatus to working and then he quit, because he ran out of helium. When he started shooting again, I worked out of my bonds and tackled him.

"He was a better man than I gave him credit for, or else he suspected me, for about the time I grabbed him he whirled and struck me over the head with his gun barrel and tore my face open. The blow stunned me, and when I came to, I was thrown into this corner. I meant to have another try at it, but I guess you rushed him too fast. He turned and ran for the tunnel, but as he did so, he shot me through the body. I guess I didn't look dead enough to suit him. You gentlemen broke open the door and came in. That's all."
"Not by a long shot, it isn't," exclaimed Dr. Bird. "Where is that cold light apparatus of yours?"
"In the tunnel."
"How do you get into it?"
"If you will open that cupboard on the wall, you'll find an open knife switch on the wall. Close it."

Dr. Bird found the switch and closed it. As he did so the cabin rocked on its foundations and both Carnes and Walter were thrown to the ground. The thud of a detonation deep in the earth came to their ears.
"What was that?" cried the doctor.
"That," replied Smith with a wan smile, "was the detonation of two hundred pounds of T.N.T. When you dig down into the underground cave where we used the cold light apparatus, you will find it in fragments. It was my only child, and I'll take it with me."

As he finished his head slumped forward on his chest. With an exclamation of dismay Dr. Bird sprang forward and tried to lift the prostrate form.

In an agony of desire the Doctor tightened his grip on the dying man's shoulder. But Smith collapsed into a heap. Dr. Bird bent forward and tore open his shirt and listened at his chest. Presently he straightened up.
"He is gone," he said sadly, "and I guess the results of his genius have died with him. He doesn't strike me as a man who left overmuch to chance. Carnes, is your case completed?"
"Very satisfactorily, Doctor. I have both of the lost packets."
"All right, then, come back to the wreck and help me pack my burros. I can make my way back to Fallon without a guide."
"Where are you going, Doctor?"
"That, Carnes, old dear, is none of your blankety blankey business. Permit me to remind you that I am on my vacation. I haven't decided yet just where I am going, but I can tell you one thing. It's going to be some place where you can't call me on the telephone."

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Contents

CIRCUS
By Alan E. Nourse

"Just suppose," said Morgan, "that I did believe you. Just for argument." He glanced up at the man across the restaurant table. "Where would we go from here?"

The man shifted uneasily in his seat. He was silent, staring down at his plate. Not a strange-looking man, Morgan thought. Rather ordinary, in fact. A plain face, nose a little too long, fingers a little too dainty, a suit that doesn't quite seem to fit, but all in all, a perfectly ordinary looking man.

Maybe too ordinary, Morgan thought.

Finally the man looked up. His eyes were dark, with a hunted look in their depths that chilled Morgan a little.
"Where do we go? I don't know. I've tried to think it out, and I get nowhere. But you've got to believe me, Morgan. I'm lost, I mean it. If I can't get help, I don't know where it's going to end."
"I'll tell you where it's going to end," said Morgan. "It's going to end in a hospital. A mental hospital. They'll lock you up and they'll lose the key somewhere." He poured himself another cup of coffee and sipped it, scalding hot. "And that," he added, "will be that."

The place was dark and almost empty. Overhead, a rotary fan swished patiently. The man across from Morgan ran a hand through his dark hair. "There must be some other way," he said. "There has to be."

"All right, let's start from the beginning again," Morgan said. "Maybe we can pin something down a little better. You say your name is Parks--right?"

The man nodded. "Jefferson Haldeman Parks, if that helps any. Haldeman was my mother's maiden name."
"All right. And you got into town on Friday--right?"

Parks nodded.
"Fine. Now go through the whole story again. What happened first?"

The man thought for a minute. "As I said, first there was a fall. About twenty feet. I didn't break any bones, but I was shaken up and limping. The fall was near the highway going to the George Washington Bridge. I got over to the highway and tried to flag down a ride."
"How did you feel? I mean, was there anything strange that you noticed?"

"Strange!" Parks' eyes widened. "I--I was speechless. At first I hadn't noticed too much--I was concerned with the fall, and whether I was hurt or not. I didn't really think about much else until I hobbled up to that highway and saw those cars coming. Then I could hardly believe my eyes. I thought I was crazy. But a car stopped and asked me if I was going into the city, and I knew I wasn't crazy."

Morgan's mouth took a grim line. "You understood the language?"

"Oh, yes. I don't see how I could have, but I did. We talked all the way into New York--nothing very important, but we understood each other. His speech had an odd sound, but--"

Morgan nodded. "I know, I noticed. What did you do when you got to New York?"

"Well, obviously, I needed money. I had gold coin. There had been no way of knowing if it would be useful, but I'd taken it on chance. I tried to use it at a newsstand first, and the man wouldn't touch it. Asked me if I thought I was the U.S. Treasury or something. When he saw that I was serious, he sent me to a money lender, a hock shop, I think he called it. So I found a place--"

"Let me see the coins."

Parks dropped two small gold discs on the table. They were perfectly smooth and perfectly round, tapered by wear to a thin blunt edge. There was no design on them, and no printing. Morgan looked up at the man sharply.

"What did you get for these?"

Parks shrugged. "Too little, I suspect. Two dollars for the small one, five for the larger."

"You should have gone to a bank."

"I know that now. I didn't then. Naturally, I assumed that with everything else so similar, principles of business would also be similar."

Morgan sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Well, then what?"

Parks poured some more coffee. His face was very pale, Morgan thought, and his hands trembled as he raised the cup to his lips. Fright? Maybe. Hard to tell. The man put down the cup and rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. "First, I went to the mayor's office," he said. "I kept trying to think what anyone at home would do in my place. That seemed a good bet. I asked a policeman where it was, and then I went there."

"But you didn't get to see him."

"No. I saw a secretary. She said the mayor was in conference, and that I would have to have an appointment. She let me speak to another man, one of the mayor's assistants."

"And you told him?"

"No. I wanted to see the mayor himself. I thought that was the best thing to do. I waited for a couple of hours, until another assistant came along and told me flatly that the mayor wouldn't see me unless I stated my business first." He drew in a deep breath. "So I stated it. And then I was gently but firmly ushered back into the street again."

"They didn't believe you," said Morgan.

"Not for a minute. They laughed in my face."

Morgan nodded. "I'm beginning to get the pattern. So what did you do next?"

"Next I tried the police. I got the same treatment there, only they weren't so gentle. They wouldn't listen either. They muttered something about cranks and their crazy notions, and when they asked me where I lived, they thought I was--what did they call it?--a wise guy! Told me to get out and not come back with any more wild stories."

"I see," said Morgan.

Jefferson Parks finished his last bite of pie and pushed the plate away. "By then I didn't know quite what to do. I'd been prepared for almost anything excepting this. It was frightening. I tried to rationalize it, and then I quit trying. It wasn't that I attracted attention, or anything like that, quite the contrary. Nobody even looked at me, unless I said something to them. I began to look for things that were different, things that I could show them, and say, see, this proves that I'm telling the truth, look at it--" He looked up helplessly.

"And what did you find?"

"Nothing. Oh, little things, insignificant little things. Your calendars, for instance. Naturally, I couldn't understand your frame of reference. And the coinage, you stamp your coins; we don't. And cigarettes. We don't have any such thing as tobacco." The man gave a short laugh. "And your house dogs! We have little animals that look more like rabbits than poodles. But there was nothing any more significant than that. Absolutely nothing."

"Except yourself," Morgan said.

"Ah, yes. I thought that over carefully. I looked for differences, obvious ones. I couldn't find any. You can see that, just looking at me. So I searched for more subtle things. Skin texture, fingerprints, bone structure, body proportion. I still couldn't find anything. Then I went to a doctor."

Morgan's eyebrows lifted. "Good," he said.

Parks shrugged tiredly. "Not really. He examined me. He practically took me apart. I carefully refrained from
saying anything about who I was or where I came from; just said I wanted a complete physical examination, and let him go to it. He was thorough, and when he finished he patted me on the back and said, 'Parks, you've got nothing to worry about. You're as fine, strapping a specimen of a healthy human being as I've ever seen.' And that was that.

Parks laughed bitterly. "I guess I was supposed to be happy with the verdict, and instead I was ready to knock him down. It was idiotic, it defied reason, it was infuriating."

Morgan nodded sourly. "Because you're not a human being," he said.

"That's right. I'm not a human being at all."

"How did you happen to pick this planet, or this sun?" Morgan asked curiously. "There must have been a million others to choose from."

Parks unbuttoned his collar and rubbed his stubbled chin unhappily. "I didn't make the choice. Neither did anyone else. Travel by warp is a little different from travel by the rocket you fiction writers make so much of. With a rocket vehicle you pick your destination, make your calculations, and off you go. The warp is blind flying, strictly blind. We send an unmanned scanner ahead. It probes around more or less hit-or-miss until it locates something, somewhere, that looks habitable. When it spots a likely looking place, we keep a tight beam on it and send through a manned scout." He grinned sourly. "Like me. If it looks good to the scout, he signals back, and they leave the warp anchored for a sort of permanent gateway until we can get a transport beam built. But we can't control the directional and dimensional scope of the warp. There are an infinity of ways it can go, until we have a guide beam transmitting from the other side. Then we can just scan a segment of space with the warp, and the scanner picks up the beam."

He shook his head wearily. "We're new at it, Morgan. We've only tried a few dozen runs. We're not too far ahead of you in technology. We've been using rocket vehicles just like yours for over a century. That's fine for a solar system, but it's not much good for the stars. When the warp principle was discovered, it looked like the answer. But something went wrong, the scanner picked up this planet, and I was coming through, and then something blew. Next thing I knew I was falling. When I tried to make contact again, the scanner was gone!"

"And you found things here the same as back home," said Morgan.

"The same! Your planet and mine are practically twins. Similar cities, similar technology, everything. The people are the same, with precisely the same anatomy and physiology, the same sort of laws, the same institutions, even compatible languages. Can't you see the importance of it? This planet is on the other side of the universe from mine, with the first intelligent life we've yet encountered anywhere. But when I try to tell your people that I'm a native of another star system, they won't believe me!"

"Why should they?" asked Morgan. "You look like a human being. You talk like one. You eat like one. You act like one. What you're asking them to believe is utterly incredible."

"But it's true."

Morgan shrugged. "So it's true. I won't argue with you. But as I asked before, even if I did believe you, what do you expect me to do about it? Why pick me, of all the people you've seen?"

There was a desperate light in Parks' eyes. "I was tired, tired of being laughed at, tired of having people looking at me as though I'd lost my wits when I tried to tell them the truth. You were here, you were alone, so I started talking. And then I found out you wrote stories." He looked up eagerly. "I've got to get back, Morgan, somehow. My life is there, my family. And think what it would mean to both of our worlds--contact with another intelligent race! Combine our knowledges, our technologies, and we could explore the galaxy!"

He leaned forward, his thin face intense. "I need money and I need help. I know some of the mathematics of the warp principle, know some of the design, some of the power and wiring principles. You have engineers here, technologists, physicists. They could fill in what I don't know and build a guide beam. But they won't do it if they don't believe me. Your government won't listen to me, they won't appropriate any money."

"Of course they won't. They've got a war or two on their hands, they have public welfare, and atomic bombs, and rockets to the moon to sink their money into." Morgan stared at the man. "But what can I do?"

"You can write! That's what you can do. You can tell the world about me, you can tell exactly what has happened. I know how public interest can be aroused in my world. It must be the same in yours."

Morgan didn't move. He just stared. "How many people have you talked to?" he asked.

"A dozen, a hundred, maybe a thousand."

"And how many believed you?"

"None."

"You mean nobody would believe you?"

"Not one soul. Until I talked to you."

And then Morgan was laughing, laughing bitterly, tears rolling down his cheeks. "And I'm the one man who couldn't help you if my life depended on it," he gasped.
"You believe me?"
Morgan nodded sadly. "I believe you. Yes. I think your warp brought you through to a parallel universe of your own planet, not to another star, but I think you're telling the truth."
"Then you can help me."
"I'm afraid not."
"Why not?"
"Because I'd be worse than no help at all."
Jefferson Parks gripped the table, his knuckles white. "Why?" he cried hoarsely. "If you believe me, why can't you help me?"
Morgan pointed to the magazine lying on the table. "I write, yes," he said sadly. "Ever read stories like this before?"
Parks picked up the magazine, glanced at the bright cover. "I barely looked at it."
"You should look more closely. I have a story in this issue. The readers thought it was very interesting," Morgan grinned. "Go ahead, look at it."
The stranger from the stars leafed through the magazine, stopped at a page that carried Roger Morgan's name. His eyes caught the first paragraph and he turned white. He set the magazine down with a trembling hand. "I see," he said, and the life was gone out of his voice. He spread the pages viciously, read the lines again.
The paragraph said:
"Just suppose," said Martin, "that I did believe you. Just for argument." He glanced up at the man across the table. "Where do we go from here?"

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**Contents**

**FLIGHT FROM TOMORROW**
by H. Beam Piper

_Hunted and hated in two worlds, Hradzka dreamed of a monomaniac's glory, stranded in the past with his knowledge of the future. But he didn't know the past quite well enough..._  

1  
But yesterday, a whole planet had shouted: Hail Hradzka! Hail the Leader! Today, they were screaming: Death to Hradzka! Kill the tyrant!  
The Palace, where Hradzka, surrounded by his sycophants and guards, had lorded it over a solar system, was now an inferno. Those who had been too closely identified with the dictator's rule to hope for forgiveness were fighting to the last, seeking only a quick death in combat; one by one, their isolated points of resistance were being wiped out. The corridors and chambers of the huge palace were thronged with rebels, loud with their shouts, and with the rasping hiss of heat-beams and the crash of blasters, reeking with the stench of scorched plastic and burned flesh, of hot metal and charred fabric. The living quarters were overrun; the mob smashed down walls and tore up floors in search of secret hiding-places. They found strange things--the space-ship that had been built under one of the domes, for instance--but Hradzka himself they could not find.  
At last, the search reached the New Tower which reared its head five thousand feet above the palace, the highest thing in the city. They blasted down the huge steel doors, cut the power from the energy-screens. They landed from antigrav-cars on the upper levels. But except for barriers of metal and concrete and energy, they met with no opposition. Finally, they came to the spiral stairway which led up to the great metal sphere which capped the whole structure.  
General Zarvas, the Army Commander who had placed himself at the head of the revolt, stood with his foot on the lowest step, his followers behind him. There was Prince Burvanny, the leader of the old nobility, and Ghorzesko Orhm, the merchant, and between them stood Tobbh, the chieftain of the mutinous slaves. There were clerks; laborers; poor but haughty nobles: and wealthy merchants who had long been forced to hide their riches from the dictator's tax-gatherers, and soldiers, and spacemen.  
"You'd better let some of us go first sir," General Zarvas' orderly, a blood-stained bandage about his head, his uniform in rags, suggested. "You don't know what might be up there."  
The General shook his head. "I'll go first." Zarvas Pol was not the man to send subordinates into danger ahead
of himself. "To tell the truth, I'm afraid we won't find anything at all up there."

"You mean...?" Ghorzesko Orhm began.

"The 'time-machine'," Zarvas Pol replied. "If he's managed to get it finished, the Great Mind only knows where he may be, now. Or when."

He loosened the blaster in his holster and started up the long spiral. His followers spread out, below; sharpshooters took position to cover his ascent. Prince Burvanny and Tobbh the Slave started to follow him. They hesitated as each motioned the other to precede him; then the nobleman followed the general, his blaster drawn, and the brawny slave behind him.

The door at the top was open, and Zarvas Pol stepped through but there was nothing in the great spherical room except a raised dais some fifty feet in diameter, its polished metal top strangely clean and empty. And a crumpled heap of burned cloth and charred flesh that had, not long ago, been a man. An old man with a white beard, and the seven-pointed star of the Learned Brothers on his breast, advanced to meet the armed intruders.

"So he is gone, Kradzy Zago?" Zarvas Pol said, holstering his weapon. "Gone in the 'time-machine', to hide in yesterday or tomorrow. And you let him go?"

The old one nodded. "He had a blaster, and I had none." He indicated the body on the floor. "Zoldy Jarv had no blaster, either, but he tried to stop Hradzka. See, he squandered his life as a fool squanders his money, getting nothing for it. And a man's life is not money, Zarvas Pol."

"I do not blame you, Kradzy Zago," General Zarvas said. "But now you must get to work, and build us another 'time-machine', so that we can hunt him down."

"Does revenge mean so much to you, then?"

The soldier made an impatient gesture. "Revenge is for fools, like that pack of screaming beasts below. I do not kill for revenge; I kill because dead men do no harm."

"Hradzka will do us no more harm," the old scientist replied. "He is a thing of yesterday; of a time long past and half-lost in the mists of legend."

"No matter. As long as he exists, at any point in space-time, Hradzka is still a threat. Revenge means much to Hradzka; he will return for it, when we least expect him."

The old man shook his head. "No, Zarvas Pol, Hradzka will not return."

Hradzka holstered his blaster, threw the switch that sealed the "time-machine", put on the antigrav-unit and started the time-shift unit. He reached out and set the destination-dial for the mid-Fifty-Second Century of the Atomic Era. That would land him in the Ninth Age of Chaos, following the Two-Century War and the collapse of the World Theocracy. A good time for his purpose: the world would be slipping back into barbarism, and yet possess the technologies of former civilizations. A hundred little national states would be trying to regain social stability, competing and warring with one another. Hradzka glanced back over his shoulder at the cases of books, record-spools, tri-dimensional pictures, and scale-models. These people of the past would welcome him and his science of the future, would make him their leader.

He would start in a small way, by taking over the local feudal or tribal government, would arm his followers with weapons of the future. Then he would impose his rule upon neighboring tribes, or pricedomcs, or communes, or whatever, and build a strong sovereignty; from that he envisioned a world empire, a Solar System empire.

Then, he would build "time-machines", many "time-machines". He would recruit an army such as the universe had never seen, a swarm of men from every age in the past. At that point, he would return to the Hundredth Century of the Atomic Era, to wreak vengeance upon those who had risen against him. A slow smile grew on Hradzka's thin lips as he thought of the tortures with which he would put Zarvas Pol to death.

He glanced up at the great disc of the indicator and frowned. Already he was back to the year 7500, A.E., and the temporal-displacement had not begun to slow. The disc was turning even more rapidly--7000, 6000, 5500; he gasped slightly. Then he had passed his destination; he was now in the Fortieth Century, but the indicator was slowing. The hairline crossed the Thirtieth Century, the Twentieth, the Fifteenth, the Tenth. He wondered what had gone wrong, but he had recovered from his fright by this time. When this insane machine stopped, as it must around the First Century of the Atomic Era, he would investigate, make repairs, then shift forward to his target-point. Hradzka was determined upon the Fifty-Second Century; he had made a special study of the history of that period, had learned the language spoken then, and he understood the methods necessary to gain power over the natives of that time.

The indicator-disc came to a stop, in the First Century. He switched on the magnifier and leaned forward to look; he had emerged into normal time in the year 10 of the Atomic Era, a decade after the first uranium-pile had gone into operation, and seven years after the first atomic bombs had been exploded in warfare. The altimeter showed that he was hovering at eight thousand feet above ground-level.
Slowly, he cut out the antigrav, letting the "time machine" down easily. He knew that there had been no danger of materializing inside anything; the New Tower had been built to put it above anything that had occupied that space-point at any moment within history, or legend, or even the geological knowledge of man. What lay below, however, was uncertain. It was night—the visi-screen showed only a star-dusted, moonless-sky, and dark shadows below. He snapped another switch; for a few micro-seconds a beam of intense light was turned on, automatically photographing the landscape under him. A second later, the developed picture was projected upon another screen; it showed only wooded mountains and a barren, brush-grown valley.

The "time-machine" came to rest with a soft jar and a crashing of broken bushes that was audible through the sound pickup. Hradzka pulled the main switch; there was a click as the shielding went out and the door opened. A breath of cool night air drew into the hollow sphere.

Then there was a loud bang inside the mechanism, and a flash of blue-white light which turned to pinkish flame with a nasty crackling. Curls of smoke began to rise from the square black box that housed the "time-shift" mechanism, and from behind the instrument-board. In a moment, everything was glowing-hot: droplets of aluminum and silver were running down from the instruments. Then the whole interior of the "time-machine" was afire; there was barely time for Hradzka to leap through the open door.

The brush outside impeded him, and he used his blaster to clear a path for himself away from the big sphere, which was now glowing faintly on the outside. The heat grew in intensity, and the brush outside was taking fire. It was not until he had gotten two hundred yards from the machine that he stopped, realizing what had happened.

The machine, of course, had been sabotaged. That would have been young Zoldy, whom he had killed, or that old billy-goat, Kradzy Zago; the latter, most likely. He cursed both of them for having marooned him in this savage age, at the very beginning of atomic civilization, with all his printed and recorded knowledge destroyed. Oh, he could still gain mastery over these barbarians; he knew enough to fashion a crude blaster, or a heat-beam gun, or an atomic-electric conversion unit. But without his books and records, he could never build an antigrav unit, and the secret of the "temporal shift" was lost.

For "Time" is not an object, or a medium which can be travelled along. The "Time-Machine" was not a vehicle; it was a mechanical process of displacement within the space-time continuum, and those who constructed it knew that it could not be used with the sort of accuracy that the dials indicated. Hradzka had ordered his scientists to produce a "Time Machine", and they had combined the possible—displacement within the space-time continuum—with the sort of fiction the dictator demanded, for their own well-being. Even had there been no sabotage, his return to his own "time" was nearly of zero probability.

The fire, spreading from the "time-machine", was blowing toward him; he observed the wind-direction and hurried out of the path of the flames. The light enabled him to pick his way through the brush, and, after crossing a small stream, he found a rutted road and followed it up the mountainside until he came to a place where he could rest concealed until morning.

It was broad daylight when he woke, and there was a strange throbbing sound; Hradzka lay motionless under the brush where he had slept, his blaster ready. In a few minutes, a vehicle came into sight, following the road down the mountainside.

It was a large thing, four-wheeled, with a projection in front which probably housed the engine and a cab for the operator. The body of the vehicle was simply an open rectangular box. There were two men in the cab, and about twenty or thirty more crowded into the box body. These were dressed in faded and nondescript garments of blue and gray and brown; all were armed with crude weapons—axes, bill-hooks, long-handled instruments with serrated edges, and what looked like broad-bladed spears. The vehicle itself, which seemed to be propelled by some sort of chemical-explosion engine, was dingy and mud-splattered; the men in it were ragged and unshaven. Hradzka snorted in contempt; they were probably warriors of the local tribe, going to the fire in the belief that it had been started by raiding enemies. When they found the wreckage of the "time-machine", they would no doubt believe that it was the chariot of some god and drag it home to be venerated.

A plan of action was taking shape in his mind. First, he must get clothing of the sort worn by these people, and find a safe hiding-place for his own things. Then, pretending to be a deaf-mute, he would go among them to learn something of their customs and pick up the language. When he had done that, he would move on to another tribe or village, able to tell a credible story for himself. For a while, it would be necessary for him to do menial work, but in the end, he would establish himself among these people. Then he could gather around him a faction of those who were dissatisfied with whatever conditions existed, organize a conspiracy, make arms for his followers, and start his program of power-seizure.

The matter of clothing was attended to shortly after he had crossed the mountain and descended into the valley.
on the other side. Hearing a clinking sound some distance from the road, as of metal striking stone, Hradzka stole cautiously through the woods until he came within sight of a man who was digging with a mattock, uprooting small bushes of a particular sort, with rough gray bark and three-pointed leaves. When he had dug one up, he would cut off the roots and then slice away the root-bark with a knife, putting it into a sack. Hradzka's lip curled contemptuously; the fellow was gathering the stuff for medicinal use. He had heard of the use of roots and herbs for such purposes by the ancient savages.

The blaster would be no use here; it was too powerful, and would destroy the clothing that the man was wearing. He unfastened a strap from his belt and attached it to a stone to form a hand-loop, then, inching forward behind the lone herb-gatherer. When he was close enough, he straightened and rushed forward, swinging his improvised weapon. The man heard him and turned, too late.

* * * * *

After undressing his victim, Hradzka used the mattock to finish him, and then to dig a grave. The fugitive buried his own clothes with the murdered man, and donned the faded blue shirt, rough shoes, worn trousers and jacket. The blaster he concealed under the jacket, and he kept a few other Hundredth Century gadgets; these he would hide somewhere closer to his center of operations.

He had kept, among other things, a small box of food-concentrate capsules, and in one pocket of the newly acquired jacket he found a package containing food. It was rough and unappetizing fare--slices of cold cooked meat between slices of some cereal substance. He ate these before filling in the grave, and put the paper wrappings in with the dead man. Then, his work finished, he threw the mattock into the brush and set out again, grimacing disgustedly and scratching himself. The clothing he had appropriated was verminous.

Crossing another mountain, he descended into a second valley, and, for a time, lost his way among a tangle of narrow ravines. It was dark by the time he mounted a hill and found himself looking down another valley, in which a few scattered lights gave evidence of human habitations. Not wishing to arouse suspicion by approaching these in the night-time, he found a place among some young evergreens where he could sleep.

The next morning, having breakfasted on a concentrate capsule, he found a hiding-place for his blaster in a hollow tree. It was in a sufficiently prominent position so that he could easily find it again, and at the same time unlikely to be discovered by some native. Then he went down into the inhabited valley.

He was surprised at the ease with which he established contact with the natives. The first dwelling which he approached, a cluster of farm-buildings at the upper end of the valley, gave him shelter. There was a man, clad in the same sort of rough garments Hradzka had taken from the body of the herb-gatherer, and a woman in a faded and shapeless dress. The man was thin and work-bent; the woman short and heavy. Both were past middle age.

He made inarticulate sounds to attract their attention, then gestured to his mouth and ears to indicate his assumed affliction. He rubbed his stomach to portray hunger. Looking about, he saw an ax sticking in a chopping-block, and a pile of wood near it, probably the fuel used by these people. He took the ax, split up some of the wood, then repeated the hunger-signs. The man and the woman both nodded, laughing; he was shown a pile of tree-limbs, and the man picked up a short billet of wood and used it like a measuring-rule, to indicate that all the wood was to be cut to that length.

Hradzka fell to work, and by mid-morning, he had all the wood cut. He had seen a circular stone, mounted on a trestle with a metal axle through it, and judged it to be some sort of a grinding-wheel, since it was fitted with a foot-pedal and a rusty metal can was set above it to spill water onto the grinding-edge. After chopping the wood, he carefully sharpened the ax, handing it to the man for inspection. This seemed to please the man; he clapped Hradzka on the shoulder, making commendatory sounds.

* * * * *

It required considerable time and ingenuity to make himself a more or less permanent member of the household. Hradzka had made a survey of the farmyard, noting the sorts of work that would normally be performed on the farm, and he pantomimed this work in its simpler operations. He pointed to the east, where the sun would rise, and to the zenith, and to the west. He made signs indicative of eating, and of sleeping, and of rising, and of working. At length, he succeeded in conveying his meaning.

There was considerable argument between the man and the woman, but his proposal was accepted, as he expected that it would. It was easy to see that the work of the farm was hard for this aging couple; now, for a place to sleep and a little food, they were able to acquire a strong and intelligent slave.

In the days that followed, he made himself useful to the farm people; he fed the chickens and the livestock, milked the cow, worked in the fields. He slept in a small room at the top of the house, under the eaves, and ate with the man and woman in the farmhouse kitchen.

It was not long before he picked up a few words which he had heard his employers using, and related them to the things or acts spoken of. And he began to notice that these people, in spite of the crudities of their own life,
enjoyed some of the advantages of a fairly complex civilization. Their implements were not hand-craft products, but showed machine workmanship. There were two objects hanging on hooks on the kitchen wall which he was sure were weapons. Both had wooden shoulder-stocks, and wooden fore-pieces; they had long tubes extending to the front, and triggers like blasters. One had double tubes mounted side-by-side, and double triggers; the other had an octagonal tube mounted over a round tube, and a loop extension on the trigger-guard. Then, there was a box on the kitchen wall, with a mouthpiece and a cylindrical tube on a cord. Sometimes a bell would ring out of the box, and the woman would go to this instrument, take down the tube and hold it to her ear, and talk into the mouthpiece. There was another box from which voices would issue, of people conversing, or of orators, or of singing, and sometimes instrumental music. None of these were objects made by savages; these people probably traded with some fairly high civilization. They were not illiterate; he found printed matter, indicating the use of some phonetic alphabet, and paper pamphlets containing printed reproductions of photographs as well as verbal text.

There was also a vehicle on the farm, powered, like the one he had seen on the road, by an engine in which a hydrocarbon liquid-fuel was exploded. He made it his business to examine this minutely, and to study its construction and operation until he was thoroughly familiar with it.

It was not until the third day after his arrival that the chickens began to die. In the morning, Hradzka found three of them dead when he went to feed them, the rest drooping unhealthily; he summoned the man and showed him what he had found. The next morning, they were all dead, and the cow was sick. She gave bloody milk, that evening, and the next morning she lay in her stall and would not get up.

The man and the woman were also beginning to sicken, though both of them tried to continue their work. It was the woman who first noticed that the plants around the farmhouse were withering and turning yellow.

The farmer went to the stable with Hradzka and looked at the cow. Shaking his head, he limped back to the house, and returned carrying one of the weapons from the kitchen--the one with the single trigger and the octagonal tube. As he entered the stable, he jerked down and up on the loop extension of the trigger-guard, then put the weapon to his shoulder and pointed it at the cow. It made a flash, and roared louder even than a hand-blaster, and the cow jerked convulsively and was dead. The man then indicated by signs that Hradzka was to drag the dead cow out of the stable, dig a hole, and bury it. This Hradzka did, carefully examining the wound in the cow's head--the weapon, he decided, was not an energy-weapon, but a simple solid-missile projector.

By evening, neither the man nor the woman were able to eat, and both seemed to be suffering intensely. The man used the communicating-instrument on the wall, probably calling on his friends for help. Hradzka did what he could to make them comfortable, cooked his own meal, washed the dishes as he had seen the woman doing, and tidied up the kitchen.

It was not long before people, men and women whom he had seen on the road or who had stopped at the farmhouse while he had been there, began arriving, some carrying baskets of food; and shortly after Hradzka had eaten, a vehicle like the farmer's, but in better condition and of better quality, arrived and a young man got out of it and entered the house, carrying a leather bag. He was apparently some sort of a scientist; he examined the man and his wife, asked many questions, and administered drugs. He also took samples for blood-tests and urinalysis. This, Hradzka considered, was another of the many contradictions he had encountered among these people--this man behaved like an educated scientist, and seemingly had nothing in common with the peasant herb-gatherer on the mountainside.

The fact was that Hradzka was worried. The strange death of the animals, the blight which had smitten the trees and vegetables around the farm, and the sickness of the farmer and his woman, all mystified him. He did not know of any disease which would affect plants and animals and humans; he wondered if some poisonous gas might not be escaping from the earth near the farmhouse. However, he had not, himself, been affected. He also disliked the way in which the doctor and the neighbors seemed to be talking about him. While he had come to a considerable revision of his original opinion about the culture-level of these people, it was not impossible that they might suspect him of having caused the whole thing by witchcraft; at any moment, they might fall upon him and put him to death. In any case, there was no longer any use in his staying here, and it might be wise if he left at once.

Accordingly, he filled his pockets with food from the pantry and slipped out of the farmhouse; before his absence was discovered he was well on his way down the road.

That night, Hradzka slept under a bridge across a fairly wide stream; the next morning, he followed the road until he came to a town. It was not a large place; there were perhaps four or five hundred houses and other buildings in it. Most of these were dwellings like the farmhouse where he had been staying, but some were much larger, and seemed to be places of business. One of these latter was a concrete structure with wide doors at the front; inside, he could see men working on the internal-combustion vehicles which seemed to be in almost universal use. Hradzka
decided to obtain employment here.

It would be best, he decided, to continue his pretense of being a deaf-mute. He did not know whether a world-language were in use at this time or not, and even if not, the pretense of being a foreigner unable to speak the local dialect might be dangerous. So he entered the vehicle-repair shop and accosted a man in a clean shirt who seemed to be issuing instructions to the workers, going into his pantomime of the homeless mute seeking employment.

The master of the repair-shop merely laughed at him, however. Hradzka became more insistent in his manner, making signs to indicate his hunger and willingness to work. The other men in the shop left their tasks and gathered around; there was much laughter and unmistakably ribald and derogatory remarks. Hradzka was beginning to give up hope of getting employment here when one of the workmen approached the master and whispered something to him.

The two of them walked away, conversing in low voices. Hradzka thought he understood the situation; no doubt the workman, thinking to lighten his own labor, was urging that the vagrant be employed, for no other pay than food and lodging. At length, the master assented to his employee's urgings; he returned, showed Hradzka a hose and a bucket and sponges and cloths, and set him to work cleaning the mud from one of the vehicles. Then, after seeing that the work was being done properly, he went away, entering a room at one side of the shop.

About twenty minutes later, another man entered the shop. He was not dressed like any of the other people whom Hradzka had seen; he wore a gray tunic and breeches, polished black boots, and a cap with a visor and a metal insignia on it; on a belt, he carried a holstered weapon like a blaster.

After speaking to one of the workers, who pointed Hradzka out to him, he approached the fugitive and said something. Hradzka made gestures at his mouth and ears and made gargling sounds; the newcomer shrugged and motioned him to come with him, at the same time producing a pair of handcuffs from his belt and jingling them suggestively.

In a few seconds, Hradzka tried to analyze the situation and estimate its possibilities. The newcomer was a soldier, or, more likely, a policeman, since manacles were a part of his equipment. Evidently, since the evening before, a warning had been made public by means of communicating devices such as he had seen at the farm, advising people that a man of his description, pretending to be a deaf-mute, should be detained and the police notified; it had been for that reason that the workman had persuaded his master to employ Hradzka. No doubt he would be accused of causing the conditions at the farm by sorcery.

* * * * *

Hradzka shrugged and nodded, then went to the water-tap to turn off the hose he had been using. He disconnected it, coiled it and hung it up, and then picked up the water-bucket. Then, without warning, he hurled the water into the policeman's face, sprang forward, swinging the bucket by the bale, and hit the man on the head. Releasing his grip on the bucket, he tore the blaster or whatever it was from the holster.

One of the workers swung a hammer, as though to throw it. Hradzka aimed the weapon at him and pulled the trigger; the thing belched fire and kicked back painfully in his hand, and the man fell. He used it again to drop the policeman, then thrust it into the waistband of his trousers and ran outside. The thing was not a blaster at all, he realized—only a missile-projector like the big weapons at the farm, utilizing the force of some chemical explosive.

The policeman's vehicle was standing outside. It was a small, single-seat, two wheeled affair. Having become familiar with the principles of these hydro-carbon engines from examination of the vehicle of the farm, and accustomed as he was to far more complex mechanisms than this crude affair, Hradzka could see at a glance how to operate it. Springing onto the saddle, he kicked away the folding support and started the engine. Just as he did, the master of the repair-shop ran outside, one of the small hand-weapons in his hand, and fired several shots. They all missed, but Hradzka heard the whining sound of the missiles passing uncomfortably close to him.

It was imperative that he recover the blaster he had hidden in the hollow tree at the head of the valley. By this time, there would be a concerted search under way for him, and he needed a better weapon than the solid-missile projector he had taken from the policeman. He did not know how many shots the thing contained, but if it propelled solid missiles by chemical explosion, there could not have been more than five or six such charges in the cylindrical part of the weapon which he had assumed to be the charge-holder. On the other hand, his blaster, a weapon of much greater power, contained enough energy for five hundred blasts, and with it were eight extra energy-capsules, giving him a total of four thousand five hundred blasts.

Handling the two-wheeled vehicle was no particular problem; although he had never ridden on anything of the sort before, it was child's play compared to controlling a Hundredth Century strato-rocket, and Hradzka was a skilled rocket-pilot.

Several times he passed vehicles on the road—the passenger vehicles with enclosed cabins, and cargo-vehicles piled high with farm produce. Once he encountered a large number of children, gathered in front of a big red building with a flagstaff in front, from which a queer flag, with horizontal red and white stripes and a white-spotted
blue device in the corner, flew. They scattered off the road in terror at his approach; fortunately, he hit none of them, for at the speed at which he was traveling, such a collision would have wrecked his light vehicle.

As he approached the farm where he had spent the past few days, he saw two passenger-vehicles standing by the road. One was a black one, similar to the one in which the physician had come to the farm, and the other was white with black trimmings and bore the same device he had seen on the cap of the policeman. A policeman was sitting in the driver's seat of this vehicle, and another policeman was standing beside it, breathing smoke with one of the white paper cylinders these people used. In the farm-yard, two men were going about with a square black box; to this box, a tube was connected by a wire, and they were passing the tube about over the ground.

The policeman who was standing beside the vehicle saw him approach, and blew his whistle, then drew the weapon from his belt. Hradzka, who had been expecting some attempt to halt him, had let go the right-hand steering handle and drawn his own weapon; as the policeman drew, he fired at him. Without observing the effect of the shot, he sped on; before he had rounded the bend above the farm, several shots were fired after him.

A mile beyond, he came to the place where he had hidden the blaster. He stopped the vehicle and jumped off, plunging into the brush and racing toward the hollow tree. Just as he reached it, he heard a vehicle approach and stop, and the door of the police vehicle slam. Hradzka's fingers found the belt of his blaster; he dragged it out and buckled it on, tossing away the missile weapon he had been carrying.

Then, crouching behind the tree, he waited. A few moments later, he caught a movement in the brush toward the road. He brought up the blaster, aimed and squeezed the trigger. There was a faint bluish glow at the muzzle, and a blast of energy tore through the brush, smashing the molecular structure of everything that stood in the way. There was an involuntary shout of alarm from the direction of the road; at least one of the policemen had escaped the blast. Hradzka holstered his weapon and crept away for some distance, keeping under cover, then turned and waited for some sign of the presence of his enemies. For some time nothing happened; he decided to turn hunter against the men who were hunting him. He started back in the direction of the road, making a wide circle, flitting silently from rock to bush and from bush to tree, stopping often to look and listen.

This finally brought him upon one of the policemen, and almost terminated his flight at the same time. He must have grown over-confident and careless; suddenly a weapon roared, and a missile smashed through the brush inches from his face. The shot had come from his left and a little to the rear. Whirling, he blasted four times, in rapid succession, then turned and fled for a few yards, dropping and crawling behind a rock. When he looked back, he could see wisps of smoke rising from the shattered trees and bushes which had absorbed the energy-output of his weapon, and he caught a faint odor of burned flesh. One of his pursuers, at least, would pursue him no longer.

He slipped away, down into the tangle of ravines and hollows in which he had wandered the day before his arrival at the farm. For the time being, he felt safe, and finally confident that he was not being pursued, he stopped to rest. The place where he stopped seemed familiar, and he looked about. In a moment, he recognized the little stream, the pool where he had bathed his feet, the clump of seedling pines under which he had slept. He even found the silver-foil wrapping from the food concentrate capsule.

But there had been a change, since the night when he had slept here. Then the young pines had been green and alive; now they were blighted, and their needles had turned brown. Hradzka stood for a long time, looking at them. It was the same blight that had touched the plants around the farmhouse. And here, among the pine needles on the ground, lay a dead bird.

It took some time for him to admit, to himself, the implications of vegetation, the chickens, the cow, the farmer and his wife, had all sickened and died. He had been in this place, and now, when he had returned, he found that death had followed him here, too.

During the early centuries of the Atomic Era, he knew, there had been great wars, the stories of which had survived even to the Hundredth Century. Among the weapons that had been used, there had been artificial plagues and epidemics, caused by new types of bacteria developed in laboratories, against which the victims had possessed no protection. Those germs and viruses had persisted for centuries, and gradually had lost their power to harm mankind. Suppose, now, that he had brought some of them back with him, to a century before they had been developed. Suppose, that was, that he were a human plague-carrier. He thought of the vermin that had infested the clothing he had taken from the man he had killed on the other side of the mountain; they had not troubled him after the first day.

There was a throbbing mechanical sound somewhere in the air; he looked about, and finally identified its source. A small aircraft had come over the valley from the other side of the mountain and was circling lazily overhead. He froze, shrinking back under a pine-tree; as long as he remained motionless, he would not be seen, and soon the thing would go away. He was beginning to understand why the search for him was being pressed so
relentlessly; as long as he remained alive, he was a menace to everybody in this First Century world.

He got out his supply of food concentrates, saw that he had only three capsules left, and put them away again. For a long time, he sat under the dying tree, chewing on a twig and thinking. There must be some way in which he could overcome, or even utilize, his inherent deadliness to these people. He might find some isolated community, conceal himself near it, invade it at night and infect it, and then, when everybody was dead, move in and take it for himself. But was there any such isolated community? The farmhouse where he had worked had been fairly remote, yet its inhabitants had been in communication with the outside world, and the physician had come immediately in response to their call for help.

The little aircraft had been circling overhead, directly above the place where he lay hidden. For a while, Hradzka was afraid it had spotted him, and was debating the advisability of using his blaster on it. Then it banked, turned and went away. He watched it circle over the valley on the other side of the mountain, and got to his feet.

Almost at once, there was a new sound—a multiple throbbing, at a quick, snarling tempo that hinted at enormous power, growing louder each second. Hradzka stiffened and drew his blaster; as he did, five more aircraft swooped over the crest of the mountain and came rushing down toward him; not aimlessly, but as though they knew exactly where he was. As they approached, the leading edges of their wings sparkled with light, branches began flying from the trees about him, and there was a loud hammering noise.

He aimed a little in front of them and began blasting. A wing flew from one of the aircraft, and it plunged downward. Another came apart in the air; a third burst into flames. The other two zoomed upward quickly. Hradzka swung his blaster after them, blasting again and again. He hit a fourth with a blast of energy, knocking it to pieces, and then the fifth was out of range. He blasted at it twice, but without effect; a hand-blaster was only good for a thousand yards at the most.

Holstering his weapon, he hurried away, following the stream and keeping under cover of trees. The last of the attacking aircraft had gone away, but the little scout-plane was still circling about, well out of blaster-range.

Once or twice, Hradzka was compelled to stay hidden for some time, not knowing the nature of the pilot's ability to detect him. It was during one of these waits that the next phase of the attack developed.

It began, like the last one, with a distant roar that swelled in volume until it seemed to fill the whole world. Then, fifteen or twenty thousand feet out of blaster-range, the new attackers swept into sight.

There must have been fifty of them, huge tapering things with wide-spread wings, flying in close formation, wave after V-shaped wave. He stood and stared at them, amazed; he had never imagined that such aircraft existed in the First Century. Then a high-pitched screaming sound cut through the roar of the propellers, and for an instant he saw countless small specks in the sky, falling downward.

The first bomb-salvo landed in the young pines, where he had fought against the first air attack. Great gouts of flame shot upward, and smoke, and flying earth and debris. Hradzka turned and started to run. Another salvo fell in front of him; he veered to the left and plunged on through the undergrowth. Now the bombs were falling all about him, deafening him with their thunder, shaking him with concussion. He dodged, frightened, as the trunk of a tree came crashing down beside him. Then something hit him across the back, knocking him flat. For a moment, he lay stunned, then tried to rise. As he did, a searing light filled his eyes and a wave of intolerable heat swept over him. Then darkness...

* * * * *

"No, Zarvas Pol," Kradzy Zago repeated. "Hradzka will not return; the 'time-machine' was sabotaged."

"So? By you?" the soldier asked.

The scientist nodded. "I knew the purpose for which he intended it. Hradzka was not content with having enslaved a whole Solar System: he hungered to bring tyranny and serfdom to all the past and all the future as well; he wanted to be master not only of the present but of the centuries that were and were to be, as well. I never took part in politics, Zarvas Pol; I had no hand in this revolt. But I could not be party to such a crime as Hradzka contemplated when it lay within my power to prevent it."

"The machine will take him out of our space-time continuum, or back to a time when this planet was a swirling cloud of flaming gas?" Zarvas Pol asked.

Kradzy Zago shook his head. "No, the unit is not powerful enough for that. It will only take him about ten thousand years into the past. But then, when it stops, the machine will destroy itself. It may destroy Hradzka with it or he may escape. But if he does, he will be left stranded ten thousand years ago, when he can do us no harm."

"Actually, it did not operate as he imagined and there is an infinitely small chance that he could have returned to our 'time', in any event. But I wanted to insure against even so small a chance."

"We can't be sure of that," Zarvas Pol objected. "He may know more about the machine than you think; enough more to build another like it. So you must build me a machine and I'll take back a party of volunteers and hunt him
"That would not be necessary, and you would only share his fate." Then, apparently changing the subject, Kradzy Zago asked: "Tell me, Zarvas Pol; have you never heard the legends of the Deadly Radiations?"

General Zarvas smiled. "Who has not? Every cadet at the Officers' College dreams of re-discovering them, to use as a weapon, but nobody ever has. We hear these tales of how, in the early days, atomic engines and piles and fission-bombs emitted particles which were utterly deadly, which would make anything with which they came in contact deadly, which would bring a horrible death to any human being. But these are only myths. All the ancient experiments have been duplicated time and again, and the deadly radiation effect has never been observed. Some say that it is a mere old-wives' terror tale; some say that the deaths were caused by fear of atomic energy, when it was still unfamiliar; others contend that the fundamental nature of atomic energy has altered by the degeneration of the fissionable matter. For my own part, I'm not enough of a scientist to have an opinion."

* * * * *
The old one smiled wanly. "None of these theories are correct. In the beginning of the Atomic Era, the Deadly Radiations existed. They still exist, but they are no longer deadly, because all life on this planet has adapted itself to such radiations, and all living things are now immune to them."

"And Hradzka has returned to a time when such immunity did not exist? But would that not be to his advantage?"

"Remember, General, that man has been using atomic energy for ten thousand years. Our whole world has become drenched with radioactivity. The planet, the seas, the atmosphere, and every living thing, are all radioactive, now. Radioactivity is as natural to us as the air we breathe. Now, you remember hearing of the great wars of the first centuries of the Atomic Era, in which whole nations were wiped out, leaving only hundreds of survivors out of millions. You, no doubt, think that such tales are products of ignorant and barbaric imagination, but I assure you, they are literally true. It was not the blast-effect of a few bombs which created such holocausts, but the radiations released by the bombs. And those who survived to carry on the race were men and women whose systems resisted the radiations, and they transmitted to their progeny that power of resistance. In many cases, their children were mutants—not monsters, although there were many of them, too, which did not survive—but humans who were immune to radioactivity."

"An interesting theory, Kradzy Zago," the soldier commented. "And one which conforms both to what we know of atomic energy and to the ancient legends. Then you would say that those radiations are still deadly—to the non-immune?"

"Exactly. And Hradzka, his body emitting those radiations, has returned to the First Century of the Atomic Era—to a world without immunity."

General Zarvas' smile vanished. "Man!" he cried in horror. "You have loosed a carrier of death among those innocent people of the past!"

Kradzy Zago nodded. "That is true. I estimate that Hradzka will probably cause the death of a hundred or so people, before he is dealt with. But dealt with he will be. Tell me, General; if a man should appear now, out of nowhere, spreading a strange and horrible plague wherever he went, what would you do?"

"Why, I'd hunt him down and kill him," General Zarvas replied. "Not for anything he did, but for the menace he was. And then, I'd cover his body with a mass of concrete bigger than this palace."

"Precisely," Kradzy Zago smiled. "And the military commanders and political leaders of the First Century were no less ruthless or efficient than you. You know how atomic energy was first used? There was an ancient nation, upon the ruins of whose cities we have built our own, which was famed for its idealistic humanitarianism. Yet that nation, treacherously attacked, created the first atomic bombs in self defense, and used them. It is among the people of that nation that Hradzka has emerged."

"But would they recognize him as the cause of the calamity he brings among them?"

"Of course. He will emerge at the time when atomic energy is first being used. They will have detectors for the Deadly Radiations—detectors we know nothing of, today, for a detection instrument must be free from the thing it is intended to detect, and today everything is radioactive. It will be a day or so before they discover what is happening to them, and not a few will die in that time, I fear; but once they have found out what is killing their people, Hradzka's days--no, his hours--will be numbered."

"A mass of concrete bigger than this place," Tobbh the Slave repeated General Zarvas' words. "The Ancient Spaceport!"

Prince Burvanny clapped him on the shoulder. "Tobbh, man! You've hit it!"

"You mean...?" Kradzy Zago began.

"Yes. You all know of it. It's stood for nobody knows how many millennia, and nobody's ever decided what it was, to begin with, except that somebody, once, filled a valley with concrete, level from mountain-top to mountain-
top. The accepted theory is that it was done for a firing-stand for the first Moon-rocket. But gentlemen, our friend Tobbh's explained it. It is the tomb of Hradzka, and it has been the tomb of Hradzka for ten thousand years before Hradzka was born!"
EXPEDITER
by MACK REYNOLDS

His assignment was to get things done; he definitely did so. Not quite the things intended, perhaps, but definitely done.

The knock at the door came in the middle of the night, as Josip Pekic had always thought it would. He had been but four years of age when the knock had come that first time and the three large men had given his father a matter of only minutes to dress and accompany them. He could barely remember his father.

The days of the police state were over, so they told you. The cult of the personality was a thing of the past. The long series of five-year plans and seven-year plans were over and all the goals had been achieved. The new constitution guaranteed personal liberties. No longer were you subject to police brutality at the merest whim. So they told you.

But fears die hard, particularly when they are largely of the subconscious. And he had always, deep within, expected the knock.

He was not mistaken. The rap came again, abrupt, impatient. Josip Pekic allowed himself but one chill of apprehension, then rolled from his bed, squared slightly stooped shoulders, and made his way to the door. He flicked on the light and opened up, even as the burly, empty faced zombi there was preparing to pound still again.

There were two of them, not three as he had always dreamed. As three had come for his father, more than two decades before.

His father had been a rightist deviationist, so the papers had said, a follower of one of whom Josip had never heard in any other context other than his father's trial and later execution. But he had not cracked under whatever pressures had been exerted upon him, and of that his son was proud.

He had not cracked, and in later years, when the cult of personality was a thing of the past, his name had been cleared and returned to the history books. And now it was an honor, rather than a disgrace, to be the son of Ljubo Pekic, who had posthumously been awarded the title Hero of the People's Democratic Dictatorship.

But though his father was now a hero, Josip still expected that knock. However, he was rather bewildered at the timing, having no idea of why he was to be under arrest.

The first of the zombi twins said expressionlessly, "Comrade Josip Pekic?"

If tremor there was in his voice, it was negligible. He was the son of Ljubo Pekic. He said, "That is correct. Uh ... to what do I owe this intrusion upon my privacy?" That last in the way of bravado.

The other ignored the question. "Get dressed and come with us, Comrade," he said flatly.

At least they still called him comrade. That was some indication, he hoped, that the charges might not be too serious.

He chose his dark suit. Older than the brown one, but in it he felt he presented a more self-possessed demeanor. He could use the quality. Five foot seven, slightly underweight and with an air of unhappy self-deprecation, Josip Pekic's personality didn't exactly dominate in a group. He chose a conservative tie and a white shirt, although he knew that currently some frowned upon white shirts as a bourgeois affectation. It was all the thing, these days, to look proletarian, whatever that meant.

The zombis stood, watching him emptily as he dressed. He wondered what they would have said had he asked them to wait in the hallway until he was finished. Probably nothing. They hadn't bothered to answer when he asked what the charge against him was.

He put his basic papers, his identity card, his student cards, his work record and all the rest in an inner pocket, and faced them. "I am ready," he said as evenly as he could make it come.

They turned and led the way down to the street and to the black limousine there. And in it was the third one, sitting in the front seat, as empty of face as the other two. He hadn't bothered to turn off the vehicle's cushion jets and allow it to settle to the street. He had known how very quickly his colleagues would reappear with their prisoner.

Josip Pekic sat in the back between the two, wondering just where he was being taken, and, above all, why. For the life of him he couldn't think of what the charge might be. True enough, he read the usual number of proscribed books, but no more than was common among other intellectuals, among the students and the country's avant garde, if such you could call it. He had attended the usual parties and informal debates in the coffee shops where the more courageous attacked this facet or that of the People's Dictatorship. But he belonged to no active organizations which
opposed the State, nor did his tendencies attract him in that direction. Politics were not his interest.

At this time of the night, there was little traffic on the streets of Zagurest, and few parked vehicles. Most of those which had been rented for the day had been returned to the car-pool garages. It was the one advantage Josip could think of that Zagurest had over the cities of the West which he had seen. The streets were not cluttered with vehicles. Few people owned a car outright. If you required one, you had the local car pool deliver it, and you kept it so long as you needed transportation.

He had expected to head for the Kalemegdan Prison where political prisoners were traditionally taken, but instead, they slid off to the right at Partisan Square, and up the Boulevard of the November Revolution. Josip Pekic, in surprise, opened his mouth to say something to the security policeman next to him, but then closed it again and his lips paled. He knew where they were going, now. Whatever the charge against him, it was not minor.

A short kilometer from the park, the government buildings began. The Skupstina, the old Parliament left over from the days when Transbalkania was a backward, feudo-capitalistic power of third class. The National Bank, the new buildings of the Borba and the Politica. And finally, set back a hundred feet from the boulevard, the sullen, squat Ministry of Internal Affairs.

It had been built in the old days, when the Russians had still dominated the country, and in slavish imitation of the architectural horror known as Stalin Gothic. Meant to be above all efficient and imposing and winding up simply--grim.

Yes. Josip Pekic knew where they were going now.

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The limousine slid smoothly on its cushion of air, up the curved driveway, past the massive iron statue of the worker struggling against the forces of reaction, a rifle in one hand, a wrench in the other and stopped before, at last, the well-guarded doorway.

Without speaking, the two police who had come to his room opened the car door and climbed out. One made a motion with his head, and Josip followed. The limousine slid away immediately.

Between them, he mounted the marble stairs. It occurred to him that this was the route his father must have taken, two decades before.

He had never been in the building of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, before. Few Transbalkanians had, other than those who were employed in the MVD, or who came under the Ministry's scrutiny.

Doors opened before them, closed behind them. Somewhat to Josip Pekic's surprise the place was copiously adorned with a surplus of metal and marble statues, paintings and tapestries. It had similarities to one of Zagurest's heavy museums.

Through doors and down halls and through larger rooms, finally to a smaller one in which sat alone at a desk a lean, competent and assured type who jittered over a heavy sheaf of papers with an electro-marking computer pen. He was nattily and immaculately dressed and smoked his cigarette in one of the small pipelike holders once made de rigueur through the Balkans by Marshal Tito.

The three of them came to a halt before his desk and, at long last, expression came to the faces of the zombis. Respect, with possibly an edge of perturbation. Here, obviously, was authority.

He at the desk finished a paper, tore it from the sheaf, pushed it into the maw of the desk chute from whence it would be transported to the auto-punch for preparation for recording. He looked up in busy impatience.

Then, to Josip Pekic's astonishment, the other came to his feet quickly, smoothly and with a grin on his face. Josip hadn't considered the possibility of being grinned at in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

"Aleksander Kardelj," he said in self-introduction, sticking out a lean hand to be shaken. "You're Pekic, eh? We've been waiting for you."

Josip shook, bewildered. He looked at the zombi next to him, uncomprehendingly.

He who had introduced himself, darted a look of comprehension from Josip to the two. He said disgustedly, but with mild humor oddly mixed, "What's the matter, did these hoodlums frighten you?"

Josip fingered his chin nervously. "Of course not."

One of the zombis shifted his feet. "We did nothing except obey orders."

Kardelj grimaced in sour amusement. "I can imagine," he grunted. "Milka, you see too many of those imported Telly shows from the West. I suspect you see yourself as a present day Transbalkanian G-Man."

"Yes, Comrade," Milka said, and then shook his head.

"Oh, hush up and get out," Kardelj said. He flicked the cigarette butt from its holder with a thumb and took up a fresh one from a desk humidifier and wedged it into the small bowl. He looked at Josip and grinned again, the action giving his face an unsophisticated youthful expression.

"You can't imagine how pleased I am to meet you, at last," he said. "I've been looking for you for months."

Josip Pekic ogled him blankly. The name had come through to him at last. Aleksander Kardelj was seldom in
the news, practically never photographed, and then in the background in a group of Party functionaries, usually with a wry smile on his face. But he was known throughout the boundaries of the State, if not internationally. Aleksander Kardelj was Number Two. Right-hand man of Zoran Jankez himself, second in command of the Party and rumored to be the brains behind the throne.

The zombis had gone, hurriedly.

"Looking for me?" Josip said blankly. "I haven't been in hiding. You've made some mistake. All I am is a student of--"

"Of course, of course," Kardelj said, humorously impatient. He took up a folder from his desk and shook it absently in Josip's general direction. "I've studied your dossier thoroughly." He flicked his eyes up at a wall clock. "Come along. Comrade Jankez is expecting us. We'll leave explanations until then."

In a daze, Josip Pekic followed him.

Comrade Jankez, Number One. Zoran Jankez, Secretary General of the Party, President of the U.B.S.R., the United Balkan Soviet Republics. Number One.

Josip could hardly remember so far back that Zoran Jankez wasn't head of the Party, when his face, or sculptured bust, wasn't to be seen in every store, on the walls of banks, railroad stations, barber shops, or bars. Never a newsreel but that part of it wasn't devoted to Comrade Jankez, never a Telly newscast but that Number One was brought to the attention of the viewers. His coming to power had been a quiet, bloodless affair upon the death of the Number One who had preceded him, and he had remained in his position for a generation.

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Josip Pekic followed Aleksander Kardelj in a daze, through a door to the rear of the desk, and into a somewhat bigger room, largely barren of furniture save for a massive table with a dozen chairs about it. At the table, looking some ten years older than in any photo Josip had ever seen, sat Zoran Jankez.

He looked ten years older, and his face bore a heavy weariness, a grayness, that never came through in his publicity shots. He looked up from a report he was perusing and grunted a welcome to them.

Kardelj said in pleasurable enthusiasm, "Here he is, Zoran. Our Comrade Josip Pekic. The average young citizen of Transbalkania."

Number One grunted again, and took in the less than imposing figure of Josip Pekic. Josip felt an urge to nibble at his fingernails, and repressed it. He had recently broken himself of the smoking habit and was hard put to find occupation for his hands when nervous.

Zoran Jankez growled an invitation for them to be seated and Kardelj adjusted his trousers to preserve the crease, threw one leg up along the heavy conference table, and rested on a buttock, looking at ease but as though ready to take off instantly.

Josip fumbled himself into one of the sturdy oaken chairs, staring back and forth at the two most powerful men of his native land. Thus far, no one had said anything that made any sense whatsoever to him since he had been hauled from his bed half an hour ago.

Zoran Jankez rasped, "I have gone through your dossier, Comrade. I note that you are the son of Hero of the People's Democratic Dictatorship, Ljubo Pekic."

"Yes, Comrade Jankez," Josip got out. He fussed with his hands, decided it would be improper to stick them in his pockets.

Number One grunted. "I knew Ljubo well. You must realize that his arrest was before my time. I had no power to aid him. It was, of course, after my being elected to the Secretary Generalship that he was exonerated and his name restored to the list of those who have gloriously served the State. But then, of course, you bear no malice at this late date. Ljubo has been posthumously given the hero's award."

It wasn't exactly the way Josip knew the story, but there was little point in his objecting. He simply nodded. He said, unhappily, "Comrades, I feel some mistake has been made. I ... I have no idea--"

Kardelj was chuckling, as though highly pleased with some development. He held up a hand to cut Josip short and turned to his superior. "You see, Zoran. A most average, laudable young man. Born under our regime, raised under the People's Democratic Dictatorship. Exactly our man."

Zoran Jankez seemed not to hear the other. He was studying Josip heavily, all but gloomily.

A beefy paw went out and banged a button inset in the table and which Josip had not noticed before. Almost instantly a door in the rear opened and a white-jacketed servant entered, pushing a wheeled combination bar and hors d'oeuvres cart before him. He brought the lavishly laden wagon to within reach of the heavy-set Party head, his face in servile expressionlessness.

Jankez grunted something and the waiter, not quite bowing and scraping, retreated again from the room. Number One's heavy lips moved in and out as his eyes went over the display.

Kardelj said easily, "Let me, Zoran." He arose and brought a towel-wrapped bottle from a refrigerated bucket
set into the wagon, and deftly took up a delicate three-ounce glass which he filled and placed before his superior. He took up another and raised his eyebrows at Josip Pekic who shook his head--a stomach as queasy as his wasn't going to be helped by alcohol. Kardelj poured a short one for himself and resumed his place at the heavy conference table.

Jankez, his eyes small and piggish, took up a heavy slice of dark bread and ladled a full quarter pound of Danube caviar upon it. He took up the glass and tossed the chilled spirits back over his palate, grunted and stuffed the open sandwich into his mouth.

Josip's eyes went to the hors d'oeuvres wagon. The spread would have cost him six months' income.

Number One rumbled, his mouth full, "Comrade, I am not surprised at your confusion. We will get to the point immediately. Actually, you must consider yourself a very fortunate young man." He belched, took another huge bite, then went on. "Have you ever heard the term, expeditor?"

"I ... I don't know ... I mean think so, Comrade Jankez."

The party head poured himself some more of the yellow spirits and took down half of it. "It is not important," he rasped. "Comrade Kardelj first came upon the germ of this project of ours whilst reading of American industrial successes during the Second World War. They were attempting to double, triple, quadruple their production of such war materiel as ships and aircraft in a matter of mere months. Obviously, a thousand bottlenecks appeared. All was confusion. So they resorted to expediers. Extremely competent efficiency engineers whose sole purpose was to seek out such bottlenecks and eliminate them. A hundred aircraft might be kept from completion by the lack of a single part. The expeditor found them though they be as far away as England, and flew them by chartered plane to California. A score of top research chemists might be needed for a certain project in Tennessee, the expeditor located them, though it meant the stripping of valued men from jobs of lesser importance. I need give no further examples. Their powers were sweeping. Their expense accounts unlimited. Their successes unbelievable." Number One's eyes went back to the piles of food, as though he'd grown tired of so much talk.

Josip fidgeted, still uncomprehending.

While the Party leader built himself a huge sandwich of Dalmatian ham and pohovano pile chicken, Aleksander Kardelj put in an enthusiastic word. "We're adapting the idea to our own needs, Comrade. You have been selected to be our first expeditor."

If anything, Josip Pekic was more confused than ever. "Exeditor," he said blankly. "To ... to expedite what?"

"That is for you to decide," Kardelj said blithely. "You're our average Transbalkanian. You feel as the average man in the street feels. You're our what the Yankees call, Common Man."

Josip said plaintively, "You keep saying that, but I don't know what you mean, Comrade. Please forgive me, perhaps I'm dense, but what is this about me being uh, the average man? There's nothing special about me. I...."

"Exactly," Kardelj said triumphantly. "There's nothing special about you. You're the average man of all Transbalkania. We have gone to a great deal of difficulty to seek you out."

Number One belched and took over heavily. "Comrade, we have made extensive tests in this effort to find our average man. You are the result. You are of average age, of average height, weight, of education, and of intelligence quotient. You finished secondary school, worked for several years, and have returned to the university where you are now in your second year. Which is average for you who have been born in your generation. Your tastes, your ambitions, your dreams, Comrade Pekic, are either known to be, or assumed to be, those of the average Transbalkanian."

Josip Pekic and his associates had wondered at some of the examinations and tests that had been so prevalent of recent date. He accepted the words of the two Party leaders. Very well, he was the average of the country's some seventy million population. Well, then?

* * * * *

Number One had pushed himself back in his chair, and Josip was only mildly surprised to note that the man seemed considerably paunchier than his photos indicated. Perhaps he wore a girdle in public.

Zoran Jankez took up a paper. "I have here a report from a journalist of the West who but recently returned from a tour of our country. She reports, with some indignation, that the only available eyebrow pencils were to be found on the black market, were of French import, and cost a thousand dinars apiece. She contends that Transbalkanian women are indignant at paying such prices."

The Party head looked hopelessly at first Josip and then Kardelj. "What is an eyebrow pencil?"

Kardelj said, a light frown on his usually easygoing face, "I believe it is a cosmetic."

"You mean like lipstick?"

Josip took courage. He flustered. "They use it to darken their eyebrows--women, I mean. From what I understand, it comes and goes in popularity. Right now, it is ultra-popular. A new, uh, fad originating in Italy, is sweeping the West."

Number One stared at him. "How do you know all that?" he rasped.
Josip fiddled with the knot of his tie, uncomfortably. "It is probably in my dossier that I have journeyed abroad on four occasions. Twice to International Youth Peace Conferences, once as a representative to a Trades Union Convention in Vienna, and once on a tourist vacation guided tour. On those occasions I ... ah ... met various young women of the West."

Kardelj said triumphantly, "See what I mean, Zoran? This comrade is priceless."

Jankez looked at his right-hand man heavily. "Why, if our women desire this ... this eyebrow pencil nonsense, is it not supplied them? Is there some ingredient we do not produce? If so, why cannot it be imported?" He picked at his uneven teeth with a thumbnail.

Kardelj held his lean hands up, as though in humorous supplication. "Because, Comrade, to this point we have not had expediters to find out such desires on the part of women comrades."

Number One grunted. He took up another report. "Here we have some comments upon service in our restaurants, right here in Zagurest, from an evidently widely published American travel reporter. He contends that the fact that there is no tipping leads to our waiters being surly and inefficient."

He glared up at his right-hand man. "I have never noticed when I have dined at the Sumadija or the Dva Ribara, that the waiters have been surly. And only last week I enjoyed cigansko pecenje, gypsy roast, followed by a very flaky cherry strudla, at the Gradski Podrum. The service was excellent."

Kardelj cleared his throat. "Perhaps you receive better service than the average tourist, Zoran."

Jankez growled, "The tourist trade is important. An excellent source of hard currencies." He glowered across at Josip. "These are typical of the weaknesses you must ferret out, Comrade."

He put the reports down with a grunt. "But these are comparatively minor. Last week a truck driver attached to a meat-packing house in Belbrovnik was instructed to deliver a load of frozen products to a town in Macenegrvo. When he arrived there, it was to find they had no refrigeration facilities. So he unloaded the frozen meat on a warehouse platform and returned to Belbrovnik. At this time of the year, obviously in four hours the meat was spoiled." He glowered at Kardelj and then at Josip Pekic. "Why do things like this continually happen? How can we overtake the United States of the Americas and Common Europe, when on all levels our workers are afraid to take initiative? That truck driver fulfilled his instructions. He delivered the meat. He washed his hands of what happened to it afterward. Why, Comrades? Why did he not have the enterprise to preserve his valuable load, even, if necessary, make the decision to return with it to Belbrovnik?"

He grunted heavily and settled back into his chair as though through, finished with the whole question.

Aleksander Kardelj became brisk. He said to Josip Pekic with a smile, "This is your job. You are to travel about the country, finding bottlenecks, finding shortages, ferreting out mistakes and bringing them to the attention of those in position to rectify them."

Josip said glumly, "But suppose ... suppose they ignore my findings?"

Number One snorted, but said nothing.

Kardelj said jovially, "Tomorrow the announcements will go out to every man, woman and child in the People's Democratic Dictatorship. Your word is law. You are answerable only to Comrade Jankez and myself. No restrictions whatsoever apply to you. No laws. No regulations. We will give you identification which all will recognize, and the bearer of which can do no wrong."

Josip was flabbergasted. "But ... but suppose I come up against some ... well, someone high in the Party, or, well ... some general or admiral? Some--"

Kardelj said jocularly, "You answer only to us, Comrade Pekic. Your power is limitless. Comrade Jankez did not exaggerate. Frankly, were cold statistics enough, Transbalkania has already at long last overtaken the West in per capita production. Steel, agriculture, the tonnage of coal mined, of petroleum pumped. All these supposed indications of prosperity. He flung up his hands again in his semihumorous gesture of despair. "But all these things do not mesh. We cannot find such a simple matter as ... as eyebrow pencils in our stores, nor can we be served acceptably in our restaurants and hotels. Each man passes the buck, as the Yankees say, and no man can care less whether or not school keeps. No man wants responsibility."

Josip was aghast, all over again. "But ... but me ... only me. What could you expect a single person to do?"

"Don't misunderstand, Comrade," Kardelj told him with amused compassion. "You are but an experiment. If it works out, we will seek others who are also deemed potential expediters to do similar work. Now, are there any further questions?"

Josip Pekic stared miserably back and forth between the two, wondering wildly what they would say if he turned the whole thing down. His eyes lit on the dour, heavy Number One, and inwardly he shook his head. No. There was no question about that. You didn't turn down Zoran Jankez. He looked at Aleksander Kardelj, and in spite of the other's smiling face, he decided you didn't turn down Number Two, either.

Josip said carefully, "From what you say, I ... I can override anyone in Transbalkania, except yourselves. But ...
but what if I antagonize one of you? You know ... with something I think I find wrong?"

The second in command of the Party chuckled, even as he fitted a fresh cigarette into his curved holder. "We've
provided even for that, Comrade. Fifty thousand Common Europe francs have been deposited to your account in
Switzerland. At any time you feel your revelations might endanger yourself, you are free to leave the country and
achieve sanctuary abroad." He chuckled whimsically again. "Given the position you will occupy, a man above all
law, with the whole of the nation's resources at his disposal, I cannot imagine you wishing to leave. The Swiss
deposit is merely to give you complete confidence, complete security."

Number One was radiating fury as he stalked heavily down the corridors of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. On
the surface, his face displayed nothing—which meant nothing. There was simply a raging aura of trouble.

Veljko Gosnjak, posted with one other before the office of Aleksander Kardelj, winced when he saw the Party
head approaching. He muttered from the side of his mouth, "Watch out. He's on a rampage. In this mood, he'd as
well set you to filling salt shakers in the Nairebis mines as...."

But Zoran Jankez was now near enough that he might hear, and Veljko Gosnjak cut himself off abruptly and
came to even stiffer attention.

Number One ignored them both and pushed on through the door.

Even as his right-hand man looked up from his work, Jankez was growling ominously. "Do you know the latest
from that brain-wave experiment?"

Kardelj was close enough to the other personally to at least pretend lack of awe. He grinned and said, "You
mean young Josip? Sit down, Zoran. A drink?"

The Number Two Party man swiveled slightly and punched out a code on a series of buttons. Almost
immediately, an area of approximately one square foot sank down from the upper right-hand corner of his desk, to
rise again bearing two chilled glasses.

Jankez snorted his anger but took up one of the glasses. "These everlasting gadgets from the West," he growled.
"One of these days, this confounded desk of yours will give you an electric shock that will set me to looking for a
new assistant." He threw the contents of the glass back over his palate. "If I don't start looking before that time," he
added ominously.

However, he savored the drink, then put down the glass, pursed his lips and rumbled, "Where do you get this
excellent slivovka, Aleksander?"

Kardelj sipped part of his own drink. He said lightly, "That is the only secret I keep from you, Zoran. However,
I will give you this hint. Its proper name is sljivovica, rather than slivovka. It does not come from Slovenia. I am
afraid, once you know its origin, I will no longer be of use to you."

He laughed again. "But what is it that young Josip has done?"

His superior's face resumed its dark expression. He growled, "You know Velimir Crvenkovski, of course."

Kardelj raised scanty eyebrows. "Of course, Vice chairman of the Secretariat of Agriculture."

Zoran Jankez had lowered his clumsy bulk into a chair. Now he said heavily, his voice dangerous. "Velimir and
I were partisans together. It was I who converted him to the Party, introduced him to the works of Lenin while we
squatted in foxholes in Macenegro."

"Of course," the other repeated. "I know the story very well. A good Party man, Comrade Crvenkovski, never
failing to vote with you in meetings of the Executive Committee."

"Yes," Jankez growled ominously. "And your precious Josip Pekic, your expediter, has removed him from his
position as supreme presider of agriculture in Bosnatia."

Aleksander Kardelj cleared his throat. "I have just been reading the account. It would seem that production has
fallen off considerably in the past five years in Bosnatia. Ah, Comrade Crvenkovski evidently had brought to his
attention that wild life in the countryside, particularly birds, accounted for the loss of hundreds of thousands of tons
of cereals and other produce annually."

"A well-known fact," Jankez rasped. He finished what remained of his drink, and reached forward to punch out
the order for a fresh one. "What has that got to do with this pipsqueak using the confounded powers you invested
him with to dismiss one of the best Party men in Transbalkania?"

His right-hand man had not failed to note that he was now being given full credit for the expediter idea. He said,
still cheerfully, however, "It would seem that Comrade Crvenkovski issued top priority orders to kill off, by
whatever means possible, all birds. Shotguns, poison, nets were issued by the tens of thousands to the peasants."

"Well?" his superior said ominously. "Obviously, Velimir was clear minded enough to see the saving in gross
production."

"Um-m-m," Kardelj said placatingly. "However, he failed to respond to the warnings of our agriculturists who
have studied widely in the West. It seems as though the balance of nature calls for the presence of wildlife, and
particularly birds. The increase in destructive insects has more than counterbalanced the amount of cereals the birds once consumed. Ah, Zoran," he said with a wry smile, "I would suggest we find another position for Comrade Crvenkovski."

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The secretary-receptionist looked up at long last at the very average looking young man before him. "Yes," he said impatiently.

The stranger said, "I would like to see Comrade Broz."

"Surely you must realize that the Commissar is one of the busiest men in Transbalkania, Comrade." There was mocking sneer in the tone. "His time is not at the disposal of every citizen."

The newcomer looked at the petty authority thoughtfully. "Do you so address everyone that enters this office?" he asked mildly.

The other stared at him flabbergasted. He suddenly banged upon a button on the desk.

When the security guard responded to the summons, he gestured curtly with his head at the newcomer. "Throw this fool out, Petar," he rapped.

Josip Pekic shook his head, almost sadly. "No," he said. "Throw this man out." He pointed at the secretary-receptionist.

The guard called Petar blinked at each of them in turn.

Josip brought forth his wallet, fidgeted a moment with the contents, then flashed his credentials. "State expediter," he said nervously. "Under direct authority of Comrade Zoran Jankez." He looked at the suddenly terrified receptionist. "I don't know what alternative work we can find to fit your talents. However, if I ever again hear of you holding down a position in which you meet the public, I will ... will, ah, see you imprisoned."

The other scurried from the room before Josip thought of more to say.

Josip Pekic looked at the guard for a long moment. He said finally, unhappy still, "What are you needed for around here?"

"Why yes, Comrade. I am the security guard."

Petar, obviously no brain at the best, was taken aback.

"You didn't answer my question." Josip's hands were jiggling so he jammed them into his pockets.

Petar had to think back to remember the wording of the question in question. Finally he came up triumphantly with, "Yes, Comrade. I guard Comrade Broz and the others from assassins. I am armed." He proudly displayed the Mikoyan Noiseless which he had holstered under his left shoulder.

Josip said, "Go back to your superior and inform him that I say you are superfluous on this assignment. No longer are commissars automatically to be guarded. Only under special circumstances. If ... well, if our people dislike individual commissars sufficiently to wish to assassinate them, maybe they need assassination."

Josip Pekic looked at the guard for a long moment. He said finally, unhappy still, "What are you needed for around here?"

"Why yes, Comrade. I am the security guard."

Petar pointed, then got out. At least he knew how to obey orders, Josip decided. What was there about the police mentality? Were they like that before they became police, and the job sought them out? Or did the job make them all that way?

He pushed his way through the indicated door. The office beyond held but one inhabitant who stood, hands clasped behind his back, while he stared in obvious satisfaction at a wall of charts, maps and graphs.

The average young man looked at some of the lettering on the charts and shook his head. He said, his voice hesitant, "Commissar Broz?"

"Yes, young man?"

Josip presented his credentials again.

Broz had heard of him. He hurried forth a chair, became expansive in manner. A cigar? A drink? A great pleasure to meet the Comrade Expediter. He had heard a great deal about the new experiment initiated by Comrade Jankez and ably assisted by Aleksander Kardelj. Happily, an expediter was not needed in the Transbalkanian Steel Complex. It was expanding in such wise as to be the astonishment of the world, both East and West.

"Yes," Josip began glumly, "but--"

Broz was back on his feet and to his wall of charts and graphs. "See here," he beamed expansively. "This curve is steel production. See how it zooms? A veritable Sputnik, eh? Our statistics show that we are rapidly surpassing even the most foremost of the Western powers."

Josip Pekic said, almost apologetically in view of the other's enthusiasm. "That's what I came to discuss with you, Comrade. You see, I've been sitting around, ah, in the local wineshops, talking it over with the younger engineers and the men on the job."
The other frowned at him. "Talking what over?"
"This new policy of yours." Josip's voice was diffident.
"You mean overtaking the steel production of the West, by utilizing all methods of production?" The commissar's voice dropped. "I warn you Comrade, the germ of this idea originated with Zoran Jankez himself. We are old comrades and friends from back before the revolution."
"I'm sure you are," Josip said pessimistically, and suppressing an urge to bite at the skin of his thumb. "However ... well, I'm not so sure Number One will admit your program originated with him. At least, it hasn't worked out that way in the recent past when something soured."
The other bug-eyed. He whispered, "That approaches cynical treason, Comrade."
Josip half nodded, said discouragedly, "You forget. By Comrade Jankez's own orders I ... I can do no wrong. But so much for that. Now, well, this steel program. I'm afraid it's going to have to be scrapped."
"Scrapped!" the Commissar of the Transbalkanian Steel Complex stared at his visitor as though the other was rabid. "You fool! Our steel progress is the astonishment of the world! Why, not only are our ultramodern plants, built largely with foreign assistance, working on a twenty-four hour a day basis, but thousands of secondary smelters, some so small as to be operated by a handful of comrade citizens, in backyard establishments, by schoolchildren, working smelters of but a few tons monthly capacity in the schoolyard, by--"

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The newly created State Expediter held up a hand dispiritedly. "I know. I know. Thousands of these backyard smelters exist ... uh ... especially in parts of the country where there is neither ore nor fuel available."

The commissar looked at him.

The younger man said, his voice seemingly deprecating his words, "The schoolchildren, taking time off from their studies, of course, bring scrap iron to be smelted. And they bring whatever fuel they can find, often pilfered from railway yards. And the more scrap and fuel they bring, the more praise they get. Unfortunately, the so-called scrap often turns out to be kitchen utensils, farm tools, even, on at least on occasion, some railroad tracks, from a narrow gauge line running up to a lumbering project, not in use that time of the year. Sooner or later, Comrade Broz, the nation is going to have to replace those kitchen utensils and farm tools and all the rest of the scrap that isn't really quite scrap."

The commissar began to protest heatedly, but Josip Pekic shook his head and tried to firm his less than dominating voice. "But even that's not the worst of it. Taking citizens away from their real occupations, or studies, and putting them to smelting steel where no ore exists. The worst of it is, so my young engineer friends tell me, that while the steel thus produced might have been a marvel back in the days of the Hittites, it hardly reaches specifications today. Perhaps it might be used ultimately to make simple farm tools such as hoes and rakes; if so, it would make quite an endless circle, because that is largely the source of the so-called steel to begin with--tools, utensils and such. But it hardly seems usable in modern industry."

The commissar had gone pale with anger by now. He put his two fists on his desk and leaned upon them, staring down at his seated visitor. "Comrade," he bit out, "I warn you. Comrade Jankez is enthusiastic about my successes. Beyond that, not only is he an old comrade, but my brother-in-law as well."
Josip Pekic nodded, unenthusiastically, and his voice continued to quiver. "So the trained engineers under you, have already warned me. However, Comrade Broz, you are ... well, no longer Commissar of the Steel Complex. My report has already gone in to Comrades Jankez and Kardelj."

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The knock came at the door in the middle of the night as Aleksander Kardelj had always thought it would.

From those early days of his Party career, when his ambitions had sent him climbing, pushing, tripping up others, on his way to the top, he had expected it eventually.
Oh, his had been a different approach, on the surface, an easygoing, laughing, gentler approach than one usually connected with members of the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Party, but it made very little difference in the very long view. When one fell from the heights, he fell just as hard, whether or not he was noted for his sympathetic easy humor.

The fact was, Aleksander Kardelj was not asleep when the fist pounded at his door shortly after midnight. He had but recently turned off, with a shaking hand, the Telly-Phone, after a less than pleasant conversation with President of the United Balkan Soviet Republics, Zoran Jankez.

For the past ten years, Kardelj had been able to placate Zoran Jankez, even though Number One be at the peak of one of his surly rages, rages which seemed to be coming with increasing frequency of late. As the socio-economic system of the People's Democratic Dictatorship became increasingly complicated, as industrialization with its modern automation mushroomed in a geometric progression, the comparative simplicity of governing which applied in the past, was strictly of yesteryear. It had been one thing, rifle and grenades in hand, to seize the government,
after a devastating war in which the nation had been leveled, and even to maintain it for a time, over illiterate peasants and unskilled proletarians. But industrialization calls for a highly educated element of scientists and technicians, nor does it stop there. One of sub-mentality can operate a shovel in a field, or even do a simple operation on an endless assembly line in a factory. But practically all workers must be highly skilled workers in the age of automation, and there is little room for the illiterate. The populace of the People's Dictatorship was no longer a dumb, driven herd, and their problems were no longer simple ones.

Yes, Number One was increasingly subject to his rages these days. It was Aleksander Kardelj's deepest belief that Jankez was finding himself out of his depth. He no longer was capable of understanding the problems which his planning bodies brought to his attention. And he who is confused, be he ditchdigger or dictator, is a man emotionally upset.

Zoran Jankez's face had come onto the Telly-Phone screen already enraged. He had snapped to his right-hand man, "Kardelj! Do you realize what that ... that idiot of yours has been up to now?"

Inwardly, Kardelj had winced. His superior had been mountingly difficult of late, and particularly these past few days. He said now, cajolingly, "Zoran, I--"

"Don't call me Zoran, Kardelj! And please preserve me from your sickening attempts to fawn, in view of your treacherous recommendations of recent months." He was so infuriated that his heavy jowls shook.

Kardelj had never seen him this furious. He said placatingly, "Comrade Jankez, I had already come to the conclusion that I should consult you on the desirability of revoking this young troublemaker's credentials and removing him from the--"

"I am not interested in what you were going to do, Kardelj. I am already in the process of ending this traitor's activities. I should have known, when you revealed he was the son of Ljubo Pekic, that he was an enemy of the State, deep within. I know the Pekic blood. It was I who put Ljubo to the question. Stubborn, wrong headed, a vicious foe of the revolution. And his son takes after him."

Kardelj had enough courage left to say, "Comrade, it would seem to me that young Pekic is a tanglefoot, but not a conscious traitor. I--"

"Don't call me comrade, Kardelj!" Number One roared. "I know your inner motivation. The reason you brought this agent provocateur, this Trotskyite wrecker, to this position of ridiculous power. The two of you are in conspiracy to undermine my authority. This will be brought before the Secretariat of the Executive Committee, Kardelj. You've gone too far, this time!"

Aleksander Kardelj had his shortcomings but he was no coward. He said, wryly, "Very well, sir. But would you tell me what Josip Pekic has done now? My office has had no report on him for some time."

"What he has done! You fool, you traitorous fool, have you kept no record at all? He has been in the Macedonian area where my virgin lands program has been in full swing."

Kardelj cleared his throat at this point.

Jankez continued roaring. "The past three years, admittedly, the weather has been such, the confounded rains failing to arrive on schedule, that we have had our troubles. But this fool! This blundering traitorous idiot!"

"What has he done?" Kardelj asked, intrigued in spite of his position of danger.

"For all practical purposes he's ordered the whole program reversed. Something about a sandbowl developing, whatever that is supposed to mean. Something about introducing contour plowing, whatever nonsense that is. And even reforesting some areas. Some nonsense about watersheds. He evidently has blinded and misled the very men I had in charge. They are supporting him, openly."

Jankez, Kardelj knew, had been a miner as a youth, with no experience whatsoever on the soil. However, the virgin lands project had been his pet. He envisioned hundreds upon thousands of square miles of maize, corn as the Americans called it. This in turn would feed vast herds of cattle and swine so that ultimately the United Balkan Soviet Republics would have the highest meat consumption in the world.

Number One was raging on. Something about a conspiracy on the part of those who surrounded him. A conspiracy to overthrow him, Zoran Jankez, and betray the revolution to the Western powers, but he, Zoran Jankez, had been through this sort of plot before. He, Zoran Jankez, knew the answers to such situations.

Aleksander Kardelj grinned humorously, wryly, and reached to flick off the screen. He twisted a cigarette into the small pipelike holder, lit it and waited for the inevitable.

It was shortly after that the knock came on his door.

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Zoran Jankez sat at his desk in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a heavy military revolver close to his right hand, a half empty liter of sljivovica and a water tumbler, to his left. Red of eye, he pored over endless reports from his agents, occasionally taking time out to growl a command into his desk mike. Tired he was, from the long sleepless hours he was putting in, but Number One was in his element. As he had told that incompetent, Kardelj, he
had been through this thing before. It was no mistake that he was Number One.

After a time he put a beefy hand down on the reports. He could feel the rage coming upon him. Of late, he realized, there most certainly had developed a plot to undermine his health by constant frustrations. Was there no one, no one at all, to take some of these trivialities off his shoulders? Must he do everything in the People's Democratic Dictatorship? Make every decision and see it through?

He snapped into the mike, "Give me Lazar Jovanovic." And then, when the police head's shaven poll appeared in the screen of the Telly-Phone, "Comrade, I am giving you one last chance. Produce this traitor, Josip Pekic, within the next twenty-four hours, or answer to me." He glared at the other, whose face had tightened in fear. "I begin to doubt the sincerity of your efforts, in this, Comrade Jovanovic."

"But ... but, Comrade, I--"

"That's all!" Number One snapped. He flicked off the instrument, then glowered at it for a full minute. If Jovanovic couldn't locate Pekic, he'd find someone who could. It was maddening that the pipsqueak had seemingly disappeared. To this point, seeking him had progressed in secret. There had been too much favorable publicity churned out in the early days of the expediter scheme to reverse matters to the point of having a public hue and cry. It was being done on the q.t.

But! Number One raged inwardly, if his police couldn't find the criminal soon enough, a full-scale hunt and purge could well enough be launched. There was more to all this than met the eye. Oh, he, Zoran Jankez had been through it before, though long years had lapsed since it had been necessary. The traitors, the secret conspiracies, and then the required purges to clean the Party ranks still once again.

The gentle summons of his Telly-Phone tinkled, and he flicked it on with a rough brush of his hand.

And there was the youthful face of Josip Pekic, currently being sought high and low by the full strength of the Internal Affairs Secretariat. Youthful, yes, but even as he stared his astonishment, Zoran Jankez could see that the past months had wrought their changes on the other's face. It was more mature, bore more of strain and weariness.

Before Jankez found his voice. Josip Pekic said diffidently, "I ... I understand you've been, well ... looking for me, sir."

"Looking for you!" the Party head bleated, his rage ebbing in all but uncontrollably. For a moment he couldn't find words.

Pekic said, his voice jittering, "I had some research to do. You see, sir, this ... this project you and Kardelj started me off on--"

"I had nothing to do with it! It was Kardelj's scheme, confound his idiocy!" Number One all but screamed.

"Oh? Well ... well, I had gathered the opinion that both of you concurred. Anyway, like I say, the project from the first didn't come off quite the way it started. I ... well ... we, were thinking in terms of finding out why waiters were surly, why workers and professionals and even officials tried to, uh, beat the rap, pass the buck, look out for themselves and the devil take the hindmost, and all those Americanisms that Kardelj is always using."

Jankez simmered, but let the other go on. Undoubtedly, his police chief, Lazar Jovanovic was even now tracing the call, and this young traitor would soon be under wraps where he could do no more damage to the economy of the People's Democratic Dictatorship.

"But, well, I found it wasn't just a matter of waiters, and truckdrivers and such. It ... well ... ran all the way from top to bottom. So, I finally felt as though I was sort of butting my head against the wall. I thought I better start at ... kind of ... fundamentals, so I began researching the manner in which the governments of the West handled some of these matters."

"Ah," Jankez said as smoothly as he was able to get out. "Ah. And?" This fool was hanging himself.

The younger man frowned in unhappy puzzlement. "Frankly, I was surprised. I have, of course, read Western propaganda to the extent I could get hold of it in Zagurest, and listened to the Voice of the West on the wireless. I was also, obviously, familiar with our own propaganda. Frankly ... well ... I had reserved my opinion in both cases."

* * * * *

This in itself was treason, but Number One managed to get out, almost encouragingly, "What are you driving at, Josip Pekic?"

"I found in one Western country that the government was actually paying its peasants, that is, farmers, not to plant crops. The same government subsidized other crops, keeping the prices up to the point where they were hard put to compete on the international markets."

Young Pekic made a moue, as though in puzzlement. "In other countries, in South America for instance, where the standard of living is possibly the lowest in the West and they need funds desperately to develop themselves, the governments build up large armies, although few of them have had any sort of warfare at all for over a century and have no threat of war."

"What is all this about?" Number One growled. Surely, Lazar Jovanovic was on the idiot traitor's trail by now.
Josip took a deep breath and hurried on nervously. "They've got other contradictions that seem unbelievable. For instance, their steel industry will be running at half capacity, in spite of the fact that millions of their citizens have unfulfilled needs, involving steel. Things like cars, refrigerators, stoves. In fact, in their so-called recessions, they'll actually close down perfectly good, modern factories, and throw their people out of employment, at the very time that there are millions of people who need that factory's product."

Josip said reasonably, "Why, sir, I've come to the conclusion that the West has some of the same problems we have. And the main one is politicians."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Just that," Josip said with dogged glumness. "I ... well, I don't know about the old days. A hundred, even fifty years ago, but as society becomes more complicated, more intricate, I simply don't think politicians are capable of directing it. The main problems are those of production and distribution of all the things our science and industry have learned to turn out. And politicians, all over the world, seem to foul it up."

Zoran Jankez growled ominously, "Are you suggesting that I am incompetent to direct the United Balkan Soviet Republics?"

"Yes, sir," Josip said brightly, as though the other had encouraged him. "That's what I mean. You or any other politician. Industry should be run by trained, competent technicians, scientists, industrialists--and to some extent, maybe, by the consumers, but not by politicians. By definition, politicians know about politics, not industry. But somehow, in the modern world, governments seem to be taking over the running of industry and even agriculture. They aren't doing such a good job, sir."

Jankez finally exploded. "Where are you calling from, Pekic?" he demanded. "You're under arrest!"

Josip Pekic cleared his throat, apologetically. "No, sir," he said. "Remember? I'm the average Transbalkanian citizen. And it is to be assumed I'd, well ... react the way any other would. The difference is, I had the opportunity. I'm in Switzerland."

"Switzerland!" Number One roared. "You've defected. I knew you were a traitor, Pekic. Like father, like son! A true Transbalkanian would remain in his country and help it along the road to the future."

The younger man looked worried. "Well, yes, sir," he said. "I thought about that. But I think I've done about as much as I could accomplish. You see, these last few months, protected by those 'can do no wrong' credentials, I've been spreading this message around among all the engineers, technicians, professionals, all the more trained, competent people in Transbalkania. You'd be surprised how they took to it. I think it's kind of ... well, snowballing. I mean the idea that politicians aren't capable of running industry. That if the United Balkan Soviet Republics are to ever get anywhere, some changes are going to have to be made."

Number One could no more than glare.

Josip Pekic, rubbed his nose nervously, and said, in the way of uneasy farewell, "I just thought it was only fair for me to call you and give a final report. After all, I didn't start all this. Didn't originate the situation. It was you and Kardelj who gave me my chance. I just ... well ... expedited things." His face faded from the screen, still apologetic of expression.

Zoran Jankez sat there for a long time, staring at the now dark instrument.

It was the middle of the night when the knock came at the door. But then, Zoran Jankez had always thought it would ... finally.
dimly audible, coming from the direction of the lecture room, and Cavender followed its faint reverberations down a narrow corridor until he reached a closed door. He eased the door open and slipped unobtrusively into the back of the lecture room.

As usual, most of the thirty-odd advanced students present had seated themselves on the right side of the room where they were somewhat closer to the speaker. Cavender started towards the almost vacant rows of chairs on the left, smiling apologetically at Dr. Ormond who, as the door opened, had glanced up without interrupting his talk. Three other faces turned towards Cavender from across the room. Reuben Jeffries, a heavysset man with a thin fringe of black hair circling an otherwise bald scalp, nodded soberly and looked away again. Mavis Greenfield, a few rows further up, produced a smile and a reproachful little headshake; during the coffee break she would carefully explain to Cavender once more that students too tardy to take in Dr. Al's introductory lecture missed the most valuable part of these meetings.

From old Mrs. Folsom, in the front row on the right, Cavender's belated arrival drew a more definite rebuke. She stared at him for half a dozen seconds with a coldly severe frown, mouth puckered in disapproval, before returning her attention to Dr. Ormond.

Cavender sat down in the first chair he came to and let himself go comfortably limp. He was dead-tired, had even hesitated over coming to the Institute of Insight tonight. But it wouldn't do to skip the meeting. A number of his fellow students, notably Mrs. Folsom, already regarded him as a black sheep; and if enough of them complained to Dr. Ormond that Cavender's laxness threatened to retard the overall advance of the group towards the goal of Total Insight, Ormond might decide to exclude him from further study. At a guess, Cavender thought cynically, it would have happened by now if the confidential report the Institute had obtained on his financial status had been less impressive. A healthy bank balance wasn't an absolute requirement for membership, but it helped ... it helped! All but a handful of the advanced students were in the upper income brackets.

Cavender let his gaze shift unobtrusively about the group while some almost automatic part of his mind began to pick up the thread of Dr. Al's discourse. After a dozen or so sentences, he realized that the evening's theme was the relationship between subjective and objective reality, as understood in the light of Total Insight. It was a well-worn subject; Dr. Al repeated himself a great deal. Most of the audience nevertheless was following his words with intent interest, many taking notes and frowning in concentration. As Mavis Greenfield liked to express it, quoting the doctor himself, the idea you didn't pick up when it was first presented might come clear to you the fifth or sixth time around. Cavender suspected, however, that as far as he was concerned much of the theory of Total Insight was doomed to remain forever obscure.

He settled his attention on the only two students on this side of the room with him. Dexter Jones and Perrie Rochelle were sitting side by side in front-row chairs--the same chairs they usually occupied during these meetings. They were exceptions to the general run of the group in a number of ways. Younger, for one thing: Dexter was twenty-nine and Perrie twenty-three while the group averaged out at around forty-five which happened to be Cavender's age. Neither was blessed with worldly riches; in fact, it was questionable whether the Rochelle girl, who described herself as a commercial artist, even had a bank account. Dexter Jones, a grade-school teacher, did have one but was able to keep it barely high enough to cover his rent and car payment checks. Their value to the Institute was of a different kind. Both possessed esoteric mental talents, rather modest ones, to be sure, but still very interesting, so that on occasion they could state accurately what was contained in a sealed envelope, or give a recognizable description of the photograph of a loved one hidden in another student's wallet. This provided the group with encouraging evidence that such abilities were, indeed, no fable and somewhere along the difficult road to Total Insight might be attained by all.

In addition, Perrie and Dexter were volunteers for what Dr. Aloys Ormond referred to cryptically as "very advanced experimentation." The group at large had not been told the exact nature of these experiments, but the implication was that they were mental exercises of such power that Dr. Al did not wish other advanced students to try them, until the brave pioneer work being done by Perrie and Dexter was concluded and he had evaluated the results....

* * * * *

"Headaches, Dr. Al," said Perrie Rochelle. "Sometimes quite bad headaches--" She hesitated. She was a thin, pale girl with untidy arranged brown hair who vacillated between periods of vivacious alertness and activity and somewhat shorter periods of blank-faced withdrawal. "And then," she went on, "there are times during the day when I get to feeling sort of confused and not quite sure whether I'm asleep or awake ... you know?"

Dr. Ormond nodded, gazing at her reflectively from the little lectern on which he leaned. His composed smile indicated that he was not in the least surprised or disturbed by her report on the results of the week's experiments--that they were, in fact, precisely the results he had expected. "I'll speak to you about it later, Perrie," he told her gently. "Dexter ... what experiences have you had?"
Dexter Jones cleared his throat. He was a serious young man who appeared at meetings conservatively and neatly dressed and shaved to the quick, and rarely spoke unless spoken to.

"Well, nothing very dramatic, Dr. Al," he said diffidently. "I did have a few nightmares during the week. But I'm not sure there's any connection between them and, uh, what you were having us do."

Dr. Ormond stroked his chin and regarded Dexter with benevolence. "A connection seems quite possible, Dexter. Let's assume it exists. What can you tell us about those nightmares?"

Dexter said he was afraid he couldn't actually tell them anything. By the time he was fully awake he'd had only a very vague impression of what the nightmares were about, and the only part he could remember clearly now was that they had been quite alarming.

Old Mrs. Folsom, who was more than a little jealous of the special attention enjoyed by Dexter and Perrie, broke in eagerly at that point to tell about a nightmare she'd had during the week and which she could remember fully; and Cavender's attention drifted away from the talk. Mrs. Folsom was an old bore at best, but a very wealthy old bore, which was why Dr. Ormond usually let her ramble on a while before steering the conversation back to the business of the meeting. But Cavender didn't have to pretend to listen.

From his vantage point behind most of the group, he let his gaze and thoughts wander from one to the other of them again. For the majority of the advanced students, he reflected, the Institute of Insight wasn't really too healthy a place. But it offered compensations. Middle-aged or past it on the average, financially secure, vaguely disappointed in life, they'd found in Dr. Al a friendly and eloquent guide to lead them into the fascinating worlds of their own minds. And Dr. Al was good at it. He had borrowed as heavily from yoga and western mysticism as from various orthodox and unorthodox psychological disciplines, and composed his own system, almost his own cosmology. His exercises would have made conservative psychiatrists shudder, but he was clever enough to avoid getting his flock into too serious mental difficulties. If some of them suffered a bit now and then, it made the quest of Total Insight and the thought that they were progressing towards that goal more real and convincing. And meeting after meeting, Dr. Al came up with some intriguing new twist or device, some fresh experience to keep their interest level high.

"Always bear in mind," he was saying earnestly at the moment, "that an advance made by any member of the group benefits the group as a whole. Thus, because of the work done by our young pioneers this week I see indications tonight that the group is ready to attempt a new experiment ... an experiment at a level I frankly admit I hadn't anticipated you would achieve for at least another two months."

Dr. Ormond paused significantly, the pause underlining his words. There was an expectant stirring among the students.

"But I must caution you!" he went on. "We cannot, of course, be certain that the experiment will succeed ... in fact, it would be a very remarkable thing if it did succeed at a first attempt. But if it should, you will have had a rather startling experience! You will have seen a thing generally considered to be impossible!"

He smile reassuringly, stepping down from the lectern. "Naturally, there will be no danger. You know me well enough to realize that I never permit the group or individuals to attempt what lies beyond their capability."

* * * * *

Cavender stifled a yawn, blinked water from his eyes, watching Ormond walk over to a small polished table on the left side of the room in front of the rows of chairs. On it Mavis Greenfield had placed a number of enigmatic articles, some of which would be employed as props in one manner or another during the evening's work. The most prominent item was a small suitcase in red alligator hide. Dr. Ormond, however, passed up the suitcase, took a small flat wooden plate from the table and returned to the center of the room.

"On this," he said, holding up the plate, "there rests at this moment the air of this planet and nothing else. But in a minute or two--for each of you, in his or her world of subjective reality--something else will appear on it."

The students nodded comprehendingly. So far, the experiment was on familiar ground. Dr. Ormond gave them all a good-humored wink.

"To emphasize," he went on, "that we deal here with practical, down-to-earth, real matters ... not some mystical nonsense ... to emphasize that, let us say that the object each of you will visualize on this plate will be--a ham sandwich!"

There were appreciative chuckles. But Cavender felt a twinge of annoyance. At the moment, when along with fighting off fatigue he'd been trying to forget that he hadn't eaten since noon, Dr. Al's choice looked like an unfortunate one. Cavender happened to be very fond of ham.

"Now here," Ormond continued, putting the plate down, "is where this experiment begins to differ from anything we have done before. For all of us will try to imagine--to visualize as being on this plate--the same ham sandwich. And so there will be no conflict in our projections, let's decide first on just what ingredients we want to put on it." He smiled. "We'll make this the finest ham sandwich our collective imagination can produce!"

There were more chuckles. Cavender cursed under his breath, his mouth beginning to water. Suggestions came
promptly.

"Mustard?" Dr. Ormond said, "Of course--Not too sharp though, Eleanor?" He smiled at Mrs. Folsom. "I agree! A light touch of delicate salad mustard. Crisp lettuce ... finely chopped gherkins. Very well!"

"Put it all on rye," Cavender said helplessly. "Toasted rye."

"Toasted rye?" Ormond smiled at him, looked around. "Any objections? No? Toasted rye it shall be, Wally. And I believe that completes our selection."

He paused, his face turning serious. "Now as to that word of caution I gave you. For three minutes each of you will visualize the object we have chosen on the plate I will be holding up before me. You will do this with your eyes open, and to each of you, in your own subjective reality, the object will become, as you know, more or less clearly discernible.

"But let me tell you this. Do not be too surprised if at the end of that time, when the exercise is over, the object remains visible to you ... does not disappear!"

There was silence for a moment. Then renewed chuckles, but slightly nervous ones, and not too many.

Dr. Ormond said sternly, "I am serious about that! The possibility, though it may be small tonight, is there. You have learned that, by the laws of Insight, any image of subjective reality, if it can be endowed with all the attributes of objective reality by its human creator, must spontaneously become an image in objective reality!

"In this case, our collective ham sandwich, if it were perfectly visualized, could not only be seen by you but felt, its weight and the texture of each of its ingredients perceived, their appetizing fragrance savored"--Cavender groaned mentally--"and more: if one of you were to eat this sandwich, he would find it exactly as nourishing as any produced by the more ordinary methods of objective reality.

"There are people in the world today," Dr. Ormond concluded, speaking very earnestly now, "who can do this! There always have been people who could do this. And you are following in their footsteps, being trained in even more advanced skills. I am aware to a greater extent than any of you of the latent power that is developing--has developed--in this group. Tonight, for the first time, that power will be focused, drawn down to a pinpoint, to accomplish one task.

"Again, I do not say that at the end of our exercise a ham sandwich will lie on this plate. Frankly, I don't expect it. But I suggest very strongly that you don't let it surprise or startle you too much if we find it here!"

There was dead stillness when he finished speaking. Cavender had a sense that the lecture room had come alive with eerie little chills. Dr. Ormond lifted the plate solemnly up before him, holding it between the fingertips of both hands.

"Now, if you will direct your attention here ... no, Eleanor, with your eyes open!

"Let us begin...."

* * * * *

Cavender sighed, straightened up in his chair, eyes fixed obediently on the wooden plate, and banned ham sandwiches and every other kind of food firmly from his thoughts. There was no point in working his appetite up any further when he couldn't satisfy it, and he would have to be on guard a little against simply falling asleep during the next three minutes. The cloudiness of complete fatigue wasn't too far away. At the edge of his vision, he was aware of his fellow students across the room, arranged in suddenly motionless rows like staring zombies. His eyelids began to feel leaden.

The three minutes dragged on, came to an end. Ormond slowly lowered his hands. Cavender drew a long breath of relief. The wooden plate, he noted, with no surprise, was still empty.

"You may stop visualizing," Ormond announced.

There was a concerted sighing, a creaking of chairs. The students came out of their semitrances, blinked, settled into more comfortable positions, waiting for Dr. Al's comments.

"No miracles this time!" Ormond began briskly. He smiled.

Mrs. Folsom said, "Dr. Al--"

He looked over at her. "Yes, Eleanor?"

Eleanor Folsom hesitated, shook her head. "No," she said. "Go on. I'm sorry I interrupted."

"That's all right." Dr. Al gave her a warm smile. It had been, he continued, a successful exercise, a very promising first attempt, in spite of the lack of an immediate materialization, which, of course, had been only a remote possibility to start with. He had no fault to find with the quality of the group's effort. He had sensed it ... as they, too, presently would be able to sense it ... as a smooth flow of directed energy. With a little more practice ... one of these days ..."
looked like a flexible copper trident, and start back to the center of the room with it.

Mrs. Folsom's voice said shrilly, "Dr. Al--!"

"Yes, Eleanor? What is it?"

"Just now," Mrs. Folsom said, her voice still holding the shrill note, "just a moment ago, on the plate over there, I'm certain ... I'm almost certain I saw the ham sandwich!"

She added breathlessly, "And that's what I was going to say before, Dr. Al! Right after you told us to stop visualizing I thought I saw the sandwich on the plate! But it was only for a moment and I wasn't sure. But now I'm sure, almost sure, that I saw it again on the plate on the table!"

The old woman was pointing a trembling finger towards the table. Her cheeks showed spots of hectic red. In the rows behind her, the students looked at one another, shook their heads in resignation, some obviously suppressing amusement. Others looked annoyed. They were all familiar with Eleanor Folsom's tendency to produce such little sensations during the meetings. If the evening didn't promise to bring enough excitement, Eleanor always could be counted on to take a hand in events.

Cavender felt less certain about it. This time, Mrs. Folsom sounded genuinely excited. And if she actually believed she'd seen something materialize, she might be fairly close to getting one of those little heart attacks she kept everyone informed about.

* * * * *

Dr. Al could have had the same thought. He glanced back at the prop table, asked gravely, "You don't see it there now, do you, Eleanor?"

Mrs. Folsom shook her head. "No. No, of course not! It disappeared again. It was only there for a second. But I'm sure I saw it!"

"Now this is very interesting," Ormond said seriously. "Has anyone else observed anything at all unusual during the last few minutes?"

There was a murmured chorus of dissent, but Cavender noticed that the expressions of amusement and annoyance had vanished. Dr. Al had changed the tune, and the students were listening intently. He turned back to Mrs. Folsom.

"Let us consider the possibilities here, Eleanor," he said. "For one thing, you should be congratulated in any case, because your experience shows that your visualization was clear and true throughout our exercise. If it hadn't been, nothing like this could have occurred.

"But precisely what was the experience? There we are, as of this moment, on uncertain ground. You saw something. That no one else saw the same thing might mean simply that no one else happened to be looking at the plate at those particular instances in time. I, for example, certainly gave it no further attention after the exercise was over. You may then have observed a genuine materialization!"

Mrs. Folsom nodded vigorously. "Yes, I--"

"But," Ormond went on, "under the circumstances, the scientific attitude we maintain at this Institute demands that we leave the question open. For now. Because you might also, you understand, have projected--for yourself only--a vivid momentary impression of the image you had created during our exercise and were still holding in your mind."

Mrs. Folsom looked doubtful. The flush of excitement began to leave her face.

"Why ... well, yes, I suppose so," she acknowledged unwillingly.

"Of course," Ormond said. "So tonight we shall leave it at that. The next time we engage in a similar exercise ... well, who knows?" He gave her a reassuring smile. "I must say, Eleanor, that this is a very encouraging indication of the progress you have made!" He glanced over the group, gathering their attention, and raised the trident-like device he had taken from the table.

"And now for our second experiment this evening--"

Looking disappointed and somewhat confused, Eleanor Folsom settled back in her chair. Cavender also settled back, his gaze shifting sleepily to the remaining items on the prop table. He was frowning a little. It wasn't his business, but if the old woman had started to hypnotize herself into having hallucinations, Dr. Al had better turn to a different type of meeting exercises. And that probably was exactly what Ormond would do; he seemed very much aware of danger signals. Cavender wondered vaguely what the red suitcase on the table contained.

There was a blurry shimmer on the wooden plate beside the suitcase. Then something thickened there suddenly as if drawing itself together out of the air. Perrie Rochelle, sitting only ten feet back from the table, uttered a yelp--somewhere between surprise and alarm. Dexter Jones, beside her, abruptly pushed back his chair, made a loud, incoherent exclamation of some kind.

Cavender had started upright, heart hammering. The thing that had appeared on the wooden plate vanished again.
But it had remained visible there for a two full seconds. And there was no question at all of what it had been.

For several minutes, something resembling pandemonium swirled about the walls of the lecture room of the Institute of Insight. The red suitcase had concealed the wooden plate on the prop table from the eyes of most of the students sitting on the right side of the room, but a number of those who could see it felt they had caught a glimpse of something. Of just what they weren't sure at first, or perhaps they preferred not to say.

Perrie and Dexter, however, after getting over their first shock, had no such doubts. Perrie, voice vibrant with excitement, answered the questions flung at her from across the room, giving a detailed description of the ham sandwich which had appeared out of nowhere on the polished little table and stayed there for an incredible instant before it vanished. Dexter Jones, his usually impassive face glowing and animated, laughing, confirmed the description on every point.

On the opposite side of the room, Eleanor Folsom, surrounded by her own group of questioners, was also having her hour of triumph, in the warmth of which a trace of bitterness that her first report of the phenomenon had been shrugged off by everyone—even, in a way, by Dr. Al—gradually dissolved.

Dr. Al himself, Cavender thought, remained remarkably quiet at first, though in the excitement this wasn't generally noticed. He might even have turned a little pale. However, before things began to slow down he had himself well in hand again. Calling the group to a semblance of order, he began smilingly to ask specific questions. The witnesses on the right side of the room seemed somewhat more certain now of what they had observed.

Dr. Ormond looked over at Cavender.
"And you, Wally?" he asked. "You were sitting rather far back, to be sure—"

Cavender smiled and shrugged.
"Sorry, Dr. Al. I just wasn't looking in that direction at the moment. The first suggestion I had that anything unusual was going on was when Perrie let out that wild squawk."

There was general laughter. Perrie grinned and flushed.
"Well, I'd have liked to hear your squawk," she told Cavender, "if you'd seen a miracle happen right before your nose!"

"Not a miracle, Perrie," Ormond said gently. "We must remember that. We are working here with natural forces which produce natural phenomena. Insufficiently understood phenomena, perhaps, but never miraculous ones. Now, how closely did this materialization appear to conform to the subjective group image we had decided on for our exercise?"

"Well, I could only see it, of course, Dr. Al. But as far as I saw it, it was exactly what we'd ... no, wait!" Perrie frowned, wrinkling her nose. "There was something added!" She giggled. "At least, I don't remember anyone saying we should imagine the sandwich wrapped in a paper napkin!"

Across the room, a woman's voice said breathlessly, "Oh! A green paper napkin, Perrie?"

Perrie looked around, surprised. "Yes, it was, Mavis."

Mavis Greenfield hesitated, said with a nervous little laugh, "I suppose I did that. I added a green napkin after we started the exercise." Her voice quavered for an instant. "I thought the image looked neater that way." She looked appealingly at the students around her. "This is really incredible, isn't it."

They gave her vague smiles. They were plainly still floating on a cloud of collective achievement—if they hadn't created that sandwich, there could have been nothing to see!

It seemed to Cavender that Dr. Ormond's face showed a flicker of strain when he heard Mavis' explanation. But he couldn't be sure because the expression—if it had been there—was smoothed away at once. Ormond cleared his throat, said firmly and somewhat chidingly. "No, not incredible, Mavis! Although—"

He turned on his smile. "My friends, I must admit that you have surprised me! Very pleasantly, of course. But what happened here is something I considered to be only a very remote possibility tonight. You are truly more advanced than I'd realized.

"For note this. If even one of you had been lagging behind the others, if there had been any unevenness in the concentration each gave to the exercise tonight, this materialization simply could not have occurred! And that fact forces me now to a very important decision."

He went over to the prop table, took the suitcase from it. "Mavis," he said gravely, "you may put away these other devices. We will have no further need for them in this group! Dexter, move the table to the center of the room for me, please."

He waited while his instructions were hastily carried out, then laid the suitcase on the table, drew up a chair and sat down. The buzz of excited conversation among the students hushed. They stared at him in anticipatory silence. It appeared that the evening's surprises were not yet over—and they were ready for anything now!

* * * *

"There is a point," Dr. Ormond began in a solemn voice, riveting their eager attention on him, "a point in the
orderly advance towards Total Insight at which further progress becomes greatly simplified and accelerated, because
the student has now developed the capability to augment his personal efforts by the use of certain instruments."

Cavender thoughtfully reached inside his coat, brought out a cigarette case, opened it and slowly put a cigarette
to his lips. About to flick on a lighter, he saw Ruben Jeffries watching him with an expression of disapproval from
across the aisle. Jeffries shook his head, indicated the NO SMOKING sign on the wall. Cavender nodded, smiling a
rueful apology for his absent-mindedness, and returned the cigarette to its case. He shoved his hands into his
trousers pockets, slouched back in the chair.

"I have told you," Ormond was saying, "that the contributions many of you so generously made to the Institute
were needed for and being absorbed by vital research. Tonight I had intended to give you a first inkling of what that
research was accomplishing." He tapped the suitcase on the table before him. "In there is an instrument of the kind I
have mentioned. The beneficial forces of the Cosmos are harnessed by it, flow through it. And I believe I can say
that my efforts in recent months have produces the most effective such device ever seen...."

"Dr. Al," Mrs. Folsom interrupted firmly, "I think you should let them know how the instrument cured my heart
condition."

Faces shifted toward her, then back to Dr. Al. The middle-aged majority of the students pricked their ears. For
each of them, conscious of the years of increasingly uncertain health to come, Mrs. Folsom's words contained a
personal implication, one that hit home. But in spite of the vindication of her claim to have seen a materialized ham
sandwich, they weren't quite ready to trust her about this.

Dr. Ormond's face was grave.

"Eleanor," he said reprovingly, "that was letting the cat out of the bag, wasn't it? I hadn't intended to discuss
that part of the matter just yet."

He hesitated, frowning, tapping the table top lightly with his knuckles. Mrs. Folsom looked unabashed. She had
produced another sensation and knew it.

"Since it was mentioned," Ormond said with deliberation at last, "it would be unfair not to tell you, at least in
brief, the facts to which Eleanor was alluding. Very well then--Eleanor has served during the past several weeks as
the subject of certain experiments connected with this instrument. She reports that after her first use of it, her
periodically recurring heart problem ceased to trouble her."

Mrs. Folsom smiled, nodded vigorously. "I have not," she announced, "had one single touch of pain or
dizziness in all this time!"

"But one should, of course," Dr. Ormond added objectively, "hesitate to use the word 'cure' under such
circumstances."

In the front row someone asked, "Dr. Al, will the instrument heal ... well, other physical conditions?"

Ormond looked at the speaker with dignity. "John, the instrument does, and is supposed to do, one thing.
Providing, as I've said, that the student working with it has attained a certain minimum level of Insight, it greatly
accelerates his progress towards Total Insight. Very greatly!

"Now, as I have implied before: as one approaches the goal of Total Insight, the ailments and diseases which
commonly afflict humanity simply disappear. Unfortunately, I am not yet free to show you proof for this, although I
have the proof and believe it will not be long before it can be revealed at least to the members of this group. For this
reason, I have preferred not to say too much on the point.... Yes, Reuben? You have a question?"

"Two questions, Dr. Al," Reuben Jeffries said. "First, is it your opinion that our group has now reached the
minimum level of Insight that makes it possible to work with those instruments?"

Ormond nodded emphatically. "Yes, it has. After tonight's occurrence there is no further question about that."

"Then," Jeffries said, "my second question is simply--when do we start?"

There was laughter, a scattering of applause. Ormond smiled, said, "An excellent question, Reuben! The
answer is that a number of you will start immediately.

"A limited quantity of the instruments--fifteen, I believe--are available now on the premises, stored in my
office. Within a few weeks I will have enough on hand to supply as many of you as wish to speed up their progress
by this method. Since the group's contributions paid my research expenses, I cannot in justice ask more from you
individually now than the actual cost in material and labor for each instrument. The figure ... I have it somewhere ...
ok, yes!" Ormond pulled a notebook from his pocket, consulted it, looked up and said, mildly, "Twelve hundred
dollars will be adequate, I think."

Cavender's lips twitched sardonically. Three or four of the group might have flinched inwardly at the price tag,
but on the whole they were simply too well heeled to give such a detail another thought. Checkbooks were coming
hurriedly into sight all around the lecture room. Reuben Jeffries, unfolding his, announced, "Dr. Al, I'm taking one
of the fifteen."

Half the students turned indignantly to stare at him. "Now wait a minute, Reuben!" someone said. "That isn't
fair! It's obvious there aren't enough to go around."

Jeffries smiled at him. "That's why I spoke up, Warren!" He appealed to Ormond. "How about it, Dr. Al?"

Ormond observed judiciously, "It seems fair enough to me. Eleanor, of course, is retaining the instrument with which she has been working. As for the rest of you--first come, first served, you know! If others would like to have Mavis put down their names...."

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There was a brief hubbub as this suggestion was acted on. Mavis, Dexter Jones and Perrie Rochelle then went to the office to get the instruments, while Dr. Ormond consoled the students who had found themselves left out. It would be merely a matter of days before the new instruments began to come in .... and yes, they could leave their checks in advance. When he suggested tactfully that financial arrangements could be made if necessary, the less affluent also brightened up.

Fifteen identical red alligator-hide suitcases appeared and were lined up beside Ormond's table. He announced that a preliminary demonstration with the instrument would be made as soon as those on hand had been distributed. Mavis Greenfield, standing beside him, began to read off the names she had taken down.

"Dr. Ormond," he said, loudly enough to center the attention of everyone in the room on him, "may I have the floor for a moment?"

Ormond appeared surprised, then startled. His glance went up to Reuben Jeffries, still standing stolidly beside him, and his face slowly whitened.

"Why ... well, yes, Wally." His voice seemed unsteady. "What's on your mind?"

Cavender faced the right side of the room and the questioning faces turned towards him.

"My name, as you know," he told the advanced students, "is Wallace Cavender. What you haven't known so far is that I am a police detective, rank of lieutenant, currently attached to the police force of this city and in temporary charge of its bunco squad."

He shifted his gaze towards the front of the room. Ormond's eyes met his for a moment, then dropped.

"Dr. Ormond," Cavender said, "you're under arrest. The immediate charge, let's say, is practicing medicine without a license. Don't worry about whether we can make it stick or not. We'll have three or four others worked up by the time we get you downtown."

For a moment, there was a shocked, frozen stillness in the lecture room. Dr. Ormond's hand began to move out quietly towards the checks lying on the table before him. Reuben Jeffries' big hand got there first.

"I'll take care of these for now, Dr. Al," Jeffries said with a friendly smile. "The lieutenant thinks he wants them."

* * * * *

Not much more than thirty minutes later, Cavender unlocked the door to Dr. Ormond's private office, went inside, leaving the door open behind him, and sat down at Ormond's desk. He rubbed his aching eyes, yawned, lit a cigarette, looked about in vain for an ashtray, finally emptied a small dish of paper clips on the desk and placed the dish conveniently close to him.

There had been an indignant uproar about Dr. Al's arrest for a while, but it ended abruptly when uniformed policemen appeared in the two exit doors and the sobering thought struck the students that any publicity given the matter could make them look personally ridiculous and do damage to their business and social standing.

Cavender had calmed their fears. It was conceivable, he said, that the district attorney's office would wish to confer with some of them privately, in connection with charges to be brought against William Fitzgerald Grady--which, so far as the police had been able to establish, was Dr. Ormond's real name. However, their association with the Institute of Insight would not be made public, and any proceedings would be carried out with the discretion that could be fully expected by blameless citizens of their status in the community.

They were fortunate, Cavender went on, in another respect. Probably none of them had been aware of just how much Grady had milked from the group chiefly through quiet private contributions and donations during the two years he was running the Institute. The sum came to better than two hundred thousand dollars. Grady naturally had wasted none of this in "research" and he was not a spendthrift in other ways. Cavender was, therefore, happy to say that around two thirds of this money was known to be still intact in various bank accounts, and that it would be restored eventually to the generous but misled donors.

Dr. Al's ex-students were beginning to look both chastened and very much relieved. Cavender briefly covered a few more points to eliminate remaining doubts. He touched on Grady's early record as a confidence man and blackmailer, mentioned the two terms he had spent in prison and the fact that for the last eighteen years he had confined himself to operations like the Institute of Insight where risks were less. The profits, if anything, had been
higher because Grady had learned that it paid off, in the long run, to deal exclusively with wealthy citizens and he was endowed with the kind of personality needed to overcome the caution natural to that class. As for the unusual experiences about which some of them might be now thinking, these, Cavender concluded, should be considered in the light of the fact that Grady had made his living at one time as a stage magician and hypnotist, working effectively both with and without trained accomplices.

The lecture had gone over very well, as he’d known it would. The ex-students left for their homes, a subdued and shaken group, grateful for having been rescued from an evil man’s toils. Even Mrs. Folsom, who had announced at one point that she believed she had a heart attack coming on, recovered sufficiently to thank Cavender and assure him that in future she would take her problems only to a reliable physician.

Footsteps were coming down the short hall from the back of the building. Then Reuben Jeffries’ voice said, “Go into the office. The lieutenant’s waiting for you there.”

Cavender stubbed out his cigarette as Dexter Jones, Perrie Rochelle and Mavis Greenfield filed into the office. Jeffries closed the door behind them from the hall and went off.

"Sit down," Cavender said, lighting a fresh cigarette.

They selected chairs and settled down stiffly, facing him. All three looked anxious and pale; and Perrie's face was tear-stained.

Cavender said, "I suppose you've been wondering why I had Sergeant Jeffries tell you three to stay behind."

Perrie began, her eyes and voice rather wild, "Mr. Cavender ... Lieutenant Cavender...."

"Either will do," Cavender said.

"Mr. Cavender, I swear you're wrong! We didn't have anything to do with Dr. Al's ... Mr. Grady's cheating those people! At least, I didn't. I didn't swear it!"

"I didn't say you had anything to do with it, Perrie," Cavender remarked. "Personally I think none of you had anything to do with it. Not voluntarily, at any rate."

He could almost feel them go limp with relief. He waited. After a second or two, Perrie's eyes got the wild look back. "But...."

"Yes?" Cavender asked.

Perrie glanced at Dexter Jones, at Mavis.

"But then what did happen?" she asked bewilderedly, of the other two as much as of Cavender. "Mr. Cavender, I saw something appear on that plate! I know it did. It was a sandwich. It looked perfectly natural. I don't think it could have possibly been something Mr. Grady did with mirrors. And how could it have had the paper napkin Mavis had just been thinking about wrapped around it, unless...."

"Unless it actually was a materialization of a mental image you'd created between you?" Cavender said. "Now settle back and relax, Perrie. There's a more reasonable explanation for what happened tonight than that."

He waited a moment, went on. "Grady's one real interest is money and since none of you have any to speak of, his interest in you was that you could help him get it. Perrie and Dexter showed some genuine talent to start with, in the line of guessing what card somebody was thinking about and the like. It's not too unusual an ability, and in itself it wasn't too useful to Grady.

"But he worked on your interest in the subject. All the other students, the paying students, had to lose was a sizable amount of cash ... with the exception of Mrs. Folsom who's been the next thing to a flip for years anyway. She was in danger. And you three stood a good chance of letting Grady wreck your lives. I said he's a competent hypnotist. He is. Also a completely ruthless one."

He looked at Mavis. "As far as I know, Mavis, you haven't ever demonstrated that you have any interesting extrasensory talents like Dexter's and Perrie's. Rather the contrary. Right?"

She nodded, her eyes huge.

"I've always tested negative. Way down negative. That's why I was really rather shocked when that.... Of course, I've always been fascinated by such things. And he insisted it would show up in me sometime."

"And," Cavender said, "several times a week you had special little training sessions with him, just as his two star pupils here did, to help it show up. You were another perfect stooge, from Grady's point of view. Well, what it amounts to is that Grady was preparing to make his big final killing off this group before he disappeared from the city. He would have collected close to thirty thousand dollars tonight, and probably twice as much again within the next month or so before any of the students began to suspect seriously that Dr. Al's instruments could be the meaningless contraptions they are.

"You three have been hypnotically conditioned to a fare-you-well in those little private sessions you've had with him. During the past week you were set up for the role you were to play tonight. When you got your cue--at a guess it was Mrs. Folsom's claim that she'd seen the ham sandwich materialize--you started seeing, saying, acting,
and thinking exactly as you'd been told to see, say, act, and think. There's no more mystery about it than that. And in my opinion you're three extremely fortunate young people in that we were ready to move in on Grady when we were."

* * * * *

There was silence for a moment. Then Perrie Rochelle said hesitantly, "Then Mrs. Folsom...."

"Mrs. Folsom," Cavender said, "has also enjoyed the benefits of many private sessions with Grady. She, of course, was additionally paying very handsomely for them. Tonight, she reported seeing what she'd been told to report seeing, to set off the hypnotic chain reaction."

"But," Perrie said, "she said her heart attacks stopped after she started using the instrument. I really don't see how that could have been just her imagination?"

"Very easily," Cavender said. "I've talked with her physician. Mrs. Folsom belongs to a not uncommon type of people whose tickers are as sound as yours or mine, but who are convinced they have a serious heart ailment and can dish up symptoms impressive enough to fool anyone but an informed professional. They can stop dishing them up just as readily if they think they've been cured." He smiled faintly. "You look as if you might be finally convinced, Perrie."

She nodded. "I ... yes, I guess so. I guess I am."

"All right," Cavender said. He stood up. "You three can run along then. You won't be officially involved in this matter, and no one's going to bother you. If you want to go on playing around with E.S.P. and so forth, that's your business. But I trust that in future you'll have the good sense to keep away from characters like Grady. Periods of confusion, chronic nightmares—even chronic headaches—are a good sign you're asking for bad trouble in that area."

They thanked him, started out of the office in obvious relief. At the door, Perrie Rochelle hesitated, looked back.

"Mr. Cavender...."

"Yes?"

"You don't think I ... I need...."

"Psychiatric help? No. But I understand," Cavender said, "that you have a sister in Maine who's been wanting you to spend the summer with her. I think that's a fine idea! A month or two of sun and salt water is exactly what you can use to drive the last of this nonsense out of your mind again. So good night to the three of you, and good luck!"

* * * * *

Cavender snapped the top of the squat little thermos flask back in place and restored it to the glove compartment of Jeffries' car. He brushed a few crumbs from the knees of his trousers and settled back in the seat, discovering he no longer felt nearly as tired and washed out as he had been an hour ago in the lecture room. A few cups of coffee and a little nourishment could do wonders for a man, even at the tail end of a week of hard work.

The last light in the Institute building across the street went out and Cavender heard the click of the front door. The bulky figure of Detective Sergeant Reuben Jeffries stood silhouetted for a moment in the street lights on the entrance steps. Then Jeffries came down the steps and crossed the street to the car.

"All done?" Cavender asked.

"All done," Jeffries said through the window. He opened the door, eased himself in behind the wheel and closed the door.

"They took Grady away by the back entrance," he told Cavender. "The records in his files ... he wasn't keeping much, of course ... and the stuff in the safe and those instruments went along with him. He was very co-operative. He's had a real scare."

Cavender grunted. "He'll get over it."

Jeffries hesitated, said, "I'm something of a Johnny-come-lately in this line of work, you know. I'd be interested in hearing how it's handled from here on."

"In this case it will be pretty well standard procedure," Cavender said. "Tomorrow around noon I'll have Grady brought in to see me. I'll be in a curf and bitter mood—the frustrated honest cop. I'll tell him he's in luck. The D. A.'s office has informed me that because of the important names involved in this fraud case, and because all but around forty thousand dollars of the money he collected in this town have been recovered, they've decided not to prosecute. He'll have till midnight to clear out. If he ever shows up again, he gets the book."

"Why leave him the forty thousand?" Jeffries asked. "I understood they know darn well where it's stashed."

Cavender shrugged. "The man's put in two years of work, Reuben. If we clean him, he might get discouraged enough to get out of the racket and try something else. As it is, he'll have something like the Institute of Insight going again in another city three months from now. In an area that hasn't been cropped over recently. He's good in that line ... one of the best, in fact."
Jeffries thoughtfully started the car, pulled out from the curb. Halfway down the block, he remarked, "You gave me the go-ahead sign with the cigarette right after the Greenfield girl claimed she'd put the paper napkin into that image. Does that mean you finally came to a decision about her?"

"Uh-huh."

Jeffries glanced over at him, asked, "Is there any secret about how you're able to spot them?"

"No ... except that I don't know. If I could describe to anyone how to go about it, we might have our work cut in half. But I can't, and neither can any other spotter. It's simply a long, tedious process of staying in contact with people you have some reason to suspect of being the genuine article. If they are, you know it eventually. But if it weren't that men with Grady's type of personality attract them somehow from ten miles around, we'd have no practical means at present of screening prospects out of the general population. You can't distinguish one of them from anyone else if he's just walking past you on the street."

Jeffries brought the car to a halt at a stop light.

"That's about the way I'd heard it," he acknowledged. "What about negative spotting? Is there a chance there might be an undiscovered latent left among our recent fellow students?"

"No chance at all," Cavender said. "The process works both ways. If they aren't, you also know it eventually--and I was sure of everyone but Greenfield over three weeks ago. She's got as tough a set of obscuring defenses as I've ever worked against. But after the jolt she got tonight, she came through clear immediately."

The light changed and the car started up. Jeffries asked, "You feel both of them can be rehabilitated?"

"Definitely," Cavender said. "Another three months of Grady's pseudoyoga might have ruined them for good. But give them around a year to settle out and they'll be all right. Then they'll get the call. It's been worth the trouble. Jones is good medium grade--and that Greenfield! She'll be a powerhouse before she's half developed. Easily the most promising prospect I've come across in six years."

"You're just as certain about Perrie Rochelle?"

"Uh-huh. Protopsi--fairly typical. She's developed as far as she ever will. It would be a complete waste of time to call her. You can't train something that just isn't there."

Jeffries grunted. "Never make a mistake, eh?"

Cavender yawned, smiled. "Never have yet, Reuben! Not in that area."

"How did you explain the sandwich to them--and Greenfield's napkin? They couldn't have bought your stage magic idea."

"No. Told them those were Dr. Al's posthypnotic suggestions. It's the other standard rationalization."

They drove on in silence for a while. Then Jeffries cleared his throat.

"Incidentally," he said. "I should apologize for the slip with the sandwich, even though it turned out to our advantage. I can't quite explain it. I was thinking of other matters at the moment, and I suppose I...."

Cavender, who had been gazing drowsily through the windshield, shook his head.

"As you say, it turned out very well, Reuben. Aside from putting the first crack in Mavis Greenfield's defenses, it shook up Dr. Al to the point where he decided to collect as much as he could tonight, cash the checks, and clear out. So he set himself up for the pinch. We probably gained as much as three or four weeks on both counts."

Jeffries nodded. "I realize that. But...."

"Well, you'd have no reason to blame yourself for the slip in any case," Cavender went on. "The fact is I'd been so confoundedly busy all afternoon and evening, I forgot to take time out for dinner. When that sandwich was being described in those mouth-watering terms, I realized I was really ravenous. At the same time I was fighting off sleep. Between the two, I went completely off guard for a moment, and it simply happened!"

He grinned. "As described, by the way, it was a terrific sandwich. That group had real imagination!" He hesitated, then put out his hand, palm up, before him. "As a matter of fact, just talking about it again seems to be putting me in a mood for seconds...."

Something shimmered for an instant in the dim air wrapped in its green tissue napkin, a second ham sandwich appeared.
"Our people will be arriving to visit us today," the robot said.
"Shut up!" snapped Rod Rankin. He jumped, wiry and quick, out of the chair on his verandah and stared at a cloud of dust in the distance.
"Our people--" the ten-foot, cylinder-bodied robot grated, when Rod Rankin interrupted him.
"I don't care about your fool people," said Rankin. He squinted at the cloud of dust getting bigger and closer beyond the wall of kesh trees that surrounded the rolling acres of his plantation. "That damned new neighbor of mine is coming over here again."

He gestured widely, taking in the dozens of robots with their shiny, cylindrical bodies and pipestem arms and legs laboring in his fields. "Get all your people together and go hide in the wood, fast."
"It is not right," said the robot. "We were made to serve all."
"Well, there are only a hundred of you, and I'm not sharing you with anybody," said Rankin.
"It is not right," the robot repeated.
"Don't talk to me about what's right," said Rankin. "You're built to follow orders, nothing else. I know a thing or two about how you robots work. You've got one law, to follow orders, and until that neighbor of mine sees you to give you orders, you work for me. Now get into those woods and hide till he goes away."
"We will go to greet those who visit us today," said the robot.
"Alright, alright, scram," said Rankin.

The robots in the fields and the one whom Rankin had been talking to formed a column and marched off into the trackless forests behind his plantation.

A battered old ground-car drove up a few minutes later. A tall, broad-shouldered man with a deep tan got out and walked up the path to Rankin's verandah.
"Hi, Barrows," said Rankin.
"Hello," said Barrows. "See your crop's coming along pretty well. Can't figure how you do it. You've got acres and acres to tend, far's I can see, and I'm having a hell of a time with one little piece of ground. I swear you must know something about this planet that I don't know."
"Just scientific farming," said Rankin carelessly. "Look, you come over here for something, or just to gab? I got a lot of work to do."

Barrows looked weary and worried. "Them brown beetles is at my crop again," he said. "Thought you might know some way of getting rid of them."
"Sure," said Rankin. "Pick them off, one by one. That's how I get rid of them."
"Why, man," said Barrows, "you can't walk all over these miles and miles of farm and pick off every one of them beetles. You must know another way."

Rankin drew himself up and stared at Barrows. "I'm telling you all I feel like telling you. You going to stand here and jaw all day? Seems to me like you got work to do."
"Rankin," said Barrows, "I know you were a crook back in the Terran Empire, and that you came out beyond the border to escape the law. Seems to me, though, that even a crook, any man, would be willing to help his only neighbor out on a lone planet like this. You might need help yourself, sometime."
"You keep your thoughts about my past to yourself," said Rankin. "Remember, I keep a gun. And you've got a wife and a whole bunch of kids on that farm of yours. Be smart and let me alone."
"I'm going," said Barrows. He walked off the verandah and turned and spat carefully into the dusty path. He climbed into his ground-car and drove off.

Rankin, angry, watched him go. Then he heard a humming noise from another direction.

He turned. A huge, white globe was descending across the sky. A space ship, thought Rankin, startled.

Police? This planet was outside the jurisdiction of the Terran Empire. When he'd cracked that safe and made off with a hundred thousand credits, he'd headed here, because the planet was part of something called the Clearchan Confederacy. No extradition treaties or anything. Perfectly safe, if the planet was safe.

And the planet was more than safe. There had been a hundred robots waiting when he landed. Where they came from he didn't know, but Rankin prided himself on knowing how to handle robots. He'd appropriated their services and started his farm. At the rate he was going, he'd be a plantation owner before long.

That must be where the ship was from. The robot said they'd expected visitors. Must be the Clearchan Confederacy visiting this robot outpost. Was that good or bad?

From everything he'd read, and from what the robots had told him, they were probably more robots. That was good, because he knew how to handle robots.
The white globe disappeared into the jungle of kesh trees. Rankin waited.
A half hour later the column of his robot laborers marched out of the forest. There were three more robots, painted grey, at the head. The new ones from the ship, thought Rankin. Well, he'd better establish who was boss right from the start.
"Stop right there!" he shouted.
The shiny robot laborers halted. But the three grey ones came on.
"Stop!" shouted Rankin.
They didn't stop, and by the time they reached the verandah, he cursed himself for having failed to get his gun.
Two of the huge grey robots laid gentle hands on his arms. Gentle hands, but hands of superstrong metal.
The third said, "We have come to pass judgement on you. You have violated our law."
"What do you mean?" said Rankin. "The only law robots have is to obey orders."
"It is true that the robots of your Terran Empire and these simple workers here must obey orders. But they are subject to a higher law, and you have forced them to break it. That is your crime."
"What crime?" said Rankin.
"We of the Clearchan Confederacy are a race of robots. Our makers implanted one law in us, and then passed on. We have carried our law to all the planets we have colonized. In obeying your orders, these workers were simply following that one law. You must be taken to our capital, and there be imprisoned and treated for your crime."
"What law? What crime?"
"Our law," said the giant robot, "is, Help thy neighbor."

Contents

BESIDE STILL WATERS
BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

When people talk about getting away from it all, they are usually thinking about our great open spaces out west. But to science fiction writers, that would be practically in the heart of Times Square. When a man of the future wants solitude he picks a slab of rock floating in space four light years east of Andromeda. Here is a gentle little story about a man who sought the solitude of such a location. And who did he take along for company? None other than Charles the Robot.

Mark Rogers was a prospector, and he went to the asteroid belt looking for radioactives and rare metals. He searched for years, never finding much, hopping from fragment to fragment. After a time he settled on a slab of rock half a mile thick.

Rogers had been born old, and he didn't age much past a point. His face was white with the pallor of space, and his hands shook a little. He called his slab of rock Martha, after no girl he had ever known.

He made a little strike, enough to equip Martha with an air pump and a shack, a few tons of dirt and some water tanks, and a robot. Then he settled back and watched the stars.

The robot he bought was a standard-model all-around worker, with built-in memory and a thirty-word vocabulary. Mark added to that, bit by bit. He was something of a tinkerer, and he enjoyed adapting his environment to himself.

At first, all the robot could say was "Yes, sir," and "No, sir." He could state simple problems: "The air pump is laboring, sir." "The corn is budding, sir." He could perform a satisfactory salutation: "Good morning, sir."

Mark changed that. He eliminated the "sirs" from the robot's vocabulary; equality was the rule on Mark's hunk of rock. Then he dubbed the robot Charles, after a father he had never known.

As the years passed, the air pump began to labor a little as it converted the oxygen in the planetoid's rock into a breathable atmosphere. The air seeped into space, and the pump worked a little harder, supplying more.

The crops continued to grow on the tamed black dirt of the planetoid. Looking up, Mark could see the sheer blackness of the river of space, the floating points of the stars. Around him, under him, overhead, masses of rock drifted, and sometimes the starlight glinted from their black sides. Occasionally, Mark caught a glimpse of Mars or Jupiter. Once he thought he saw Earth.

Mark began to tape new responses into Charles. He added simple responses to cue words. When he said, "How does it look?" Charles would answer, "Oh, pretty good, I guess."

At first the answers were what Mark had been answering himself, in the long dialogue held over the years. But, slowly, he began to build a new personality into Charles.
Mark had always been suspicious and scornful of women. But for some reason he didn't tape the same suspicion into Charles. Charles' outlook was quite different.

"What do you think of girls?" Mark would ask, sitting on a packing case outside the shack, after the chores were done.

"Oh, I don't know. You have to find the right one." The robot would reply dutifully, repeating what had been put on its tape.

"I never saw a good one yet," Mark would say.

"Well, that's not fair. Perhaps you didn't look long enough. There's a girl in the world for every man."

"You're a romantic!" Mark would say scornfully. The robot would pause—a built-in pause—and chuckle a carefully constructed chuckle.

"I dreamed of a girl named Martha once," Charles would say. "Maybe if I would have looked, I would have found her."

And then it would be bedtime. Or perhaps Mark would want more conversation. "What do you think of girls?" he would ask again, and the discussion would follow its same course.

Charles grew old. His limbs lost their flexibility, and some of his wiring started to corrode. Mark would spend hours keeping the robot in repair.

"You're getting rusty," he would cackle.

"You're not so young yourself," Charles would reply. He had an answer for almost everything. Nothing involved, but an answer.

It was always night on Martha, but Mark broke up his time into mornings, afternoons and evenings. Their life followed a simple routine. Breakfast, from vegetables and Mark's canned store. Then the robot would work in the fields, and the plants grew used to his touch. Mark would repair the pump, check the water supply, and straighten up the immaculate shack. Lunch, and the robot's chores were usually finished.

The two would sit on the packing case and watch the stars. They would talk until supper, and sometimes late into the endless night.

In time, Mark built more complicated conversations into Charles. He couldn't give the robot free choice, of course, but he managed a pretty close approximation of it. Slowly, Charles' personality emerged. But it was strikingly different from Mark's.

Where Mark was querulous, Charles was calm. Mark was sardonic, Charles was naive. Mark was a cynic, Charles was an idealist. Mark was often sad; Charles was forever content.

And in time, Mark forgot he had built the answers into Charles. He accepted the robot as a friend, of about his own age. A friend of long years' standing.

"The thing I don't understand," Mark would say, "is why a man like you wants to live here. I mean, it's all right for me. No one cares about me, and I never gave much of a damn about anyone. But why you?"

"Here I have a whole world," Charles would reply, "where on Earth I had to share with billions. I have the stars, bigger and brighter than on Earth. I have all space around me, close, like still waters. And I have you, Mark."

"Now, don't go getting sentimental on me--"

"I'm not. Friendship counts. Love was lost long ago, Mark. The love of a girl named Martha, whom neither of us ever met. And that's a pity. But friendship remains, and the eternal night."

"You're a bloody poet," Mark would say, half admiringly. "A poor poet."

Time passed unnoticed by the stars, and the air pump hissed and clanked and leaked. Mark was fixing it constantly, but the air of Martha became increasingly rare. Although Charles labored in the fields, the crops, deprived of sufficient air, died.

Mark was tired now, and barely able to crawl around, even without the grip of gravity. He stayed in his bunk most of the time. Charles fed him as best he could, moving on rusty, creaking limbs.

"What do you think of girls?"

"I never saw a good one yet."

"Well, that's not fair."

Mark was too tired to see the end coming, and Charles wasn't interested. But the end was on its way. The air pump threatened to give out momentarily. There hadn't been any food for days.

"But why you?" Gasping in the escaping air. Strangling.

"Here I have a whole world--"

"Don't get sentimental--"
"And the love of a girl named Martha."
From his bunk Mark saw the stars for the last time. Big, bigger than ever, endlessly floating in the still waters of space.
"The stars ..." Mark said.
"Yes?"
"The sun?"
"--shall shine as now."
"A bloody poet."
"A poor poet."
"And girls?"
"I dreamed of a girl named Martha once. Maybe if--"
"What do you think of girls? And stars? And Earth?" And it was bedtime, this time forever.
Charles stood beside the body of his friend. He felt for a pulse once, and allowed the withered hand to fall. He walked to a corner of the shack and turned off the tired air pump.
The tape that Mark had prepared had a few cracked inches left to run. "I hope he finds his Martha," the robot croaked, and then the tape broke.
His rusted limbs would not bend, and he stood frozen, staring back at the naked stars. Then he bowed his head.
"The Lord is my shepherd," Charles said. "I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me ..."

Contents

THE HUNTED HEROES
By ROBERT SILVERBERG

The planet itself was tough enough--barren, desolate, forbidding; enough to stop the most adventurous and dedicated. But they had to run head-on against a mad genius who had a motto: Death to all Terrans!

"Let's keep moving," I told Val. "The surest way to die out here on Mars is to give up." I reached over and turned up the pressure on her oxymask to make things a little easier for her. Through the glassite of the mask, I could see her face contorted in an agony of fatigue.

And she probably thought the failure of the sandcat was all my fault, too. Val's usually about the best wife a guy could ask for, but when she wants to be she can be a real flying bother.

It was beyond her to see that some grease monkey back at the Dome was at fault--whoever it was who had failed to fasten down the engine hood. Nothing but what had stopped us could stop a sandcat: sand in the delicate mechanism of the atomic engine.

But no; she blamed it all on me somehow: So we were out walking on the spongy sand of the Martian desert. We'd been walking a good eight hours.
"Can't we turn back now, Ron?" Val pleaded. "Maybe there isn't any uranium in this sector at all. I think we're crazy to keep on searching out here!"

I started to tell her that the UranCo chief had assured me we'd hit something out this way, but changed my mind. When Val's tired and overwrought there's no sense in arguing with her.

I stared ahead at the bleak, desolate wastes of the Martian landscape. Behind us somewhere was the comfort of the Dome, ahead nothing but the mazes and gullies of this dead world.
"Try to keep going, Val." My gloved hand reached out and clumsily enfolded hers. "Come on, kid. Remember--we're doing this for Earth. We're heroes."

She glared at me. "Heroes, hell!" she muttered. "That's the way it looked back home, but, out there it doesn't seem so glorious. And UranCo's pay is stinking."

"We didn't come out here for the pay, Val."
"I know, I know, but just the same--"

It must have been hell for her. We had wandered fruitlessly over the red sands all day, both of us listening for the clicks of the counter. And the geigers had been obstinately hushed all day, except for their constant undercurrent of meaningless noises.

Even though the Martian gravity was only a fraction of Earth's, I was starting to tire, and I knew it must have
been really rough on Val with her lovely but unrugged legs.

"Heroes," she said bitterly. "We're not heroes--we're suckers! Why did I ever let you volunteer for the Geig Corps and drag me along?"

Which wasn't anywhere close to the truth. Now I knew she was at the breaking point, because Val didn't lie unless she was so exhausted she didn't know what she was doing. She had been just as much inflamed by the idea of coming to Mars to help in the search for uranium as I was. We knew the pay was poor, but we had felt it a sort of obligation, something we could do as individuals to keep the industries of radioactives-starved Earth going. And we'd always had a roving foot, both of us.

No, we had decided together to come to Mars--the way we decided together on everything. Now she was turning against me.

* * * * *

I tried to jolly her. "Buck up, kid," I said. I didn't dare turn up her oxy pressure any higher, but it was obvious she couldn't keep going. She was almost sleep-walking now.

We pressed on over the barren terrain. The geiger kept up a fairly steady click-pattern, but never broke into that sudden explosive tumult that meant we had found pay-dirt. I started to feel tired myself, terribly tired. I longed to lie down on the soft, spongy Martian sand and bury myself.

I looked at Val. She was dragging along with her eyes half-shut. I felt almost guilty for having dragged her out to Mars, until I recalled that I hadn't. In fact, she had come up with the idea before I did. I wished there was some way of turning the weary, bedraggled girl at my side back into the Val who had so enthusiastically suggested we join the Geigs.

Twelve steps later, I decided this was about as far as we could go.

I stopped, slipped out of the geiger harness, and lowered myself ponderously to the ground. "What'samatter, Ron?" Val asked sleepily. "Something wrong?"

"No, baby," I said, putting out a hand and taking hers. "I think we ought to rest a little before we go any further. It's been a long, hard day."

It didn't take much to persuade her. She slid down beside me, curled up, and in a moment she was fast asleep, sprawled out on the sands.

Poor kid, I thought. Maybe we shouldn't have come to Mars after all. But, I reminded myself, someone had to do the job.

A second thought appeared, but I squelched it:

Why the hell me?

I looked down at Valerie's sleeping form, and thought of our warm, comfortable little home on Earth. It wasn't much, but people in love don't need very fancy surroundings.

I watched her, sleeping peacefully, a wayward lock of her soft blonde hair trailing down over one eyebrow, and it seemed hard to believe that we'd exchanged Earth and all it held for us for the raw, untamed struggle that was Mars. But I knew I'd do it again, if I had the chance. It's because we wanted to keep what we had. Heroes? Hell, no. We just liked our comforts, and wanted to keep them. Which took a little work.

* * * * *

Time to get moving. But then Val stirred and rolled over in her sleep, and I didn't have the heart to wake her. I sat there, holding her, staring out over the desert, watching the wind whip the sand up into weird shapes.

The Geig Corps preferred married couples, working in teams. That's what had finally decided it for us--we were a good team. We had no ties on Earth that couldn't be broken without much difficulty. So we volunteered.

And here we are. Heroes. The wind blasted a mass of sand into my face, and I felt it tinkle against the oxymask. I glanced at the suit-chronometer. Getting late. I decided once again to wake Val. But she was tired. And I was tired too, tired from our wearying journey across the empty desert.

I started to shake Val. But I never finished. It would be so nice just to lean back and nuzzle up to her, down in the sand. So nice. I yawned, and stretched back.

* * * * *

I awoke with a sudden startled shiver, and realized angrily I had let myself doze off. "Come on, Val," I said savagely, and started to rise to my feet.

I couldn't.

I looked down. I was neatly bound in thin, tough, plastic tangle-cord, swathed from chin to boot-bottoms, my arms imprisoned, my feet caught. And tangle-cord is about as easy to get out of as a spider's web is for a trapped fly.

It wasn't Martians that had done it. There weren't any Martians, hadn't been for a million years. It was some Earthman who had bound us.

I rolled my eyes toward Val, and saw that she was similarly trussed in the sticky stuff. The tangle-cord was still
fresh, giving off a faint, repugnant odor like that of drying fish. It had been spun on us only a short time ago, I
realized.

"Ron--"

"Don't try to move, baby. This stuff can break your neck if you twist it wrong." She continued for a moment to
struggle futilely, and I had to snap, "Lie still, Val!"

"A very wise statement," said a brittle, harsh voice from above me. I looked up and saw a helmeted figure
above us. He wasn't wearing the customary skin-tight pliable oxysuits we had. He wore an outmoded, bulky
spacesuit and a fishbowl helmet, all but the face area opaque. The oxygen cannisters weren't attached to his back as
expected, though. They were strapped to the back of the wheelchair in which he sat.

Through the fishbowl I could see hard little eyes, a yellowed, parchment-like face, a grim-set jaw. I didn't
recognize him, and this struck me odd. I thought I knew everyone on sparsely-settled Mars. Somehow I'd missed
him.

What shocked me most was that he had no legs. The spacesuit ended neatly at the thighs.
He was holding in his left hand the tanglegun with which he had entrapped us, and a very efficient-looking
blaster was in his right.

"I didn't want to disturb your sleep," he said coldly. "So I've been waiting here for you to wake up."
I could just see it. He might have been sitting there for hours, complacently waiting to see how we'd wake up.
That was when I realized he must be totally insane. I could feel my stomach-muscles tighten, my throat constrict
painfully.

Then anger ripped through me, washing away the terror. "What's going on?" I demanded, staring at the half of a
man who confronted us from the wheelchair. "Who are you?"

"You'll find out soon enough," he said. "Suppose now you come with me." He reached for the tanglegun,
flipped the little switch on its side to MELT, and shot a stream of watery fluid over our legs, keeping the blaster
trained on us all the while. Our legs were free.

"You may get up now," he said. "Slowly, without trying to make trouble." Val and I helped each other to our
feet as best we could, considering our arms were still tightly bound against the sides of our oxysuits.

"Walk," the stranger said, waving the tanglegun to indicate the direction. "I'll be right behind you." He
holstered the tanglegun.

I glimpsed the bulk of an outboard atomic rigging behind him, strapped to the back of the wheelchair. He
fingered a knob on the arm of the chair and the two exhaust ducts behind the wheel-housings flamed for a moment,
and the chair began to roll.

Obediently, we started walking. You don't argue with a blaster, even if the man pointing it is in a wheelchair.

* * * * *

"What's going on, Ron?" Val asked in a low voice as we walked. Behind us the wheelchair hissed steadily.
"I don't quite know, Val. I've never seen this guy before, and I thought I knew everyone at the Dome."

"Quiet up there!" our captor called, and we stopped talking. We trudged along together, with him following
behind; I could hear the crunch-crunch of the wheelchair as its wheels chewed into the sand. I wondered where we
were going, and why. I wondered why we had ever left Earth.

The answer to that came to me quick enough: we had to. Earth needed radioactives, and the only way to get
them was to get out and look. The great atomic wars of the late 20th Century had used up much of the supply, but
the amount used to blow up half the great cities of the world hardly compared with the amount we needed to put
them back together again.

In three centuries the shattered world had been completely rebuilt. The wreckage of New York and Shanghai
and London and all the other ruined cities had been hidden by a shining new world of gleaming towers and flying
roadways. We had profited by our grandparents' mistakes. They had used their atomics to make bombs. We used
ours for fuel.

It was an atomic world. Everything: power drills, printing presses, typewriters, can openers, ocean liners,
powered by the inexhaustible energy of the dividing atom.

But though the energy is inexhaustible, the supply of nuclei isn't. After three centuries of heavy consumption,
the supply failed. The mighty machine that was Earth's industry had started to slow down.

And that started the chain of events that led Val and me to end up as a madman's prisoners, on Mars. With
every source of uranium mined dry on Earth, we had tried other possibilities. All sorts of schemes came forth.
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every source of uranium mined dry on Earth, we had tried other possibilities. All sorts of schemes came forth.
Project Sea-Dredge was trying to get uranium from the oceans. In forty or fifty years, they'd get some results, we
hoped. But there wasn't forty or fifty years' worth of raw stuff to tide us over until then. In a decade or so, our power
would be just about gone. I could picture the sort of dog-eat-dog world we'd revert back to. Millions of starving,
freezing humans tooth-and-clawing in it in the useless shell of a great atomic civilization.
So, Mars. There's not much uranium on Mars, and it's not easy to find or any cinch to mine. But what little is there, helps. It's a stopgap effort, just to keep things moving until Project Sea-Dredge starts functioning.

Enter the Geig Corps: volunteers out on the face of Mars, combing for its uranium deposits.

And here we are, I thought.

After we walked on a while, a Dome became visible up ahead. It slid up over the crest of a hill, set back between two hummocks on the desert. Just out of the way enough to escape observation.

For a puzzled moment I thought it was our Dome, the settlement where all of UranCo's Geig Corps were located, but another look told me that this was actually quite near us and fairly small. A one-man Dome, of all things!

"Welcome to my home," he said. "The name is Gregory Ledman." He herded us off to one side of the airlock, uttered a few words keyed to his voice, and motioned us inside when the door slid up. When we were inside he reached up, clumsily holding the blaster, and unscrewed the ancient spacesuit fishbowl.

His face was a bitter, dried-up mask. He was a man who hated.

The place was spartanly furnished. No chairs, no tape-player, no decoration of any sort. Hard bulkhead walls, rivet-studded, glared back at us. He had an automatic chef, a bed, and a writing-desk, and no other furniture.

Suddenly he drew the tanglegun and sprayed our legs again. We toppled heavily to the floor. I looked up angrily.

"I imagine you want to know the whole story," he said. "The others did, too."

Valerie looked at me anxiously. Her pretty face was a dead white behind her oxymask. "What others?"

"I never bothered to find out their names," Ledman said casually. "They were other Geigs I caught unawares, like you, out on the desert. That's the only sport I have left--Geig-hunting. Look out there."

He gestured through the translucent skin of the Dome, and I felt sick. There was a little heap of bones lying there, looking oddly bright against the redness of the sands. They were the dried, parched skeletons of Earthmen. Bits of cloth and plastic, once oxymasks and suits, still clung to them.

Suddenly I remembered. There had been a pattern there all the time. We didn't much talk about it; we chalked it off as occupational hazards. There had been a pattern of disappearances on the desert. I could think of six, eight names now. None of them had been particularly close friends. You don't get time to make close friends out here. But we'd vowed it wouldn't happen to us.

It had.

"You've been hunting Geigs?" I asked. "Why? What've they ever done to you?"

He smiled, as calmly as if I'd just praised his house-keeping. "Because I hate you," he said blandly. "I intend to wipe every last one of you out, one by one."

I stared at him. I'd never seen a man like this before; I thought all his kind had died at the time of the atomic wars.

I heard Val sob, "He's a madman!"

"No," Ledman said evenly. "I'm quite sane, believe me. But I'm determined to drive the Geigs--and UranCo--off Mars. Eventually I'll scare you all away."

"Just pick us off in the desert?"

"Exactly," replied Ledman. "And I have no fears of an armed attack. This place is well fortified. I've devoted years to building it. And I'm back against those hills. They couldn't pry me out." He let his pale hand run up into his gnarled hair. "I've devoted years to this. Ever since--ever since I landed here on Mars."

"What are you going to do with us?" Val finally asked, after a long silence.

He didn't smile this time. "Kill you," he told her. "Not your husband. I want him as an envoy, to go back and tell the others to clear off." He rocked back and forth in his wheelchair, toying with the gleaming, deadly blaster in his hand.

We stared in horror. It was a nightmare--sitting there, placidly rocking back and forth, a nightmare.

I found myself fervently wishing I was back out there on the infinitely safer desert.

"Do I shock you?" he asked. "I shouldn't--not when you see my motives."

"We don't see them," I snapped.

"Well, let me show you. You're on Mars hunting uranium, right? To mine and ship the radioactives back to Earth to keep the atomic engines going. Right?"

I nodded over at our geiger counters.

"We volunteered to come to Mars," Val said irrelevantly.
"Just what is it you're after?" I said, stalling, stalling.
"Atomics cost me my legs," he said. "You remember the Sadlerville Blast?" he asked.
"Of course." And I did, too. I'd never forget it. No one would. How could I forget that great accident--killing hundreds, injuring thousands more, sterilizing forty miles of Mississippi land--when the Sadlerville pile went up?
"I was there on business at the time," Ledman said. "I represented Ledman Atomics. I was there to sign a new contract for my company. You know who I am, now?"
I nodded.
"I was fairly well shielded when it happened. I never got the contract, but I got a good dose of radiation instead. Not enough to kill me," he said. "Just enough to necessitate the removal of--" he indicated the empty space at his thighs. "So I got off lightly." He gestured at the wheelchair blanket.
I still didn't understand. "But why kill us Geigs? We had nothing to do with it."
"You're just in this by accident," he said. "You see, after the explosion and the amputation, my fellow-members on the board of Ledman Atomics decided that a semi-basket case like myself was a poor risk as Head of the Board, and they took my company away. All quite legal, I assure you. They left me almost a pauper!" Then he snapped the punchline at me.
"They renamed Ledman Atomics. Who did you say you worked for?"
I began, "Uran--"
"Don't bother. A more inventive title than Ledman Atomics, but not quite as much heart, wouldn't you say?" He grinned. "I saved for years; then I came to Mars, lost myself, built this Dome, and swore to get even. There's not a great deal of uranium on this planet, but enough to keep me in a style to which, unfortunately, I'm no longer accustomed."
* * * * *
He consulted his wrist watch. "Time for my injection." He pulled out the tanglegun and sprayed us again, just to make doubly certain. "That's another little souvenir of Sadlerville. I'm short on red blood corpuscles."
He rolled over to a wall table and fumbled in a container among a pile of hypodermics. "There are other injections, too. Adrenalin, insulin. Others. The Blast turned me into a walking pin-cushion. But I'll pay it all back," he said. He plunged the needle into his arm.
My eyes widened. It was too nightmarish to be real. I wasn't seriously worried about his threat to wipe out the entire Geig Corps, since it was unlikely that one man in a wheelchair could pick us all off. No, it wasn't the threat that disturbed me, so much as the whole concept, so strange to me, that the human mind could be as warped and twisted as Ledman's.
I saw the horror on Val's face, and I knew she felt the same way I did.
"Do you really think you can succeed?" I taunted him. "Really think you can kill every Earthman on Mars? Of all the insane, cockeyed--"
Val's quick, worried head-shake cut me off. But Ledman had felt my words, all right.
"Yes! I'll get even with every one of you for taking away my legs! If we hadn't meddled with the atom in the first place, I'd be as tall and powerful as you, today--instead of a useless cripple in a wheelchair."
"You're sick, Gregory Ledman," Val said quietly. "You've conceived an impossible scheme of revenge and now you're taking it out on innocent people who've done nothing, nothing at all to you. That's not sane!"
His eyes blazed. "Who are you to talk of sanity?"
* * * * *
Uneasily I caught Val's glance from a corner of my eye. Sweat was rolling down her smooth forehead faster than the auto-wiper could swab it away.
"Why don't you do something? What are you waiting for, Ron?"
"Easy, baby," I said. I knew what our ace in the hole was. But I had to get Ledman within reach of me first.
"Enough," he said. "I'm going to turn you loose outside, right after--"
"Get sick!" I hissed to Val, low. She began immediately to cough violently, emitting harsh, choking sobs. "Can't breathe!" She began to yell, writhing in her bonds.
That did it. Ledman hadn't much humanity left in him, but there was a little. He lowered the blaster a bit and wheeled one-hand over to see what was wrong with Val. She continued to retch and moan most horribly. It almost convinced me. I saw Val's pale, frightened face turn to me.
He approached and peered down at her. He opened his mouth to say something, and at that moment I snapped my leg up hard, tearing the tangle-cord with a snicking rasp, and kicked his wheelchair over.
The blaster went off, burning a hole through the Dome roof. The automatic sealers glued-in instantly. Ledman went sprawling helplessly out into the middle of the floor, the wheelchair upended next to him, its wheels slowly
revolving in the air. The blaster flew from his hands at the impact of landing and spun out near me. In one quick
motion I rolled over and covered it with my body.

* * * * *

Ledman clawed his way to me with tremendous effort and tried wildly to pry the blaster out from under me, but
without success. I twisted a bit, reached out with my free leg, and booted him across the floor. He fetched up against
the wall of the Dome and lay there.

Val rolled over to me.

"Now if I could get free of this stuff," I said, "I could get him covered before he comes to. But how?"

"Teamwork," Val said. She swivelled around on the floor until her head was near my boot. "Push my oxymask
off with your foot, if you can."

I searched for the clamp and tried to flip it. No luck, with my heavy, clumsy boot. I tried again, and this time it
snapped open. I got the tip of my boot in and pried upward. The oxymask came off, slowly, scraping a jagged red
scratch up the side of Val's neck as it came.

"There," she breathed. "That's that."

I looked uneasily at Ledman. He was groaning and beginning to stir.

Val rolled on the floor and her face lay near my right arm. I saw what she had in mind. She began to nibble the
vile-tasting tangle-cord, running her teeth up and down it until it started to give. She continued unfailingly.

Finally one strand snapped. Then another. At last I had enough use of my hand to reach out and grasp the
blaster. Then I pulled myself across the floor to Ledman, removed the tanglegun, and melted the remaining tangle-
cord off.

My muscles were stiff and bunched, and rising made me wince. I turned and freed Val. Then I turned and faced
Ledman.

"I suppose you'll kill me now," he said.

"No. That's the difference between sane people and insane," I told him. "I'm not going to kill you at all. I'm
going to see to it that you're sent back to Earth."

"No!" he shouted. "No! Anything but back there. I don't want to face them again--not after what they did to me-
-"

"Not so loud," I broke in. "They'll help you on Earth. They'll take all the hatred and sickness out of you, and
turn you into a useful member of society again."

"I hate Earthmen," he spat out. "I hate all of them."

"I know," I said sarcastically. "You're just all full of hate. You hated us so much that you couldn't bear to hang
around on Earth for as much as a year after the Sadlerville Blast. You had to take right off for Mars without a
moment's delay, didn't you? You hated Earth so much you had to leave."

"Why are you telling all this to me?"

"Because if you'd stayed long enough, you'd have used some of your pension money to buy yourself a pair of
prosthetic legs, and then you wouldn't need this wheelchair."

Ledman scowled, and then his face went belligerent again. "They told me I was paralyzed below the waist. That
I'd never walk again, even with prosthetic legs, because I had no muscles to fit them to."

"You left Earth too quickly," Val said.

"It was the only way," he protested. "I had to get off--"

"She's right," I told him. "The atom can take away, but it can give as well. Soon after you left they developed
atomic-powered prosthetics--amazing things, virtually robot legs. All the survivors of the Sadlerville Blast were
given the necessary replacement limbs free of charge. All except you. You were so sick you had to get away from
the world you despised and come here."

"You're lying," he said. "It's not true!"

"Oh, but it is," Val smiled.

I saw him wilt visibly, and for a moment I almost felt sorry for him, a pathetic legless figure propped up against
the wall of the Dome at blaster-point. But then I remembered he'd killed twelve Geigs--or more--and would have
added Val to the number had he had the chance.

* * * * *

"You're a very sick man, Ledman," I said. "All this time you could have been happy, useful on Earth, instead of
being holed up here nursing your hatred. You might have been useful, on Earth. But you decided to channel
everything out as revenge."

"I still don't believe it--those legs. I might have walked again. No--no, it's all a lie. They told me I'd never
walk," he said, weakly but stubbornly still.

I could see his whole structure of hate starting to topple, and I decided to give it the final push.
"Haven't you wondered how I managed to break the tangle-cord when I kicked you over?"
"Yes--human legs aren't strong enough to break tangle-cord that way."
"Of course not," I said. I gave Val the blaster and slipped out of my oxysuit. "Look," I said. I pointed to my smooth, gleaming metal legs. The almost soundless purr of their motors was the only noise in the room. "I was in the Sadlerville Blast, too," I said. "But I didn't go crazy with hate when I lost my legs."
Ledman was sobbing.
"Okay, Ledman," I said. Val got him into his suit, and brought him the fishbowl helmet. "Get your helmet on and let's go. Between the psychs and the prosthetics men, you'll be a new man inside of a year."
"But I'm a murderer!"
"That's right. And you'll be sentenced to psych adjustment. When they're finished, Gregory Ledman the killer will be as dead as if they'd electrocuted you, but there'll be a new--and sane--Gregory Ledman." I turned to Val.
"Got the geigers, honey?"
For the first time since Ledman had caught us, I remembered how tired Val had been out on the desert. I realized now that I had been driving her mercilessly--me, with my chromium legs and atomic-powered muscles. No wonder she was ready to fold! And I'd been too dense to see how unfair I had been.
She lifted the geiger harnesses, and I put Ledman back in his wheelchair.
Val slipped her oxymask back on and fastened it shut.
"Let's get back to the Dome in a hurry," I said. "We'll turn Ledman over to the authorities. Then we can catch the next ship for Earth."
"Go back? Go back? If you think I'm backing down now and quitting you can find yourself another wife! After we dump this guy I'm sacking in for twenty hours, and then we're going back out there to finish that search-pattern. Earth needs uranium, honey, and I know you'd never be happy quitting in the middle like that." She smiled. "I can't wait to get out there and start listening for those tell-tale clicks."
I gave a joyful whoop and swung her around. When I put her down, she squeezed my hand, hard.
"Let's get moving, fellow hero," she said.
I pressed the stud for the airlock, smiling.
THE END
want to swing about the Sun in this as our tomb for all eternity. At least we eat and drink at the mines, even though the
whips of the drivers hurry us on to an early death."

"You're crazy, Nizzo," harshly retorted Winford. "You know what they do when escaped prisoners are brought
back, or come of their own free will. The Universe knows nothing of the caged saurians in the warden's gardens, nor
of the incorrigible prisoners that go to feed them. But I know—we all of us know. Far better to remain out here and
die whole, than to be devoured alive by a slobbering horror."

A heated argument ensued among the men below. Presently Nizzo looked up again.

"But you have no plan," he shouted at the Earthman. "We have followed you blindly so far, and here we are off
the traffic lanes. Our only hope of being picked up now is one of space patrol ships. And short shrift may we expect
from them!"

Winford scowled impatiently.

"Listen, men," he began. "This is a desperate venture, I know, and I picked every one of you carefully. You are
not common scum of the prison mines. Every man of you can be depended upon to put through a daring escape of
this nature. Every man of you is an innocent victim of the rotten politicians and corrupt officials that now hold sway
in the Three Planets. Take Jarl there, for example." He indicated a big, patient, resigned Martian. "He is under life
sentence in the penal mines simply because his brother-in-law wanted his lands and wealth. As for myself, I had a
sister who suffered the misfortune of being seen and coveted by Silas Teutoberg, a member of the Earth Council...."

He choked at the thought, his pale face rigid with emotion. Those below saw the flash of his lambent eyes. He
controlled himself with an effort, and continued:

"I have said nothing of any plan beyond that of making our escape in this prison tender off Mercury, but I had a
plan behind that. It is true that we seem to be off the regular traffic lanes, but space liners between Venus and Earth
just now are cutting in quite close to Mercury, due to the position of the three planets in their orbits. This formed the
basis of the whole venture.

"During the three interplanetary days we have floated out here, I have repeatedly scanned the Void, thinking
every minute we would sight a craft we could reach. But so far luck has been against us. All I ask is that you do not
allow yourselves to be discouraged, for sooner or later we'll get a break."

A chorus of enthusiastic approval answered him. Winford sighed with relief, then stared abruptly through the
window and gave a shout. The others below swarmed up the ladder and crowded into the tiny control nest. Winford
pointed.

Far off against the black depths of space toward Venus gleamed the tiny, elliptical, silvery hull of a ship,
bearing slightly toward them. Although sharply outlined, the craft was hundreds of miles away as the men realized.
Winford checked it swiftly through the telescope distance calculator, determined its speed, and rapidly formed his
plan.

"There are plenty of space suits in the lockers," he said tersely. "Get into them. Stand by the air-lock. You, Jarl,
get into the lock and take a cable with an electro-magnet anchor. Lash yourself to it. When I give the signal by
blinking the lights in the lock, open the outer door and leap across to the other ship. I know you risk death from their
rays, but it is our only chance. Clamp the anchor against the side of the ship and locate the emergency entrance
lock."

"Suppose there is none?" interrupted Jarl stoically.

"Chances are there will be. The interplanetary treaties call for them on most ships since those five hundred
passengers perished trying vainly to enter a liner after their own ship was smashed by a meteor out near Jupiter
several years ago. Anyway, it's our only chance. You, Nizzo and Ragna, enter the air-lock with Jarl so that if he
misses, you can pull him back. Now hurry. I'll have to maneuver this tub around so that I can approach the ship, if
possible, without being noticed."

* * * * *

The others scuttled back down the ladder, leaving Winford to rapidly work out his final calculations. The ship,
traveling at a rate of six thousand miles an hour, would miss their little sphere by about a hundred miles. The ship
was probably a slow speed freighter, a guess that was supported by the lack of port-holes in the hull.

It was a ticklish task that Winford faced. He could either approach the freighter from against the sun, trusting
that the navigation officer on duty would fail to notice the dark blot of the little tender against the blinding glare. Or
he could get on the far side of the ship and approach it, concealed by its black shadow. He decided on the latter plan.

The freighter was coming up fast. Winford eased the accelerator open, and moved off at right angles to its line
of progress to place it between him and the sun. If the officer in charge of the freighter should see the tiny dot go
shooting presently across his path, he would doubtless mistake it for a wandering meteor. As soon as he crossed the
path of the big ship, Winford slowly turned his little craft toward the protecting shadow of his prospective victim,
and picked up speed as quickly as he dared until the little tender was traveling at the same speed as the freighter.
Lucky it was for him that the big craft was not a mail liner, for if it had been, the little ball could never have gained speed enough to equal it.

The shadow of the freighter presently enveloped the little ship, and the two hung side by side. Winford eased the tender in toward the big craft, fully realizing that the meteor warning dial in the control room of the freighter would hint at his presence by its pronounced fluctuation. But there was no help for it; he could only take the chance that the navigator in charge would not investigate. Winford peered up anxiously at the windows of the control room. Apparently the little craft had not yet been discovered.

Less than a hundred yards now separated the two craft. Winford flashed his signal to the air-lock. A moment later a dark blob that shut off the light of the stars in depths below floated across the gap from the tender to the freighter. The electric meter on the control board registered a sudden fluctuation as the electro-magnet anchor attached itself to the hull of the big ship.

Winford snapped off the propulsion beams, seized two ray pistols that lay on the chart table, and ducked down the ladder. His companions were standing before the inner door of the air-lock in their bulging space suits, awaiting his order to leave the tender. He quickly got into a suit, clamped on the helmet and screwed tight the connections. Then he opened the door of the air-lock and motioned the others into it, following the last man in.

Nizzo and Ragna were waiting there, and as the inner door closed, automatically opening the outer door, they pointed to the cable stretching away across forty yards of empty space to the side of the big freighter. Winford could make out faintly the form of Jarl, who was clambering cautiously up the bulging side of the ship on hands and knees, seeking the emergency air-lock. Winford beckoned to the others to follow, and leaped out into space along the cable.

It was a terrifying experience, for no matter how often a man made such a trip, there was always the primitive fear of falling into those millions upon millions of miles of space below where the stars gleamed, red, green, white and blue in the cold depths. Yet a man had no weight. He merely pulled himself along the cable, which kept him from getting lost.

He reached the bulging side of the hull and continued upward on hands and knees, now held to it by its own attraction for his body. The others followed, and scattered out seeking the emergency entrance lock.

At the end of an hour they were in despair. There was no emergency entrance lock! Winford bitterly resigned himself to their fate. This was the end of their daring attempt. He must go forward now to the control room windows and attract the attention of the navigating officer. It meant surrender and subsequent death in the teeth of the caged saurians, but if they remained much longer where they were they would freeze to death anyway, for the batteries that warmed their suits were running down under the continued strain, and when they ceased to function, the deadly cold of interstellar space would claim them. He managed to make known his intentions to the others and was starting forward when Fate took a hand.

The prison tender ship, which was still floating at the end of its cable at the side of the freighter, relinquished itself to the play of the forces that rule the measureless void and began to set up an orbit of its own about the bigger ship. It came to the end of its tether and swung gently against the hull of the freighter, sending a violent vibration through it; then it rebounded and struck with another crash which was utterly soundless to the stranded men on the outside of the hull, who, nevertheless, felt the vibration plainly.

Winford halted abruptly. The crew inside the ship would investigate. Fate was offering the desperate men on the outside another chance. He turned and beckoned to the others and hurried aft toward the regular air-lock, which was operated only from inside the ship. Hastily he placed the men about the outer door. Then they waited.

Five minutes later it opened, and two men in space suits crawled out. Jarl captured the first man single-handed, and Nizzo and Ragna, with perfect teamwork, overpowered the second before he realized what was taking place. Within a minute the men crowded into the air-lock, and shut the outer portal. Automatically, the inner door slid open.

Winford stepped out into the passageway with his ray pistols, covering the half dozen members of the crew who gaped at the intruders in speechless astonishment. One man recovered his wits and started to run. Winford's pistol stabbed a ray after him, and he collapsed. The other members of the crew silently raised their hands in surrender and were herded into a nearby stateroom and locked in, including the two in space suits who had been captured on the hull outside.

"Overpower and imprison the crew at once," Winford ordered, as he emerged from his space suit. "Jarl, you take charge, and work through the ship. Miss no one. Bind them, imprison them, if you can, and if you must, use sterner measures. Remember you are now pirates, and if we don't capture this ship, the ship will capture us. I'll go ahead alone to the control room and introduce myself to the officers there. When you have cleaned things up, join me."
Captain Robers was peering out through the window at the dark blob of the space tender near the rear of the big freighter when the door of the control room opened softly and Winford slipped inside with leveled ray pistols. The two navigation officers on duty gasped in astonishment. Captain Robers whirled around. His momentary amazement gave way to wrath.

"Who the devil are you, and what do you want?" he bellowed.

Winford's eyes blazed coldly. The ray pistols in his hands twitched meaningly.

"Civility first, Captain. Hands off those instruments, gentlemen. Stand up. Face the windows. Thank you."

With catlike quickness Winford leaped behind the chart table. A glance showed that the ship was holding to its course with unchecked speed. Only the meteor detector fluctuated from the presence of the little space ship outside. No worry there. Disintegrator rays would soon dissolve it, and with it the last visible evidence of their presence on the ship.

"Now, Captain, you may turn about facing me. I want a little information."

"You'll sniff gas for this!" snarled the officer. "This is piracy pure and simple. Who are you, anyway?"

Winford smiled ironically. Captain Robers' eyes widened suddenly and he paled slightly, as he recognized the dirty white uniform.

"The mines of Mercury!" he ejaculated. "We received a heliogram not twenty-four hours ago warning us of your escape. You're Evan Winford of Earth!"

Winford bowed slightly.

"At your service, Captain. My six companions are even now trussing up the remainder of your crew down below. Don't choke, Captain. You are in no danger, unless you make it yourself. I desire a little information about the Universe. You see I have been out of touch for the last three years during my enforced sojourn on Mercury."

Captain Robers glared at Winford.

"Tell me, Captain, who are you, and what is this craft?"

The officer thrust out his chin stubbornly, then glanced at the pistol covering him and changed his mind.

"Captain Robers. The freighter is the Golden Fleece."

"Port?"

"New York. I am homeward bound with a cargo from Ceres of the Asteroids."

Winford's eyes gleamed momentarily.

"Iridium, eh?"

Captain Robers declined to answer. The valuable metal, which was found mostly in abundance among the Asteroids and particularly on Ceres, had proved the bait that lured pirates in flocks from all parts of the Universe to prey on the freighters that carried it, usually under heavy guard. The Golden Fleece had obviously been trying to slip through under the camouflage of an ordinary tramp freighter when Winford and his followers boarded her. Robers saw no reason for trying to lie about Ceres, since Winford would discover it later when he examined the log. Winford, however, did not press the question about the cargo.

"Who is the owner, Captain?"

"The Interstellar Transportation Company, New York, Silas Teutoberg, president."

Winford leaped to his feet.

"Repeat that name, Captain," he ordered harshly.

"Silas Teutoberg," sullenly complied the officer. "But don't be so excited. He has already resigned."

"Why?"

A crafty light appeared in the captain's eyes. He sensed a slight advantage in retaining this knowledge himself.

"I decline to answer," he stated.

The lambent flames leaped ominously in Winford's eyes. He toyed with the ray pistol expressively, then glanced up at a sudden interruption. The control room door had opened, admitting Jarl and Ragna.

"The crew is all accounted for," announced Jarl. "We imprisoned a hundred men and have control."

"Very good, Jarl," replied Winford calmly. "Ragna, take these two navigating officers down and lock them up with the rest. Jarl, you remain here. I have a little task for you."

"Awah," replied Jarl, using the Martian term for "very good, sir."

"Captain Robers here is going to strip off his clothing and pass out through the air-lock into space." Winford spoke each word with cold precision.

The officer jerked up his head in sudden terror. He had once witnessed the modern equivalent for the ancient piratical sentence of walking the plank and the vivid memory rose before him. He saw again the nude man cowering inside the air-lock as the inner door shut, the wafting out into interstellar space of his struggling body as the atmosphere inside the lock rushed out of the outer opening door, and the fatal bloating of the body from the sudden..."
pressure from within. The horror of it unlocked the officer's tongue.

"I'll answer, I'll answer!" he cried. "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me why Silas Teutoberg is resigning as president of the Interstellar Transportation Company."

In the momentary silence that followed, Jarl's eyes narrowed with sudden intensity. His interest escaped Winford, who was watching Robers closely. The officer gulped with relief.

"Teutoberg has been named governor of the new emigration colonies the United States is establishing on Ganymede," he explained hurriedly. "The Earth Council, which recently took over the most fertile provinces on the third moon of Jupiter, with the full approval of the Interplanetary Council, has named him for the post. The position is nearly the same as that of an absolute monarch. But he could not hold a government post and retain his executive position with the Interstellar people, so he resigned."

Winford eyed him skeptically. Captain Robers, now greatly agitated, gestured frantically toward the chart table. "I am telling you the truth!" he assured Winford fervently. "You'll find somewhere on the table a copy of the Heliogram News which tells of his departure from New York less than twelve hours ago in a specially chartered liner with his staff and friends for New Chicago, on Ganymede. It also tells of his approaching marriage to Princess Irkeen, daughter of King Donossus, a political marriage that will assure Teutoberg's position with the natives."

"Poor girl," muttered Winford under his breath, searching among the loose papers on the chart table for the copy of the news which was received every twelve hours by automatic helioprinter from New York millions of miles away. He read the article about Teutoberg through and laid aside the paper. Turning to the charts he jotted down a few hasty calculations, and stepped to the controls where he set a new course for the "iron mike" of the space freighter to follow.

"Captain Robers, I have changed my mind about having you go out into space from the air-lock," he announced, turning again to the anxious officer. "We will hold you prisoner with your men and later on will set you down on one of Jupiter's smaller satellites--Callisto, if possible, since the living conditions there are quite satisfactory. Word will be sent to Mars of where you can be found. All of your crew, excepting those who wish to sign on with me, will be freed with you. I and my six companions are hardly enough to operate such a craft as this. Incidentally, we are appropriating the Golden Fleece and its cargo. If the Interstellar people object, they may present the bill to Silas Teutoberg, and he can deduct it from the income my property yields him."

Captain Robers glanced up curiously at the harsh bitterness that crept into Winford's voice. Then his glance shifted to Jarl, and he was amazed to see the malevolent expression that appeared on the Martian's face as he listened to Winford's words. The moment passed, and Jarl silently escorted the officers below to be locked up with the rest of his crew.

* * * * *

Three weeks later, Earth time, the Golden Fleece slipped into the atmosphere of Callisto, the fourth satellite of mighty Jupiter, which swung in its orbit a million and a quarter miles from the great planet. Far off to the west, separated by two million miles of empty space, floated Ganymede, the third satellite, on which the people of the United States were now gaining a foothold with their newly planted colonies.

The big freighter, under the engineering genius of Agar, had made a marvelously speedy journey from its original position just outside the orbit of Mercury to this point nearly four hundred and fifty million miles away from the little planet. Winford studied the ground below. He was only partly acquainted with the topography of Callisto and wanted to be sure to pick a spot where Captain Robers and his men could be certain of surviving until help arrived. His eye picked out a satisfactory spot close beside the Gnan River in one of the stunted conifer forests of the planet. Swiftly he dropped the big freighter until it hovered but a few yards above the ground.

A freight port-hole was opened, and Captain Robers, accompanied by half his crew, prepared to descend. They were all bundled in heavy garments, for the temperature of Callisto, never high, frequently drops to sub-zero readings. Winford stood at the port and watched the men climb down the rope ladder to the ground below.

Robers was last to go. He faced Winford bitterly, for this escaped lifer from Mercury had stolen not only his ship, but half his crew as well, and the prospect of a liberal share of the rich iridium cargo in the hold.

"You'll regret this day!" snarled the captain. "I'll be in the front row of spectators when you sniff the death gas in the glass execution cage on Mars. Hundreds have tried this sort of thing before you, and every man of them has come finally to the cage."

"You're only delaying us, Captain Robers," replied Winford coldly. "I am in a hurry to be on my way. Kindly move down the ladder and join your men. Your hand weapons and food supplies will be dropped by parachute as we leave. I might add that in a short time I expect to be in a position to broadcast an S O S message for you which should bring rescue ships here to Callisto for you. Good-by."

He turned away, leaving the officer to descend the ladder in baffled fury to the ground below, where his men huddled together in the unfamiliar cold, and stared half fearful at the far-away sun glowing like a yellow arc-light in
the depths of space half a billion miles away.

When the rising ship reached the thousand-foot level, the weapons and food were dropped by parachute, and
the port-hole closed and locked. Winford hurried forward to the control room where the two navigators, who had
signed with him for a hundred and twentieth share of the iridium each, were already pointing the nose of the ship up
through the purple heavens toward Ganymede.

"Open her up! Use the emergency propulsion beams!" ordered Winford. "We are overdue now for my tryst
with this new governor at New Chicago!"

The officers gazed at him in awe, wondering what desperate thing he planned at the new colonial capital.

Winford was poring over the maps of New Chicago six hours later in the chart room when one of the
navigation officers touched him on the shoulder.

"Battle sphere rapidly overhauling us from sunward, sir," said the man. "Approaching us against the glare of
sunlight until it was so close when we discovered it that escape is now impossible. I'd say it is one of the new 4-Q
 heavies of the Interplanetary Council patrol fleet."

Winford hurried to the telescope. As his anxious eye took in the spherical outline of the battle craft, showing as
a silvery crescent to the rear and starboard of them, he recognized it as one of the heavily armored spheres of the
Interplanetary Council's fleet with the new long range K-ray disintegrator guns.

Winford seized a telescope speed calculator. The sphere was coming up far too rapidly to permit the Golden
Fleece to pick up speed soon enough to escape—although he was confident the freighter could do it now, since Agar
had changed its propulsion machinery.

Perhaps the commander of the battle sphere was merely curious about the Golden Fleece since it appeared to be
an ordinary tramp freighter with no distinguishing emblems or other identification, and was coming close to give her
a better look. Or perhaps he was hurrying to some destination and his nearness to the Golden Fleece was merely
accidental.

Whatever the cause, there remained but one thing to do, and that was to keep the freighter on its course as
though nothing out of the ordinary was taking place. Winford turned to the communication board and cut in the
universal radio wave. The instrument was silent. He sighed. At least the commander of the battle sphere was not
trying to communicate with him.

Winford turned back to the window again. The sphere was quite close now, and its speed was dropping rapidly.
Suddenly the radio loud-speaker hummed to life.

"Ahoy there, aboard the freighter," sounded a stern, determined voice. "This is the Interplanetary Council battle
sphere, Eagle, nearing you. We are coming aboard you to investigate. Make ready your air-lock to receive us.
Attempt nothing hostile. Hundred-kilowatt ray guns are trained on you."

Winford cut in the microphone and answered with the customary "O. K." reply; then he turned to the two
white-faced navigators.

"Carry on as usual," he said grimly. "Perhaps we can fool them once they are aboard."

Then he turned to the phone connecting with the crew's quarters. He hurriedly explained the situation to Jarl
and instructed him to receive the boarding party at the air-lock.

The big battle sphere was drawing close alongside. Magnet grapnels shot across the narrow space between the
two craft and gripped the side of the freighter, followed by the cable bridge along which the boarding party presently
came wavering their way to the air-lock of the freighter.

Winford counted fifty men, then turned away dejectedly. This was no ordinary inspection party, but a prize
crew coming aboard. He sat down wearily. Just as victory seemed almost within his grasp—had been actually in his
hand when he had started to Ganymede—this battle sphere popped up out of nowhere like an inescapable doom to
strike him and his companions down. He gritted his teeth. Some way, somehow he would still win out. He and his
fellows had come too far to be cheated of liberty now.

The door of the control room opened, and a smart young officer in gold and gray of the Interplanetary Council
Marine service entered, accompanied by three privates with drawn pistols who took their positions near the door.
Winford noted the clean-cut lines and fresh features of the officer and felt that under different circumstances he
would like to know him.

"I am Lieutenant Commander 6666-A," the officer introduced himself, using the designation the Interplanetary
Council required of all their fighting men. "You are Evan Winford, are you not?"

Winford nodded.

"You nearly got away with it, Winford," complimented the officer with a boyish grin. "I almost admire you for
it. But you made at least one fatal error."

"What was that?" asked Winford curiously.
"When you put Captain Robers and his men off this ship they smuggled out with them a hand-operated helio set. Each man carried a part. Within an hour after you left they had it assembled and were cranking out S O S signals. We happened to be but a million miles off Callisto and picked up their message. At once our commander decided to start out and rope in the Golden Fleece before you did any further damage. And here we are."

Winford cursed himself under his breath. Fool that he had been not to have had the men and their baggage searched more carefully before he allowed them to leave the freighter. Nizzo was responsible for that. He should be, but it was too late now. No use crying over spilled milk. He forced a grin and shrugged.

"'The best laid plans of mice and men--'" he quoted philosophically. "I hope the entire blame for this wild venture is put on my shoulders where it belongs when we are brought to trial. These two navigators here and the rest of the men are in no way responsible. I forced every man of them under pain of death to join me."

The young officer shook his head and smiled.

"Not a chance of that, Winford. You'll all stand trial alike, and you know it. You are rather a strange sort of pirate, it seems to me, to offer yourself as a sacrifice for your men. I'd say you are too tender-hearted for buccaneering in the Void."

"If I had succeeded in reaching New Chicago, you might have gained a different impression of me," retorted Winford, his lambent eyes flaming at the thought. "I have sworn to kill Silas Teutoberg, the new governor of Ganymede, because he sent me to die in the mines of Mercury for a crime I never committed."

The young officer laughed.

"You can set your mind at rest about him, Winford. You'll all stand trial alike, and you know it. But I'd say the chance is gone in more ways than one. Teutoberg is undoubtedly dead, and you are on your way to the gas execution cage on Mars. Incidentally, you are now my prisoner. I'll not lock you in the hold with the rest of your crew, but will confine you to your stateroom."

Winford surveyed him curiously.

"I warn you that I'll take advantage of any opportunity to escape," he said.

The officer grinned.

"That's to be expected. But any other man doomed to die. But the coronium doors, locks and walls of the Golden Fleece's staterooms are practically escape proof, and with two of my marines on guard outside your door, with orders to kill if you break out, I feel reasonably safe."

Imprisoned in his stateroom, Winford threw himself on his bunk. Too early to attempt anything yet, he considered. It would be better to wait a few days—at least until Eagle had departed. Besides, he would have to work out a plan for escape.

He glanced up at the port-hole. The sunlight was shifting. He arose and peered out. Twenty-five miles away he could see the battle sphere standing out across the Void on a sunward course. The Golden Fleece was turning her nose toward distant Mars, a long journey, since the Red Planet was on the opposite side of the sun, seven hundred million miles away.

Winford knew what was taking place. The commander of the battle sphere was again resuming his mission of searching for the missing liner, while the young officer and his crew were taking the Golden Fleece with its iridium cargo and pirate crew directly to Mars.

Meantime the radio and audio-vision announcers on all the planets were broadcasting the sensational news of the capture of the escaped convict-pirates and their forthcoming trial and certain execution on Mars. Winford turned bitterly away from the port-hole.

* * * * *

One week had passed. Winford started up out of a sound sleep. He listened tensely. There was a murmur through the big freighter. He recognized it as the clanging of the great alarm gongs through the hull of the big ship, muffled by the walls of his stateroom. Something was afoot!

He threw off the covers, sprang out on the deck and pulled on his clothes. This might be a break! Those gongs never sounded without plenty of cause.
He pulled a chair to the door, mounted it, and cautiously opening the transom which he had previously loosened, thrust his head out into the passage.

A marine was running down the passage. The guards before Winford's door tried to stop him, but the man ran on. Presently another came along. The guard was more successful.

"Say, Budde, what's all the excitement?" he demanded.

"We've found Teutoberg's liner, or rather, it has found us!" exclaimed the marine. "They say old Teutoberg has trained his heaviest guns on us and is demanding that we surrender. Our skipper doesn't know just what to make of it. He's arguing with Teutoberg by radio that this old tub is in the hands of the law already and that he is taking it to Mars for the piracy court. Teutoberg says he won't be fooled by any such bunk as that; he knows we are all pirates and he is going to have this ship regardless of anything, since it belongs to his line. I've got to be hurrying along. We're getting the big guns ready, the few that we have."

Winford cautiously withdrew his head. His eyes were glowing. The whole scheme was as plain as day now. Teutoberg knew as well as every informed person in the Universe did that the Golden Fleece was in the hands of the Interplanetary Council marines. That talk about being entitled to the freighter because it was owned by his shipping line was so much rubbish. He was protected by insurance. What he wanted was the insurance and the ten million dollars' worth of iridium in the hold as well.

Furthermore, he had intended to have it all along. It was part of his diabolical scheme to put the shipment on an unprotected freighter. Then he had chartered a liner privately for his venture in piracy. When the liner was "lost" he was out searching for the Golden Fleece along the lanes where it should have been had not he, Winford, and his companions captured the craft and sent it hurtling out toward Ganymede. And now Teutoberg had succeeded in trailing it down.

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Winford surveyed the transom pessimistically. Impossible to get through it. If only he had a ray pistol to dissolve the door lock.... The air ventilator! He dropped down on hands and knees and peered under the bunk. The opening seemed large enough to let his shoulders through. If he should become fast in one of the turns of the tunnel it would be all up with him. They'd probably find his body when the ship went into dock for repairs. But this was no time to think of that.

He crawled under the bunk, took out the grating and set it beside the opening. Then he wormed his way into the tunnel. It was a tight fit, but he could move. The first turn should bring him to the branch that opened out on the passage not far from his stateroom door.

Never would he forget that struggle when he forced his cramped, tortured body round the bend in the blackness a fraction of an inch at a time and crawled up the branch. If he was mistaken--but he wasn't. Presently he was looking out of the grating into the passage.

Members of the crew raced back and forth like disturbed ants. From the snatches of conversation that reached him, Winford learned that Teutoberg had succeeded in getting the range of the freighter and was holding her helpless under the imposing muzzles of his heavy disintegrator-ray guns.

The door of the control opened and the boyish commander, his face pale and drawn, thrust out his head.

"They're coming aboard, men," he shouted to the group in the passage below. "I can't stop them. Our only chance may come after they are aboard."

"Why don't you free the pirates and let them help us?" cried one of the men.

"Never," returned the young commander firmly. "They are in our care, and by the gods, we are going to bring them and this ship through safe and sound!"

A moment later he descended the stairs and led his men aft.

Teutoberg displayed a flash of generalship, for his first ten men who came in through the air-lock were pistol experts. They rayed the marines in their tracks and cleared the passage leading to the lock, before the defenders could get organized. A few minutes later the invaders were spreading through the ship, hunting down and ruthlessly slaying the marines whom they outnumbered three to one. Scattered fights to the death took place on all the decks. Winford, snugly ensconced in his air tunnel, raged inwardly as the crackling of the rays and the agonized screams of the wounded and dying came to his ears.

The fighting seemed to be drawing nearer. He risked peeping out. The young commander and half a dozen of his men covering themselves as best they might with the inadequate protector shields of the service, retreated to the foot of the stairs leading up to the control room. As the invaders prepared to mow them down a sudden hush fell on the men and the invaders parted. A huge man stepped out before them. Winford sucked in his breath sharply as he recognized Teutoberg and saw him take a step forward in the direction of the marines.

Teutoberg raised his hand toward Commander 6666-A and spoke.

"Will you surrender, or must my men obliterate you? I would say that you pirates have your backs to the wall."
Surely life is sweet. Why not surrender while you still have it?"
"We're not pirates!" declared the young commander hotly.
Teutoberg sneered.
"It will take more than a gold and gray uniform of the Interplanetary Council military forces to convince me," he retorted. "Uniforms of any kind can be obtained anywhere in the Universe where there happens to be a competent tailor."
"The only pirates, excepting yourselves, aboard this ship are under lock and key," said the commander. "That's where you will be before this matter is settled."
Teutoberg laughed. His manner changed suddenly.
"What a line of talk for a pirate," he commented affably. "Come, youngster, there is no need to sacrifice lives uselessly. Surrender, since you're outnumbered anyway, and let's discuss this thing on a sane basis."
Commander 6666-A hesitated. Winford could scarcely refrain from shouting treachery. Then the marines lowered their shields and rays. Next instant they went down under the charge of the invaders.
The young commander was chalky white when they dragged him bound and helpless to his feet. A trickle of blood made a crimson line from the corner of his mouth, and his eyes sparkled with helpless rage.
"You dirty snake!" he gasped. "You'll sniff gas for this!"
Teutoberg laughed scornfully.
"Take them back to the air-lock and shove them out naked one at a time," he ordered curtly. "That's the way they would have treated us. Save the young bantam for the last. Now, where is this Evan Winford? I have an old score to settle with him."
Up in his air tunnel Winford nodded grimly to himself. Teutoberg's words only added to the proof that he knew all along that the Golden Fleece was in the hands of the Interplanetary marines, for his request for Winford revealed that he had been following the helio reports of the capture of the ship by the marines and the stories being broadcast throughout the Universe of how Winford and Jarl and their pirate companions were being taken with the ship to Mars for piracy and execution.
Neither Commander 6666-A nor his men deigned to answer Teutoberg, but one of his own men had already discovered that Winford was locked in his own stateroom, and he promptly indicated the door.
Teutoberg scowled, drew a pistol in either hand, and strode to the door. One of the men unlocked it, and he kicked it open. He waited expectantly, then advanced cautiously into the room. The sound of his baffled curses filled the passage. Winford grinned mirthlessly.
"Someone dies for this!" shouted Teutoberg, storming out into the passage. "Where is he, I say? Bring me that Martian, Jarl! He'll know, if anyone does. Bring him, I say, and I'll torture the truth out of his big carcass!"

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Winford's grin vanished. His eyes grew anxious as he waited, tense and breathless, until Jarl, with his big hands lashed together behind his back, was brought up from the hold.
"So we meet again, Jarl?" jeered Teutoberg, scowling blackly at him. "Where is this master of yours, this Winford?"
Jarl's eyes met Teutoberg's impassively. All too well he knew the innate cruelty of this Earthman. Some explanation would have to be made to satisfy him. Never a flicker of an eye-lash revealed what that explanation would be, but Jarl glanced stoically at the empty stateroom.
"He did it," he said calmly.
"Did what, you clod?" Teutoberg flung at him savagely.
"Ended his life as he swore he would."
"Suicide? Impossible! Where is the body?"
"He destroyed it together with his life by drinking disintegrator concentrate. He carried a capsule of it when we escaped from Mercury, and I've heard him swear time and again that he would die before he would permit himself to be taken back."
Teutoberg swallowed the story. There was nothing else to do, apparently. He raved and cursed. Once he raised his pistol to Jarl's heart and lowered it again.
"You'll take his place, Martian dog!" he snarled. "By proxy I shall treat him as he deserves, and you shall be the proxy. Back to the hold with you for the present!"
With that Teutoberg whirled about, strode up the stairs and vanished in the control room.
Commander 6666-A and his men were dragged aft to the air-lock, leaving the passage near Winford temporarily empty. He broke out the grating and wormed his way out of the air tunnel, dropping on the floor hands first. He sprang to his feet, and started grimly up the steps to the control room. Inside that room was Teutoberg, a bigger man than himself, and armed, yet Winford, barehanded, cautiously opened the door and stepped inside.
Teutoberg was standing at one side of the room gazing in rapt attention at the slaughter of the helpless marines. One by one he watched them emerge from the air-lock bloated and white in their nakedness with their convulsed limbs already growing rigid in the icy cold of space. Out in the open space between the two ships they hung motionless a few minutes, then swiftly dissolved and vanished under the ray of a small disintegrator gun on the liner.

Teutoberg smiled crookedly.

The door clicked behind him. Teutoberg turned with a startled oath. Winford, foul with grime and his clothing torn to rags, stood there. Teutoberg's eyes widened. Both hands leaped downward for the holstered pistols in his belt. At that instant Winford lunged for him.

One of Teutoberg's hands was now gripping a pistol. Winford struck frenziedly, knocking it from Teutoberg's grasp. The weapon slid under the chart table out of reach. Winford clutched Teutoberg's left hand which held the still holstered pistol.

Suddenly he saw an advantage, and his heart leaped in exultation. Round behind Teutoberg he pivoted—a wrestling trick he had learned as a boy. For an instant they stood back to back. Then with a mighty effort Winford heaved upward relentlessly on his opponent's forearm.

Teutoberg screamed in pain as something snapped in his wrist. The pistol dropped from his nerveless fingers. Winford flicked it out of reach under the table with his toe, but had no chance to reach for it, because Teutoberg had managed to work himself free.

With a bellow of animal rage and with arms flailing like wind-mills he charged at Winford again. Winford met his rush with a rapid series of blows and Teutoberg went down. But up he came, a wild light in his eyes. Again he went down, only to struggle gamely to his feet once more.

Winford was gasping for breath. It amazed him that Teutoberg could endure so much punishment. His arm must be broken and he was terribly battered, yet here he came staggering back for more. Winford now hunched down and, like a crouching animal, advanced slowly toward his enemy. Suddenly he started a right almost from the deck straight for Teutoberg's chin. It connected. Teutoberg was lifted clear of the deck and hurled unconscious against the side of the control room six feet away.

Winford staggered to the communication board and his trembling fingers clutched the air-lock phone.

"Hello, hello!" he gasped. "Teutoberg speaking. Send no more marines out through the lock just now.... Yes, of course this is Teutoberg."

He hung the instrument back on its hook and clung dizzily to the edge of the table. At least the slaughter was halted for the time being.

He would have to act fast. He caught up the big water pitcher from the holder on the wall where it had miraculously escaped the fight, gulped deeply from it, and splattered water down his face and chest. Then he picked up the two pistols from the deck, placed one in his belt and gripped the other firmly as he approached the unconscious Teutoberg.

At the first splash of water in his face Teutoberg groaned and rolled over.

"Get up, you," Winford ordered harshly.

Teutoberg sat up groggily. The sight of the pistol and Winford's eyes brought him out with a sudden shock.

"Get over to that air-lock phone and say just what I tell you to," ordered Winford grimly. "One false word, and I'll ray you plenty."

Teutoberg staggered to his feet obediently and took the phone, for he had read death in Winford's hard eyes.

"Hello, Jarvis?" he asked, his body rigid under the prod of Winford's pistol. "This is Teutoberg.... Yes, I talked a minute ago. I've changed my plans, Jarvis. We've got to get the iridium out of the hold and into the liner as soon as possible, or we'll be sighted by some other craft. Take all the men but ten and go back to the liner. Make ready there for the cargo.... You'll have to clear some cabins; there is more than I thought. There isn't much food aboard here, anyway, and it is better to let the men go to mess right away and start transferring the cargo immediately afterward."

Teutoberg hung up the phone.

"Is that satisfactory?" he asked sullenly.

"It will do," was Winford's terse reply. "Now when the men have gone back to the liner, order two of the remainder to bring up Jarl from the hold to the control room here."

Jarl was as impassive as usual when he entered the control room and beheld Winford in charge there, although his two captors stared in amazement at Teutoberg, bloody and battered, seated against the side of the room with his hands upraised. Jarl calmly disarmed his two captors and closed the door.

"Only eight of Teutoberg's men besides these remain on the Golden Fleece," Winford explained to Jarl. "Take
care of them first, then release the rest of our men from the hold. Tell Agar to take charge of the machinery as soon as possible, and have the gunners stand by for further orders."

"Awah," replied Jarl stoically, and left the control room.

He took care of the eight invaders in his very efficient Martian fashion, for he pistoled them with neatness and dispatch where they stood before the air-lock with the young commander and his remaining two marines, waiting to thrust them out into space. Winford had not instructed Jarl just how to take care of the situation, and the Martian attended to it in his own way. Commander 6666-A, with his arms bound behind his back, stared in amazement as Jarl calmly stepped over the dead bodies and went on his way to release his fellow pirates from the hold.

Up in the control room the radio loud-speaker hummed to life.

"Teutoberg, Teutoberg, are you there?" cried an anxious voice. "Three Interplanetary battle spheres are approaching from the direction of the Earth! They are still two thousand miles away, but they are coming on fast! We're going to cut loose and run for it. If you're not back here in five minutes, you'll have to stay where you are!"

Winford cut in then for Teutoberg, who gulped painfully before speaking.

"Go right ahead," he said in a strained voice. "I'm staying here on the Golden Fleece. I'll--I'll see you later."

"Why didn't you say you'd meet them in the Hereafter?" suggested Winford coldly, as he cut out the microphone. "That's where you are going as soon as Jarl returns. He'll be glad to help you on your way, for he hasn't forgotten the aid you gave his brother-in-law in robbing him and sending him to Mercury."

Teutoberg made no answer.

Things were happening swiftly. Already the liner was lurching forward frantically with every propulsion ray flaming as she started her flight through space from the avenging battle spheres. Red lights twinkled on the control board of the Golden Fleece. Agar, at the generators now, threw in the power. The big freighter leaped ahead like a greyhound, soon reaching a speed that even the swift battle spheres could not equal, thanks to the engineering genius of the half-insane Agar.

Winford glanced around. Teutoberg was already gone. Jarl had taken him down to the air-lock. Winford tried to forget him. There were other things to think of. There were the details of taking the Golden Fleece out to Pluto near the frontiers of the Sun's domain--Pluto, that stronghold of the space pirates where a man could sell an entire planet or any part of it, no questions asked, if he could produce it for the buccaneer kings to bid on. The freighter and its cargo were as good as sold already, and the money they would bring would be more than enough to buy pardons and freedom for everyone in the crew.

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There were many details to consider carefully, but instead Winford found himself thinking of Teutoberg down by the air-lock, stripped of his clothing, ready for his last adventure with life. As much as Winford hated the man, he was forced into an unwilling admiration for his dogged fight in the control room. A mere word in that telephone would save him. Winford shook his head irritably. The man deserved death. Yet again he saw the set features, the final walk into the air-lock. Suddenly Winford found himself at the phone and heard himself giving the order that would save Teutoberg's life. He sat down again, surprised at his own weakness. He was still musing when Jarl entered.

"You couldn't go through with it," observed the big Martian impassively. "I was afraid you couldn't. It is as I have always said of you Earthlings. You think you want revenge, good old ancient vengeance; but when the moment comes and you sit in the high place and can have it, you weaken. Well, you won't have to execute Teutoberg now."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Winford.

"After I received your order and told Teutoberg he wasn't to go out through the lock after all, he grinned. It was an insult, that grin, just as though he knew all along you wouldn't have the nerve to kill him. And while I stood there asking myself if I should not go ahead and shove him out anyway, one of his men--one of the two we captured up here in this room--caught sight of that grin. He screamed something about treachery and Teutoberg betraying him to the pirates, and before I could interfere he drew a knife and stabbed Teutoberg to death right there before all of us. After that there was nothing to do but to heave his body into the air-lock and let it go on out into space."

Far back across the Void in a tiny space sphere which Winford had given him and his two marines to return to the distant battle sphere, Lieutenant Commander 6666-A saw through his telescope the white speck of Teutoberg's body leave the side of the Golden Fleece and wondered what it was.
"They're crazy! They're insane! That mob outside is made up of madmen," Jacob Clark told his young assistant, Bill Towney.
"They'll be battering at the door any minute now, sir," Towney said nervously.
"But why? Why are they doing it? My inventions have advanced the world a hundred years. I've always been a benefactor of man, not a destroyer."
"It's the robots. People are in a rage because they say the robots cause unemployment by replacing workers."
"It's utter nonsense, you know," Clark said impatiently. "Why can't they see that my intelligent, self-controlled robots are the greatest boon the human race has ever received from one man?"
"I don't know, sir, but they don't." Towney paused as the shouting and pounding outside became more intense.
"They demanded that you take the robots out of the labor market and order your factories to stop making them. This is the result of your refusal."
"DOWN WITH CLARK! DOWN WITH THE TIN MEN! DEATH TO THE ROBOT LOVERS!" The furious mob was battering at the door now.
"Really, sir," Towney said, "you should leave here. They'll kill you if you don't!"
"Leave here? I should say not. I'll defy the fools. I'll tell them what I've done for them and make them understand." He glanced nervously at the door. "Besides there's only one door. I couldn't get away now."
"There's the time machine, sir."
"But isn't there some other way? Perhaps if you went out and talked to them...."
"You know there's no other way. Those people believe you've brought disaster to the human race and they mean to kill you. And if you don't hurry they will," Towney said urgently. "The time machine is set for twenty years in the future. Please hurry, sir!"

The door was beginning to give. Clark looked around unhappily and then walked to the time machine. "All right, I'll go. In the future I know the results of my work will be appreciated. I'll be a hero and benefactor of mankind."

Towney heard the door crash and roughly pushed his employer into the time machine as the mob burst through. "Push the starting button, push the starting button. Quick!" he screamed as the first of the mob reached him.

Clark's hand leaped to the control lever just as a brick crashed into his head. His hand completed its motion with more force than he had intended as he sank unconscious to the floor and the machine was set for a thousand years in the future instead of twenty.

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The year three thousand had been a brilliant one for the robots, in fact, the most brilliant since the last human being had died some five hundred years before. They had reached Venus and Mars and were now planning a trip to Jupiter. And this very day, a huge statue of Jacob Clark, the creator and benefactor, was to be dedicated on the site of what once had been his laboratory. It seemed a shame that most of the records concerning him and his time had been lost in one of the great wars that had helped to extinguish the humans. The statue though was good for surely he looked like a robot. One of the few human books still in existence said that the Creator had created in his own image.

It was right at the foot of his own statue that the Guardians of the Shrine found Jacob Clark. They picked up his unconscious, bleeding body and laid it tenderly on a nearby bench. They bent over him with all the gentleness and solicitude that had been installed in his very first models and had been handed down from generation to generation of robots. They wanted to help him but they were very puzzled.
"Perhaps it came from a far part of the earth," one of them said.
"Or maybe a mistake was made at one of the birth factories," said another. "See, it is losing oil at a great rate."
"Perhaps," mused the elder, "it is a new model. At any rate it is a robot and has been damaged. As our great creator taught us, he must be aided. We will take it to the central repair factory in the city."
"But," the first robot protested, "it's awfully bulky to be carried so far."

Being creatures of logic, they thought about it for a moment and then the elder came to a decision that was both effective and reasonable.
"Since he is so bulky, we will disassemble him for transportation purposes," he said as he leaned over and gently twisted off Clark's right arm.

"Rather primitive and messy construction, I'd say," said the second robot as he tenderly unscrewed Jacob Clark's head from his body.
slightly bigger than his terrestrial cousin. Her hair was dark, like that of most Martians, drawn back from her forehead and fastened at the nape of her neck, from there to fall in an abundant, rippling cascade down her slim, straight back. Her figure was like those delicate and ancient creations of Dresden china to be seen in museums, but elastic, and full of strength. She was dressed in the two-piece garment universally worn by both sexes on Mars—a garment, so historians say, that was called "pyjamas" by our forebears.

And she was defiant. In her hand was a stiletto with long, slim blade. Sime made a darting grasp for her wrist and wrung the weapon from her. It fell to the metal floor with a tinkling clatter.

"And now tell me, young lady, what's the meaning of this?"

Suddenly she smiled.

"I came to warn you, Sime Hemingway." She spoke softly and sweetly, and with effortless dignity.

"You came to warn me?"

"You are in grave danger. Your mission here is known, and powerful enemies are preparing to destroy you."

"You talk like you knew something, kid," Sime admitted. "What is my mission here?"

"You have been sent to Mars by the I. F. P. in the guise of a mining engineer. You are to discover what you can about a suspected plot of interplanetary financiers to plunge the Earth and Mars into a war."

"How so?" Sime asked enigmatically, concealing his dismay at the girl's ready reply. Here was inside information with a vengeance!

"Several shiploads of gray industrial diamonds from Venus have been seized by war vessels carrying the insignia of the Martian atmospheric guard."

"Go on!"

"Curiously enough, these raids were so timed that they were witnessed by the news telecasters. All of the people on Earth were thus eye-witnesses, and feeling ran high. Am I right?"

"Go on!"

"And of course you know about the raids on the Martian borium mines by pirates armed with modern weapons. In the fights, some of the pirates' weapons were captured. They bore the ordnance marks of the terrestrial government."

"I'm way ahead of you, girlie!" Sime conceded. "Certain financial interests would like to see a war. They're cookin' up these overt acts to get the people all steamed up till they're ready to fight. I'll go further, since you seem to know all about it anyway, and admit that I'm here to find out just who's back of all this. And how does all that tie up with you hiding in my mist-bath with a long and mean lookin' knife?"

"My usual weapon. Don't you know most of us Martians go armed all the time?"

"Yeh?" Sime grinned skeptically. "And is it a habit of yours to hide in the bedroom of visiting policemen? Come on, kid. I'm going to turn you over to the guard."

For a second it looked as if she would make a dash for the blade glistening there on the floor. But she straightened up, and with a look of infinite scorn said:

"So the mighty policeman of the Sun calls a hotel guard, does he? Please! Believe me, I am myself working for the same object as yourself—the prevention of a horrible war!"

She was pleading now.

"Believe me, you are against forces that you don't understand! I can help you, if you will listen. Let me tell you, the Martian government is itself corrupted. The planetary president, Wilcox, is in alliance with the war party. You will have to fight the police. You will have to fear poison. You will be set upon and killed in the first dark passage. Yet if you help me you may accomplish your object. You must help me!"

"What do you want of me?"

"Help me change our government!"

Sime laughed shortly. He began to suspect that this amazing girl was demented. He thought of the powerfully entrenched rulers of this theoretically republican government. For more than two hundred years, if he remembered rightly, the Martians had been ruled by a small group of rich politicians.

"You propose a revolution?" he asked curiously.

"I propose the return of Princess Sira to the throne!" she declared vehemently. "But enough! Are you going to betray me--I, who have risked much to warn you? Or are you going to let me go?"

Sime looked into her warm, earnest little face. Her lips were parted softly, showing perfect little teeth, and she was breathing quickly, anxiously. Sime was woman hungry, as men of the service often are on the long, lonely trail. He seized her quickly, pressed her little figure to him and kissed her.
For a thrilling instant it seemed that she relaxed. But she tore away, furious, her eyes cold with anger.

"For that," she panted, raging, "you must die!"

She reached the door before he could stop her, and in a trice she was out in the gallery. He raced after her, staring stupidly. Surprisingly, when her escape was assured, she turned back. Her look was still hurt, angry, as she called to him in low tones:

"Look out for Scar Balta, you brute!"

"Who is Scar Balta?" Sime asked himself after locking the door again. The name was not unusual and did not bring any familiar associations to his mind. The given name, Scar, once a nickname, had been in general use for centuries. As for Balta--oh, well--

His mind reverted to the girl again. Her warm, palpitant presence disturbed him.

He composed himself to sleep, strapping his dispatch belt around his waist before crawling into bed. He did not believe that the girl had hidden in his room with murderous intent; rather that she had hoped to inspect and perhaps to steal any papers that he carried. But his last conscious thought of her had nothing to do with her connection with this planet of intrigue, but the soft curve of her throat.

CHAPTER II

Scar Balta

Sime breakfasted on one of the juicy Martian tropical pears, and as he dug into the luscious fruit with his spoon he looked about the spacious dining hall, filled with wide-eyed tourists on their first trip to Mars, blissful and oblivious honeymooners, and a sprinkling of local residents and officials.

Through broad windows of thick glass (for on Mars many buildings maintain an atmospheric pressure somewhat higher than the normal outside pressure) could be seen the north banks of the canal, teeming with swift pleasure boats and heavily loaded work barges. Down the long terraces strolled hundreds of people, dressed in garments of vivid colors and sheer materials suitable to the hot and cloudless days. Brilliant insects floated on wide diaphanous wings, waiting to pounce on the opening blossoms.

But the terrestrial agent felt that in this scene of luxury there was a menace. Out of sight, but instantly available, were frightful engines of destruction, waiting to be mobilized against the Earth branch of the human race. And on that distant green planet were people much like these, unconscious still of the butchery into which they were being deftly maneuvered by calculating psychologists, expert war-makers.

His meal completed, Sime sauntered out into the wide, clean streets of North Tarog. He purchased a desert unionall suit, proof against the heat of day and cold of night, and a wide-brimmed Martian pith helmet. Hailing a taxi, he relaxed comfortably in the cushions.

"Nabar mine," he told the driver.

The driver nosed the vehicle up, over the domed roofs of the city and over the harsh desert landscape. The rounded prow cut through the thin air with a faint whistling, and the fair cultivated area along the canal was soon lost to sight.

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After half an hour the metal mine sheds grew out of the horizon. But even from a distance of several miles Sime could see that everything was not as it should be. There were no moving white specks of the laborers' white fatigue uniforms against the brown rocks, and no clouds of dust from the borium refuse pile.

The levitator screws of the taxi sank from their high whine to a groan, and the wheels came to the ground before the company office. A man in the Martian army uniform came out. His beetle-browed face was truculent, and his hand rested on the hilt of his neuro-pistol.

"No visitors allowed!" snapped the guard.

"I'm not exactly a visitor," Sime objected, but making no move to get out of the taxi. "I'm an engineer sent here by the board of directors to see why the output of this mine has dropped. Where's Mr. Murray?"

"All settled!" the guard retorted. "Murray's in jail for mismanagement of planetary resources, and the mine's been expropriated to the government. Now, you--off!"

The driver needed no further order from his fare. The taxi leaped into the air and tore back toward the city. It was clear that the military rules of Mars brooked no nonsense from the civilian population, and that the latter were well aware of it.

"Fast work!" Sime said to himself with grudging admiration. Murray was a trusted agent of the terrestrial government. It was he who had first uncovered the war cabal. Sime knew his face well from the stereoscopic service record--a bald, placid man of about forty, a bonafide engineer, a spy with an unbroken record of success, until now. And a fighter who asked no odds, who could manage very well on less than an even break. Well, he was up against something now.

They passed the line of shield-ray projectors, North Tarog's first line of defense against an attack of space,
hovered over the teeming streets and parks, and settled on the pavement at the Hotel of the Republic. Sime wanted to go to his room and think things over.

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From the concealment of a doorway an officer with a squad of soldiers came up quickly.
"You are under arrest!" said the officer, placing his hand on Sime's shoulder, while the soldiers rested their hands on their neuro-pistols.
"Would it be asking too much to inquire on what charge?" Sime asked politely.
"Military arrests do not require the filing of charges," the officer explained stiffly. "Come out of there now, Mr. Hemingway."
"I demand to see the terrestrial consul," Sime said, getting out.
"How about my fare?" asked the taxi-driver.
Sime put his hand into his pocket, where he kept a roll of interplanetary script; but the officer restrained him.
"Never mind now," he said ironically. "You are a guest of the government." Then to the driver he added:
"Get on, now! Get on! File your claim at the divisional office."

The driver departed, outwardly meek before the power of the military, and Sime was hustled into an official car. He had little hope that his demand to see the terrestrial consul would be complied with, and this opinion was verified when the car rose into the air and sped over the waters of the canal to South Tarog. It did not pause when it came over the military camps there--the massive ordnance depots in which were stored new and improved killing tools that had long been idle in that irksome interplanetary peace.

They flew on, over the desert, until the Gray Mountains loomed on the horizon. On, over the tumbled rocks, interspersed with the strange red thorny vegetation common in the Martian desert.

Far below them, in a ravine, a cylindrical building was now visible, and toward this the car began to drop. It landed on a level space before the structure. A sliding gate opened, and the car wheeled into a sort of courtyard, protected from the cold of night by an arching roof of glass.

Sime was hustled out and led into an office located on the lower floor of the fortification, or whatever the structure was.

As he saw the man who sat at the desk he gave a startled explanation.
"Colonel Barkins!"
* * * * *

The elderly, white-haired man smiled. He brushed back his hair with a characteristic gesture, and his twinkling blue eyes bored into those of the I. F. P. special officer. The colonel wore the regular uniform of the service; his little skullcap, with the conventionalized sun symbol denoting his rank, was on the table before him. He put out his lean, strong hand.
"Surprised to see me, eh, Hemingway?" he inquired pleasantly.
Sime managed an awkward salute. "I don't quite understand, sir. You gave me my instructions at the Philadelphia space port just before I made the Pleadisia. She's the fastest passenger liner in the solar system: I've barely landed here, and it seems you got here before me. It don't seem right!"

Sime watched the colonel narrowly, a vague suspicion in his mind, and he thought he saw a slight flicker in the man's eye when Sime spoke.

But the colonel answered smoothly, with a hint of reproof.
"Never mind questioning me now, Hemingway. The mission is important. I want to know if you remember every detail of what I told you." He nodded to the men, and they filed out of the room. "Repeat your orders."
"Nothing doing, Colonel!" Sime replied promptly and respectfully. "In fact, Colonel, you can go to hell! This is the first time that a man of the I. F. P. has turned traitor, and if your men hadn't so thoughtfully taken my neuro I'd be pleased to finish you right now!"
"But you observe I have a neuro in my hand," remarked the colonel pleasantly, "and so you will remain standing where you are."
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So saying, he slipped off the white wig he was wearing, wiped his face so that the brown powder came off, and sat, obviously pleased with the success of his masquerade, useless though it was. He was a typical Martian, dark, sleek-haired, coral-skinned.

"I hate to send a man to his death mystified," said the Martian after a moment, "so I'll explain that I am Scar Balta!"
"Scar Balta!"
"You've heard of me?"
"Uh--yes and no," Sime suddenly remembered the girl of the evening before--the imperious little Martian. She
had warned him of Scar Balta.

"If I do say it," said the Martian, "I am the best impersonator in the service of the interests I represent. I did not expect to get information of great value from you, but we do not neglect even the most unpromising leads."

He pressed a button; two Martian soldiers answered promptly.

"Take this man to the cell," Balta ordered. "Provide him with writing materials so that he can write a last message to his family. In the morning take him to the end of the ravine and finish him with your short sword."

"Yes, Colonel!"

"The fellow's a colonel, anyway," Sime thought as they led him away.

They led him downward, along a straight corridor that evidently went far beyond the boundaries of the ravine fortress. In places the walls, adequately lit by the glow-wands the guards carried, were plainly cut out of the solid rock; in others they were masonry, as though the channel were passing through pockets of earth; or--the thought electrified him--through faults or natural caverns.

At last they came to the end. One of the guards unlocked a metal door, motioned his prisoner into the prison cell. A light-wand, badly run down and feeble, with only a few active cells left, gave the only light. As the door slammed behind him, Sime took in the depressing scene.

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The stone walls were mildewed, leprous. The only ventilation was through small holes in the door. Chains, fastened to huge staples in the uneven stone floor, with smooth metal wrist and ankle cuffs, were spaced at regular intervals, and musty piles of canal rushes showed where some forgotten prisoner had dragged out his melancholy last days. Sime was glad they had not chained him down. Probably didn't consider it necessary unless there were many prisoners, who might rush the guards.

"Ho, there, sojer!"

The voice was startling, so hearty and natural in this sad place. Sime saw something coming out of a far corner. It was a man in the blouse and trousers of civilian wear; a bald and good-natured man, with a shocking growth of beard.

"Murray's the name," said this apparition with mock ceremony. "And you?"

"I'm Hemingway, Sime Hemingway. Sergeant Sime Hemingway, to be exact. Suppose you'd like to hear my orders?"

"I don't get you," said Murray, shaking hands.

"I mean," Sime explained elaborately, "that I'd like to know if you're Scar Balta, or really Murray, as you say you are."

The other laughed.

"I'm Murray, all right. Feel this scalp. Natural, ain't it? That's one thing Balta won't do--shave off his hair. Too vain. He'd hate to have the Princess Sira see him that way. Ever hear of her? Say, she's a raving beauty. This Balta'd like to be elected planetary president, see--to succeed Wilcox, who has bigger plans. There's always been a strong sentiment for the old monarchy, anyway. The oligarchy never did go big. Follow me?"

"Yeh; go on."

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"Well, this Princess Sira has ideas. She wouldn't mind sitting on the throne again. Her great-great-grandpa was jobbed and murdered, and the nobles who did it formed a closed corporation and called it a republican government. So Sira started holding audiences, and gained a lot of power. Among the people--even among some of the nobles."

"Get the idea? Scar Balta is one of the electors. If he married Sira he'd have the backing of the monarchists, and of course he's done a lot for the bosses. They'd elect him to head off the monarchists, anyway. Then heigh-ho for a war with the Earth, to kill off a lot of the kickers--and soft pickins in a lot of ways. Neat, huh?"

"Very neat!" Sime assented drily. "But we won't live to see it. Anyway, I won't. They're going to bump me off in the morning."

"As they have a lot of our men," Murray agreed. "But they won't do it in the morning. Or for several days. Look here!"

He held up his hand. On the back of it was what appeared to be a boil.

"But it isn't a boil," Murray explained. "That was done by a stream of water, fine as a needle, under a thousand pounds pressure. They held it there for a minute at a time----I don't know how many times, because I keeled over. Any time I was willing to give them the information they wanted they'd turn it off. Wasn't important info, either. But what is it to them, how much they make me suffer for a trifle?"

Sime couldn't help the lump that rose in his throat. Men like Murray certainly justified the world's faith in the service.

"Listen, old man," Sime said in a low voice, "out in the corridor--"
But Murray squeezed his hand warningly, pulled him to the floor.
"Might as well get some sleep," the old man said in ordinary tones. "Plenty cool here. Let's lie together."
He kept his hold on Sime's wrist, and, by alternately squeezing and releasing, began to talk in a silent telegraphic code.
"Don't say anything of importance," he spelled out. "They have mikes in here to pick up all we say. Probably infra-red telenses too, so they can see what we do."
So Sime told him, as they huddled together in simulated sleep, about the walled passages, and they speculated on the possibility of felling the guards and breaking their way to freedom through some underground cavern. But at last they slept soundly to await the tortures of the next morning.

CHAPTER III
The Price of Monarchy
Had Sime been able to follow and watch the girl he had kissed under such unusual circumstances on the night of his arrival on Mars, he would have been both puzzled and enlightened. After her final warning about Scar Balta she dashed into the luxurious gloom of the passage. At an intersection a maid was awaiting her. She curtseyed as she threw a cape over the girl's shoulder, and together they hurried out into the night.

A magnificently uniformed hotel servant called a private car, drew the vitrine curtains, and saluted as the car lifted sharply into the chilly night air. The car sped across the canal to the jeweled city across the water, to a residence district whose magnificence even the pale night light revealed.

The two women entered a mansion of glittering metal and came to a private apartment.
"Everybody's gone to bed," said the girl, addressing her maid. "That's one thing we can be thankful for."
"Yes, Your Highness. Did you discover anything of importance in the man's room?"
"No. Draw me a bath, Mellie. He--he caught me--and kissed me!"

The maid, with flasks of perfume and aromatic oils in her hand, paused, discreetly impudent.
"You seem not displeased, Your Highness."
"But of that he had no inkling." And Princess Sira laughed. "I left him standing, utterly at a loss. He took me for a common assassin, and yet he wanted to kiss me. That pleased me. But if he had valuable information he kept it. And I promised him death for his kiss."

As Princess Sira, claimant to the throne of a planet, slipped into the tepid waters of her bath, Mellie stood by, her smooth little Martian's face disturbed. For she loved her mistress, and could not comprehend the things she did under ambition's sway.
"Your Highness, couldn't you let your royal friends do these dangerous things for you?"
"For what? For fear? And how could a Martian princess who knows fear lay claim to a throne? No, Mellie, one gets used to it. The enemies of the house of Sira are ever alert. Didn't they murder my father and my mother, and my only brother? My peril in this palace is as great as in the room of a terrestrial detective. Only their fear of the people-"
She was interrupted by the tinkling of a bell. The maid left the alcove, and returned a moment later with the news that Joro, Prince of Hanlon, awaited the princess's pleasure in the ante-room.
"At this hour!" exclaimed the princess. "Did he say what brought him here?"
"Something about a new plot."
"Plots! They fall thicker than rain on Venus. Bid him wait."
Fifteen minutes later, swathed in a trailing orange silk robe that made her look like a Venus orchid, she greeted the prince.
"Greetings, Joro. We seem to have the unusual this night."
The prince, a thin, elderly man of medium stature, smiled admiringly. His sharp features and bright little button eyes gave some hint of the energy which suffused him. Here was a man both ruthless and loyal to his royal house. He addressed her by her given name.
"The hour seems to make no difference with you; Phobos has set, but as long as you are awake there is loveliness enough. I have come, dear one, to tell you that success is ours at last!"

Sira smiled. "I will restrain my joy, my good Joro, until I hear the price."
"Always the same!" Joro chuckled. "A price, 'tis true, but not too heavy, since you are, in a manner, fond of him."
"I've had vague promises from Wilcox," Sira said, with a wry smile. "I would rather trade places with Mellie than be espoused by that madman."
"Not Wilcox, but Scar Balta. He is badly smitten, for which I can not blame him. He has great political power,
and the backing of the military. He could have dictated better terms, but for love of you has yielded, point after point. He wants nothing now but your hand in marriage, and is prepared to cede to the royal cause all the advantages he has gained--"

"Not to mention," Sira interjected, "the royal prestige he will gain with the common people."

Joro laughed, a little impatiently.

"True, true! But after all, what does the support of the people amount to? They are powerless. If you are ever to establish your royal house you must have other help."

"And I suppose," Sira continued sweetly, "that you have also arranged a deal with the central banks and the secret war interests?"

Joro coughed uncomfortably.

"As a matter of fact--you see, my dear princess, there are certain commercial interests--transportation, mining, and so forth. They have defied the power of the bankers. They are likely to upset our whole order of society. They need a set-back. And the military men are chafing at their inaction. The war will be ended before too much harm is done, by agreement of the interplanetary bankers. You see--"

"No!" Sira interrupted him coldly. "No! No! No! Oh, I'm sick of the whole thing! I'm sick of the men I know! I hate Scar Balta, and you too. I would rather be the wife of a common interplanetary patrolman than queen of Mars! I withdraw, now!"

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Joro, struck by her vehemence, paled. The muscles of his jaw lumped. From a pocket he took a portable disk-radio, an inch in diameter, and spoke a few words. From outside there was a sudden uproar, shouts and curses. The draperies moved, as with an outrush of air caused by the careless handling of an airlock, and the temperature dropped suddenly.

Sira was irresolute only a split second. With a cat-like leap she seized a short sword from the wall, made a lunge at the prince. But Joro, the veteran of many a battle of wits and arms, parried the stroke with the thick barrel of his neuro-pistol, caught the girl's wrist and disarmed her. The screams of the maid went unheeded.

From the other parts of the palace came sounds of struggle, the clashing of sword on sword.

"Sira! Sira!" Joro panted, struggling to hold the girl. "You must give up your impractical ideas! Take the world as it is. Do as I tell you and you'll not be sorry."

"I relinquish my claims!" the girl cried fiercely. "To-morrow I will publicly announce that decision. All my life has been spent feeding that hopeless ambition. Now I will be free!"

"I am loyal to the monarchy," Joro grunted, pinioning her arms at last. "I will guard your interest against yourself."

He began to shout:

"Hendricks, Mervin, Carpender, Nassus! Here, to the princess's chamber."

Several men, after further delay and fighting, responded. They wore civilian blouses and trousers, but there was that something in their alert carriage that proclaimed them trained fighting men. One of them sat down with a grunt on the threshold, holding his hand to a bleeding wound under his armpit. He appeared to be mortally wounded.

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Most of the others carried minor wounds, showing that the palace guards had put up a good battle in the sword-play. Both sides had refrained from using the neuro-pistols for fear that the beams, which readily penetrated walls at short range, might injure the princess.

"Let go!" Sira wrenched herself free. "Where is Tolto? Has Tolto turned traitor? How did you get past Tolto?"

"Do not use that ugly word against me. I implore you!" Joro protested. "What we are doing is out of loyalty to the monarchy--not treason. The monarchy is of greater importance than individuals. Consider your duty to the rule of your fathers! As for Tolto--"

He issued a curt command, and there was the sound of movement. Presently four men staggered in, one to each leg, each arm, of the most impressive giant Mars had ever produced--Tolto, to whom there was no god but the one divinity: and Princess Sira was she. Slow of perception, mighty of limb, he had come into her service from some outlying agricultural region of the red planet. His tremendous muscles were hers to command or destroy, as she wished. He would not have consented to this invasion of her home, she knew!

And he had not. Joro had been too wise to try. A dose of marchlor in a glass of wine had done what fifty men could not have accomplished by main strength. Tolto was in a drugged sleep.

Joro said: "He isn't hurt. We will simply send him back to his valley, and you, my dear princess, will do your duty to your subjects!"

And there, though he probably did not know it, Prince Joro harked back to the youth of the human race--the compensatory, atavistic principle that gods, rulers, kings, must hold themselves in readiness as sacrifices for the
good of their subjects. Joro might have been a tribal high priest invoking their dread rule in the dawn of time. The Martians were, for all their scientific advancement, still the descendants of those prehistoric human savages. Sira knew, instinctively, that the people who loved her would nevertheless approve of Joro's judgment.

CHAPTER IV

Torture

When Sime awoke it was to the rattling of the door. Murray stirred. The light was even weaker than before.

"If they offer you a drink, drink heartily!" Murray muttered, sitting up. "I've got an idea it's going to be a hard day."

But they were not offered any water. Instead they were again conducted before Scar Balta, who looked at them morosely. At last he remarked gruffly:

"If you tin sojers weren't so cursed stubborn, you could get yourself a nice berth in the Martian army. Ever consider that?"

"Talk sense!" Sime said contemptuously. "If I threw down the service how could you trust me?"

"That'd be easy," Balta rejoined. "Once the I. F. P. finds out you joined us you'd have to stick with us to save your skin."

He laughed at his prisoners' look of surprise.

"Come, come!" he bantered. "You didn't think that I was ignorant of your purpose here? You, Murray; your spying was excellent, I'll admit. You were the first to give away certain plans of ours. Well, well! We don't hold that against you. Wheels within wheels, eh? It would perhaps astonish certain braided gentleman of our high command to learn that I, a mere colonel, control their destinies. As our ancestors would say, it's dog eat dog.

"Now, how about it? I can make a place for you in my organization. It seems to run to secret service, oddly enough. You will be rewarded far beyond anything you could expect in your present career of chasing petty crooks from Mercury to Pluto and back again."

"Is that all?" Murray asked softly, with a bearded grin.

"Oh no. You will turn over to me all the information you can about the I. F. P. helio code. You will name and describe to me each and every plainclothes operative of the service--and you should have an extensive acquaintance."

"Before you answer," Murray said quietly at Sime's side, "let me suggest that you consider what's in store for us--or you--if you don't take up this offer."

"Why, you--" Sime whirled in astonished fury upon his companion. "Didn't you--"

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But he did not complete his reference to last night's surreptitious conversation. It seemed that he saw the merest ghost of a flicker in Murray's left eye.

"--Didn't you say you'd stick no matter what they did?" he finished lamely.

Murray hung his head.

"I'm getting along," he muttered. "Not as young as I used to be. This life is getting me nowhere. Why be a fool? Come along with me!"

"Why, you dirty, double-crossing hound!" Sime's exasperation knew no bounds. For an instant he had believed that Murray was enacting a little side-play in the pursuit of a suddenly conceived plan. But he looked so obviously hangdog--so guiltily defiant....

Crack! Sime's fist struck Murray's solid jaw, scraping the skin off his knuckles, but Murray swayed to the blow, sapping its force, and came in to clinch. They rolled on the floor. Murray twisted Sime's head painfully, bit his ear.

But in the next split second he was whispering:

"Keep your head, Sime. Can't you see I'm stringing him? Take that!" And he planted a vicious short hook to Sime's midriff.

Balta had squalled orders, and now Martian soldiers were bursting the buttons off their uniforms in the scrimmage to separate the battlers. Bruised and battered, they were dragged apart. Murray's one eye was now authentically closed, and rapidly coloring up. Unsteadily he got to his feet. With mock delicacy he threw a kiss to his late antagonist.

"Farewell, Trueheart!" He bowed ironically, and the men all laughed.

Balta grinned too. "Still the same mind, Hemingway? All right, men, take him up to the observation post. Here, Murray, have a drink."

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Sime was led up a seemingly endless circular staircase. After an interminable climb he saw the purplish Martian sky through the glass doors of an airlock. Then they were outside, in the rarefied atmosphere that sorely tried Sime's lungs, still laboring after the fight and long ascent. The Sun, smaller than on Earth but intensely bright,
struck down vindictively.

"A good place to see the country," laughed the corporal in charge. "Off with his clothes!"

It was but a matter of seconds to strip Sime's garment from him. They dragged him to an upright post, one of several on the roof, and with his back to the post, tied his wrists behind it with rawhide. His ankles they also tied, and so left him.

It was indeed an excellent point of vantage from which to see the country. The fortress was high enough to clear the nearby cliffs of low elevation, and on all sides the Gray Mountains tumbled to the horizon. To the north, beyond that sharply cut, ragged horizon, lay the big cities, the industrial heart of the planet. To the south, at Sime's back, was the narrow agricultural belt, the region of small seas, of bitter lakes, of controlled irrigation. Here the canals, natural fissures long observed by astronomers and at first believed to be artificial, were actually put to the use specified by ancient conjecture, just as further north they had been preempted as causeways of civilization. Sime painfully worked his way around the post so that he could look south. But here too nothing met his eye but the orange cliffs with their patches of gray lichen. There was no comfort to be had in that desolate landscape. Nevertheless, Sime kept moving around, to keep the post between himself and the Sun. Already it was beginning to scorch his skin uncomfortably.

By the time it was directly overhead Sime had stopped sweating. The dry atmosphere was sucking the moisture out of his body greedily, and his skin was burned red. His suffering was acute.

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The Martian day is only a little more than a day on Earth, but to Sime that afternoon seemed like an eternity. Small and vicious, with deadly deliberation, the sun burned its way down a reluctant groove in the purple heavens. Long before it reached the horizon, Sime was almost unconscious. He did not see its sudden dive into the saw-edge of the western mountains--knew only that night had come by the icy whistle of the sunset wind that stirred and moaned for a brief interval among the rocks. The keen, thin wind that first brought relief and then new tortures, to be followed by freezing numbness.

Above, in the blackness, the stars burned malignantly. Drug to his misery they were, those familiar constellations, which are about the only things that look the same on all planets of the solar system. But they were not friendly. They seemed to mock the motionless human figure, so tiny, so inconsequential, that stared at them, numerous tiny pinpricks of light, so remote.

There was no dawn, but after aeons Sime saw the familiar green disk of Earth coming up in the east, one of the brightest stars. Sime fancied he saw the tiny light flick of the moon. There would be a game of blackjack going on somewhere there about now. He groaned. The Sun would not be far behind now.

But he must have slept. The Sun was up before he was aware of it. A man with a caduceus on his blouse collar was holding his wrist, feeling his pulse. He seemed to be a medical officer of the Martian army. His smooth, coral face was serious as he prodded Sime's shriveled tongue.

"Water, quick!" he snapped,--"or he's done for."

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His head was tipped back and water poured into his mouth, but Sime could not swallow. The soldier with the bucket poured dutifully, however, almost drowning the helpless man. It helped, anyway; and Sime returned to half-consciousness. A few minutes later, when Scar Balta came to inquire if he had changed his mind, Sime was able to curse thickly. And around noon, when Murray, jauntily dressed in the uniform of a Martian captain, bid him a cheerful good-by, Sime was almost fluent.

His torture had now reached the pitch of exquisite keenness that made it something spiritual. Solicitously they kept him alive, and far back in his mind Sime wondered why they bothered to do that. Couldn't they be satisfied with what they could learn from Murray?

So passed the second day, and the third.

On the fourth day Sime was able to drink water freely, and to eat the food they placed into his mouth, a fact which the medical officer noted. The torture was wearing itself out. Sime's body was emaciated, stringy, burnt black. But his extraordinary toughness was weathering conditions that would kill most men. Balta shook his head in wonderment when this was reported to him.

"Can't wait any longer for him. Must get back to Tarog. You might as well put him out of his misery. By the way, I'm convinced that Murray is double-timing me. But I'll attend to that personally."

From his post of pain Sime saw the official car leave toward Tarog. Had he known of Balta's remark he would not have been puzzled so much by what he saw.

As the ship was about to disappear over the ragged northern horizon, Sime's bleared eyes saw, or he thought they saw, a human figure silhouetted against the pitiless sky. It was a tiny-seeming figure at that distance, but it was clear-cut in the rare atmosphere. Then it plunged from sight.
"Somebody taken for a ride," he muttered, half grateful for the brief distraction from his own misery.

The medical officer, to whom the long climb was arduous, delayed his mission to the roof, and that was why, several hours later, Sime was still alive to see another ship appear to the north. It was large, sumptuous, evidently a private yacht. Its course would bring it within a mile of the fortress, and with sudden wild hope Sime realized that if he were seen he might expect relief. He began to tug at his bonds. They were tough, but they would stretch a little. His haphazard movements had already worn them against the rough post, and now he began to struggle violently. If he could only get his hands loose, he could wave....

The thongs cut into his flesh, but his wrists were numb and swollen, and he did not mind the pain. His muscles stood out hard and sharp, and with a supreme effort, aided by the growing brittleness of the rawhide in the dry atmosphere, he snapped his bonds.

The ship was now quite near, and he waved frantically. He fancied he saw movement back of the pilot ports. Faintly he heard the hum of the levitators. Now it turned--no! It yawed, now toward him, now away, purposelessly, like a ship in distress. It made an abrupt downward plunge that scraped a crag, and just missed a canyon wall.

Again it twisted, came down with a long, twisting motion, struck a rock upside down, slitting a long gash in its skin, clattered to the rocks so close to the fortress that Sime could not see it. Now desperation gave the prisoner superhuman strength. Regardless of the pain, he burst the thongs about his ankles, tottered to the edge of the roof.

There was a battle going on below. Men seemed to be running, shouting. Someone, using a massive plate of metal as a partial shield against the neuro-pistols, was creating havoc. Sime tried to focus his giddy eyes on the scene. It seemed always to be turning to the left, to be circling around him. With tottering steps he tried to follow it, keeping to the brink of that lofty tower--uselessly. Now it was rocking, flying straight toward him, and, gratefully, Sime gave up the struggle, closed his eyes.

CHAPTER V
The Wrath of Tolto

Tolto awoke from his drugged sleep in the cargo room of a pleasure ship. He was thoroughly trussed up, for Prince Joro's servants had a wholesome respect for the giant's strength. Even in his supine position power was evident in every line of his great torso, revealed through great rents in his blouse. His thighs were as big around as an ordinary man's body, and the smooth pink skin of his mighty arms and shoulders rippled with every movement that brought into play the broad, flat bands of muscle underneath.

A chain of beryllium steel was passed around Tolto's waist, and close in front of him the smooth, shining cuffs of steel around his wrist were locked to the chain. Short lengths of chain led to cargo ringbolts in the floor, holding fast Tolto's cuffed ankles.

To anyone looking at Tolto, just then, these extreme precautions might have seemed absurd. Prince Joro, however, was a good judge of men. It would have pleased him best if Tolto had been quietly eased from his sleep into death, but he knew that such a murder would have destroyed forever his chances of winning Sira to his plans. He meant to see Tolto safely and demonstrably returned to his home valley, and in order to accomplish this the more surely, he had him loaded aboard his own ship, and instructed his captain to take the little used desert route.

Tolto lifted his hands as far as he could and looked wonderingly at them. His child-like face, with the soft, agate eyes, expressed only bewilderment. He lifted his voice, a powerful bass.

"Hi, hi! Let Tolto go! The princess may call!"

There was no answer, only the rhythmic hum of the levitators. Again Tolto cried out. But there was no answering sound. The Sun poured in through the ports, and when presently the ship changed its course, the light fell full in his face, almost blinding him. The giant endured this without complaint.

Several hours later, however, his patience snapped, and he roared and bellowed so loudly that a door opened and a frightened face appeared. Back of it was the chromium glitter of the ship's galley.

"Be still, big one!" admonished the cook. "The captain is resting. He will have you chained standing if you disturb him with your bellowing."

"I wanted only to know where I am," Tolto replied, subsiding meekly. "I drank overmuch and some larksters tied me up like this. Release me, so that if the princess calls I may answer."

"The princess will have to call loudly for you to hear," the cook answered jocularly.

"The princess need only whisper for Tolto to hear," the giant boasted, "Come now, shrimp, take these things off!"

"Are you really as dumb as that?" the cook marveled. "Why, sonny boy, the princess couldn't even hear you! Don't you know where you're goin'?"

Vague alarm began to creep over Tolto.
"Where is she?" he asked anxiously. "Isn't she in this ship? Princess Sira never goes anywhere without Tolto. Ask her. Ask anybody."

"The princess may never go anywhere without you, you head of bone," remarked the cook, rather enjoying his own humor, "but this time you're going somewhere without her."

"You talk funny talk, but I can't laugh at it. Little bug, tell me now what this is all about, or I will take you between my fingers and squash you!"

The cook's coral face paled almost to white despite himself.

"Listen, big one," he said placatingly. "Have an orange?"

Tolto refused the gift, although he knew this rare and luscious importation from the Earth and was very fond of it.

"Once more I ask you, bug, where is she?"

"Aw, now, listen!" the cook whined. "Don't blame me! I'm only a servant around here. How can I help what they do? Don't glare at me so. Well, she's at Tarog."

"But why--why does she send me away?"

The cook failed to recognize his opportunity to lie in time.

"Well, the fact is--" he hesitated. "The boss--Prince Joro's sending you away. You see, she's going to get hitched up-big important guy. They didn't want you around, bustin' up things every time you turn around. So they're sendin' you back home."

"The princess would not send me home like this," Tolto objected. But he held his peace, and the cook went back to his work, satisfied that he had subdued this dangerous prisoner.

In this he was guilty of no greater error than Prince Joro and the other monarchists. For ages there had been an unfounded opinion that big men are generally slow and stupid. They may often act so, for their great strength serves as a substitute for the quick wit of smaller men. But in Tolto, at all events, this prejudice was wrong. In Tolto's bullet head was a healthy, active brain, and a primitive cunning.

So instead of wasting his strength in vain struggles against the tough steel, he rested, marshalling the facts in his mind.

He utterly rejected the thought that Princess Sira had consented to his removal in this manner, or in any manner. That meant that she was being coerced, and Tolto's eyes grew small and hard at the thought.

Presently he began to test the chains. They were of great hardness and toughness, and so smooth that he could not twist them, for the links slid over one another harmlessly. However, after much quiet effort he found that he could shift his body several inches toward either side of the narrow hold. Here there were a number of locked boxes. One of them, he reasoned, might contain tools.

His closely confined hands were practically useless. He found that he could not reach any of the boxes with his fingers, strain as he might. But he grinned with hope when his head struck one of the handles. His strong teeth closed down on it.

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That would have been something to see! The box was of thin, strong metal, but it was heavy. With no other purchase but his teeth, Tolto dragged it to him, on top of him. Now his hands could help a little. He inched it down toward his knees, fearful each moment that a lurch of the ship might precipitate it to the floor with a crash. When his head could push no longer his knees grasped the end of the chest, and managed to pull it down.

Tolto had never heard of the wrestling hold known as the scissors, but he applied it to that box. His mighty sinews cracked under the strain, and stabbing pain tore at his hips. But he persisted, and with a protesting rasp the lid was telescoped inward, breaking the lock.

Breathless, he waited. After minutes he decided that the sound had not attracted attention.

Again he brought his teeth into play, and this time, when the box stood open, Tolto's lips were lacerated by the jagged edges of twisted metal. Triumphantly, he looked inside.

The box contained a set of counterweights for the hydrogen integrator motors.

No bar, nothing that might be utilized to twist off the eyebolts!

Again he set to work. The next box was longer, heavier. It was coated with unpleasantly rancid oil. Tolto's broad chest was covered with blood, partly from gouges in his skin, partly from his crushed lips. But this time he found a bar. It was in the bottom, under some extra valves, but eventually his teeth closed on it, and he fell back, nearly exhausted, for a moment's rest.

He heard a door slam beyond the galley. The words floated out:

"...better go see how he's coming along."

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The horrified mate saw the wrecked boxes, the blood-covered giant with a thick steel bar in his teeth, the extra valves scattered about the floor. He whipped out his neuro-pistol, pointed it at Tolto.

But Tolto made no move to resist when the shaken officer gingerly took the bar out of his mouth. He did not move when several shipmen, called by the officer, moved everything out of reach. After half an hour, with many awed comments, they left him alone.

Tolto's battered lips opened in what might have been a grin. Painfully he rolled off the single valve that had been digging into the small of his back. He patiently resumed the tedious task of bringing the valve in reach of his locked hands.

The valve stem was stout, and a foot long. It was just long enough so that Tolto, by lying on his side, could reach one of the eyebolts.

Inserting the stem, Tolto pulled toward him. The eyebolt turned without resistance. It was free to rotate, and could not be twisted off. A groan escaped from the prisoner.

But in a few moments he tried bending upward. The leverage was highly disadvantageous that way. Still, straining with the last ounce of his strength, he was just able to do it. Pulling down was not so hard.

It took fifty-four motions, up and down, before the tough metal cracked and one chain trailed free.

He would have shrieked, but Tolto took his arm between thumb and forefinger, saying gently: "Remember, little bug, what I said!"

He was cast, dumb with fear, into the late prisoner's cell.

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Tolto had not bothered to remove the chains, but only to twist them apart by means of such tools as he could find to permit free movement of his arms and legs. They dangled from him, tinkling musically.

Now he strode into the main cabin. The ship's crew, having no guests, were playing the part of guests. A man who was shuffling cards, was the first to see him. The cards flew up and showered all over the room.

"He's loose!" this shipman croaked, diving under the table.

"Mr. Yens! Mr. Yens!" shouted the captain, a small, bristling Martian with graying, stiff hair. He snatched the neuro-pistol at his side, pointed it at Tolto, pressed the trigger.

Tolto felt a numbing cold as the ray struck him. But his great body absorbed the weapon's energy to such an extent that he was not killed at once. His flailing arms continued their arc, and one end of chain, whistling through the air, struck the weapon from the officer's hand. Tolto stumbled, recovered. He picked up the pistol and stuck it in his chain belt.

His impulse was to rend, to crush with his hands. The shipmen, except for the officers, were unarmed, and they went down helplessly before the giant fists. Some of them found riot guns, but they might as well have pounded a Plutonian mammoth for all the effect they had on Tolto.

Mr. Yens, the mate, sitting at the controls in the glassed-in cabin forward, turned his head at the captain's cry, and, looking down the short corridor into the main cabin, saw the blood-covered giant coming toward him. Mr. Yens was a brave man; but he had been careless. His neuro-pistol was in his own cabin. He did the best he knew, and snapped the lock.

But Tolto's great bulk smashed in the door as if it were nothing. The unbreakable glass did not splinter, but it bent like sheet metal, and a blow of the giant's fist broke the mate's neck.

The mate had not engaged the gyroscopic control, and immediately the ship began a series of eccentric maneuvers, so sharp and unexpected that no one on board could keep his feet. For a few seconds she straightened, and one of the crew bethought himself of the pistol in the mate's cabin. He sighted on Tolto, clearly visible ahead. Before he could release the ray the ship went into another breath-taking maneuver.

A mountain peak came sliding toward them ominously. They scraped by. The ship dived, throwing Tolto forward, and his instinctive grab threw the elevator up. The levitators screamed madly as they lost their purchase on the air, due to the ship's unstable keel.

"We're goners!" someone shouted. "Kill that fool!"

They bounced off a cliff, turned over and over like a tumbleweed. A cylindrical building, unexpected in this wilderness, loomed up. They seemed about to hit it, but floated past. The rock floor of the valley rushed up. With a crash the ship rolled over, split wide open.

CHAPTER VI
The Fight in the Fort

Its coming had been observed. Men wearing the uniforms of the Martian army dashed out, their pistols ready. A
man dropped out of a gaping hole in the ship's skin, sat down unsteadily. Others dribbled out.

"Crazy man in there!" one of them shouted. "Look out, he's murderous!" The pistols came up. The soldiers began to close in, showing a certain professional eagerness.

They were perhaps within ten feet when a metal plate, sheared off from the pilot's cabin in the fall, lifted up. Barely visible under it was a pair of large, running feet. One soldier, trying to oppose it with his hands, was knocked senseless and bleeding. He might as well have tried to stop an oncoming rocket ship.

Neuro-pistols, bearing from every side, spangled briskly. They partly neutralized one another. Their charges were partly reflected by the metal and partly absorbed by Tolto's great bulk. He was thoroughly confused now. Every way he looked in this glaring wilderness of desert and rocks were enemies.

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But there! An opening loomed, cool and dark. The fortress entrance. Tolto dashed into it. There was the sharp challenge of a guard, unanswered; the futile hiss of a weapon.

The improvised shield wedged on a narrowing stairway. Tolto let it stick, ran up alone. The stairway went round and round, climbing ever higher. The fugitive's lungs were bursting.

At last he came to an airlock. He did not know how to operate it, so smashed through. There was no rush of air, because the pressure had already been equalized in the rush to the wreck at ground level. Panting, listening for pursuers, Tolto looked around.

He found himself on a circular roof, bare except for the airlock and a number of upright posts, whitened by the Sun.

It was some moments before he saw the unconscious figure of a man lying on the very edge of the lofty tower on which he was standing—a man naked and blackened. He was lying on his face, one arm and one foot hanging over space as though he had fallen unconscious at the very edge of the abyss.

Tolto collected his excited wits. This, at least was no enemy. His enemies were in power here. This must be a victim, a possible ally.

The man was stirring. The overhanging arm was feebly trying to grasp something. If he were to roll over--
He did not have time. Tolto dragged him in to the safety of the airlock opening, where he could watch.

There were sounds of pursuit, faint and cautious.
Tolto grinned at the naked stranger.
"Who are you, little bug?" he asked.

Sime Hemingway tried to tell him but his swollen tongue would not behave. Instead, he waved in the general direction of the Sun.
Tolto understood. "From Earth? Good guy, prob'ly. Want this dingus?"

* * * * *

Sime was able to take the neuro-pistol. He knew what was expected of him, and strove to collect his faculties so he could obey orders. He crawled a little way into the lock, where he could be in comparative darkness, setting the little focalizer wheel at the side of the pistol for maximum concentration. Such a beam would require good aiming, being narrow, but if it touched a vital center would be infallibly fatal.

Meanwhile Tolto appraised one of the posts on the roof. It was firmly set in masonry, but he found he could loosen it a little by shaking it. Presently he had it uprooted. It made a splendid battering ram, a war club fit for a giant such as he.

"Here they come!" Sime croaked, and, peering around a corner, took careful aim at the foremost attacker. At the first whispering impact of the Martian the savage, sprawled, dead.

The soldiers were caught at a disadvantage. They were expecting club or fist, but not the neuro-beam. Nevertheless Sime had no more easy opportunities. The Martians flung themselves down behind the bulge of the curved stairway, and the air became acrid under the malignant neuro-beams.

None of them reached Sime directly, but the stone walls reflected them to some extent, and even under their greatly weakened power he became cold and sick.

The situation was by no means to his liking. There were other weapons to be reckoned with, and he tried to keep consciousness from slipping away from him. When at last his breathing became easier and his diaphragm moved without pain, Sime knew that danger was greatest. For this relief meant that the Martians had withdrawn down the stairway.

"Good-by, boys!" he thought, as he sprinted up into the comparative safety of the open. He motioned to Tolto, who stood hopefully waiting with his great war club, to stand clear.

* * * * *

There it was! Sime saw the faint phosphorescent reflection against the stone where the stairway curved. He did not wait to see the tiny pellet of the atomic bomb floating up, but threw himself flat on the roof, tugging at Tolto,
who understood and followed suit.

Even lying prone, and below the edge of the explosion cone, they were nearly blown off the roof. Though no
larger than a pinhead, the bomb had the power of a thousand times its weight in fulminate of mercury. When the rain
of small stones and dust had subsided, they rubbed their eyes and saw that the airlock was no more. In its place was
a shallow pit, ending with the top of the battered stairway.

"Down after 'em!" Sime husked out of a raw throat. "Before they think it's safe to come after us!"

He led the way, the giant after him, carrying his club and a huge rock fragment. Sime saw a cautious peering
head, and that Martian died instantly. Then they were around the bend and in the middle of a fight. Sime deflected a
hand that held a pistol, and its beam killed another Martian who was about to let Tolto have it at close range.

There was a light-wand affixed to the wall a trifle further down. Tolto waded through the ruck of smaller men,
tore it from its socket and hurled it up the stairs. A short sword bit into Sime's shoulder, but there was no force in the
stroke, for in that instant Sime paralyzed his enemy's heart with the beam.

An officer barked a command, and the spang of neuro-beams ceased, to be followed by the lethal rustling of
swords. The passage was too crowded for the neuro-pistols, giving the outnumbered prisoners the advantage.

Sime, following him, his neuro hissing death from side to side, marveled at his ferocity. He saw a bare-bodied,
bleeding fighter leap to Tolto's back, his sword poised for a downward stab for the jugular. Kicking viciously at the
man who was just then coming at him, Sime tried to bring Tolto's would-be killer down. But Tolto himself attended
to him, dashing him to his death with the elbow of his sword arm.

That diversion nearly cost Sime his life. Fortunately for him he tripped, and the sword-thrust that was to
disembowel him merely gashed his side. Sime was beginning to enjoy the fight. The exercise was loosening up his
cramped muscles, and the shaky feeling due to the reflected beams of the neuro-pistols was leaving him.

Tolto had smashed down the light-wands as they fought their way down the steps, so that now they were in
almost complete darkness. One could still see the occasional rise and fall of a glinting sword and the dark shadow of
an arm or head. They were almost clear when Tolto received his first serious wound, a stab in the abdomen that let
out a sticky stream of blood.

There was an interval of silence, broken only by the groans of the wounded. The air was thick with the odor of
raw blood and pungent with ozone. They had fought their way down perhaps two hundred feet of the stairway, and
due to its curve they could see neither top nor bottom.

"I'm stuck!" Tolto muttered.

"Bad?" Sime edged to his side, stepping, in the darkness, on the body of the man who had succeeded in
delivering that sword-stroke before Tolto's own blade had cleft him. He felt the edges of the wound, but in the
darkness could not tell how serious it was.

"Feel sick? Any retching?" he croaked anxiously.

"Tolto's all right," the giant assured him. "I just said I was stuck."

Sime managed to make a hurried bandage out of the slashed fragment of Tolto's blouse, and again they resumed
their descent. Strangely, their enemies further up made no move to attack, although there were many left alive.

Sime laid his hand on Tolto's arm.

"Something wrong here. There's somebody at the bottom of the steps, and the fellows above want to give him
elbow room. Well, we'll soon see!"

They crawled up a short distance, began to haul inert bodies down, dragging them as far as the last curve, until
they had formed a barricade of nineteen or twenty of their late enemies. It was unpleasant work, but justified by
following events.

"Can you just see the loom of it?" Sime asked.
"Yes."
"Watch!"

Sime felt about until he found a small fragment broken from the stone steps. Keeping well within the shelter of the convex wall, he crept toward the bend.

"Dig your fingers into a joint and hold on," he instructed Tolto, locating a crack for himself. Then he tossed the fragment gently over the barricade of bodies.

There was the click of its fall, and a moment later things seemed to turn around. Clinging like leeches to the wall, the two men resisted the warped gravitational drag that would have flung them down upon their waiting enemies below. They seemed to be hanging in a well. Sime had a confused impression of piled-up bodies hurtling down—down.

Thereafter everything was normal again, and they were running down the normal steps. Both had swords in their hands now, and within a hundred feet they were upon the "gravitorser" gun. It was a rather cumbersome weapon, comprising a great deal of electrical apparatus, with a D-solenoid surmounting, whose object was to twist the normal lines of gravitation. It was intended for large-scale operations in the open; the few men remaining below had tried a rather risky experiment, for they might have brought the whole fortress down upon them. Now they were untangling themselves from the corpses that had flown at them as iron flies to a magnet.

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Sime and Tolto struck them like a tempest. The light was good and the battle short and sweet. Tolto was slowed up a little, but was irresistible, nevertheless. There is nothing surprising about the seeming immunity of a reckless man in battle. He fights by instinct, taking short-cuts that are not as dangerous as they look because the enemy is not expecting them. So Sime and Tolto fought their way down, until there was no one able to oppose them.

Sime pressed a neuro-pistol into Tolto's hand, warned him to sweep the stairs with it, while he coursed around for some of the pellet bombs. He found them, and two of them closed that avenue of attack with a mass of jumbled ruins.

Now they had a breathing spell. A combination of blind luck and foolhardiness had given them temporary possession of this desert outpost. That was their pawn in the game of life and death—the chance to get back and hide among the millions in the cities of the industrial belt. Certain routine precautions had to be taken. They destroyed the radio apparatus, picked a few days supply of food, threw a couple more bombs and made a search for means of transportation: for there was a desert wilderness of four or five hundred miles to be traversed.

They discovered the egg-shaped hull of an enclosed levitator car in the covered courtyard. It was distinguished by the orange and green stripes which are the Martian army standard. Like all army equipment, it was in excellent condition. The hydrogen gages showed a full supply of fuel.

"We're getting the breaks," Sime crowed to Tolto as they surfeited themselves with water before starting. He had covered his nakedness with an ill-fitting fatigue suit.

"Yeh," Tolto agreed, referring to their numerous wounds with sly humor: "lots of 'em."

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Nevertheless, they felt pretty happy when the levitator screws took up their melancholy whine. The rocky valley floor dropped away, and the windowless stone walls of the fortress slid down past them. Now they were even with the top.

Through the ports they could see a group of their late adversaries on the roof, standing in strained attitudes. Their immobility was explained a moment later by an electric blue spark from something in the shadow of their bodies.

Instantly Sime, who was at the controls, threw her hard-a-port, dived, looped up. The first explosion of the tiny projectile tossed them up like a monstrous wave, allowed them to drop sickeningly. The exhaust tubes poured out a dense haze as Sime sought for distance. But they were following him. He was five miles away when they finally got the range. The vessel was jarred as if it had hit a rock. One of the atomic pellets had exploded within a few feet of it. There was a dismaying lurch. Sime picked himself up from the floor and dashed to the controls.

"Everything's all right!" he shouted excitedly.

Tolto, however, was listening anxiously. There was a sharp crackling at the stern, where, in a narrow space, the reaction motors provided the forward motive power. In moments of excitement he referred to himself in the third person. He did so now.

"Tolto's afraid that something's wrong! Smells hot, too!"

"Here, take the wheel!" Sime ordered. The explosions of the shells were becoming less dangerous; they were getting too far away.

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Sime burned his hand opening the narrow door. The paint was already blistering off it. The trouble was
immediately apparent. One of the integrator chambers, in which atomic hydrogen was integrated to form atomic iron and calcium (sometimes called the Michelson effect), had sprung a leak. The heat escaping into the little room was not the comparatively negligible heat of burning hydrogen, but the cosmic energy of matter in creation. Sime slammed the door. The radiated light was so intense that it stung even his hardened skin.

Looking through the rear range-finding periscope, he saw that they were about twenty miles from the fort. They had ceased firing.

"Won't be long, Tolto," he said, taking over the controls himself again, "before our tail's going to drop off. Got to make time."

It was, in fact, about ten minutes when, without warning, their nose dropped.

"Tail's gone!" Sime announced.

Their momentum, under the destructive rate of speed they had been making, was great, and as the levitators, with independent power supply, still held them up, Sime continued to steer a course for the twin cities of Tarog. He was aided by a light breeze, and the Sun was nearing the western horizon by the time their rate of motion had become negligible.

"Might at well land," Sime decided. "Conserve fuel. If we get a favorable wind to-morrow we can go up and drift with it."

But Tolto, who had been narrowly scanning the terrain, advised continuing a little longer.

"I thought I saw a little smoke, a few miles ahead. Seems to be gone now. But we're still drifting slow."

Sime searched the indicated spot in the ground glass of the forward magnifying periscope. After a few minutes he discovered a blackened spot which might be the remains of a fire. It was surrounded by huge blocks of orange rock, the igneous rock which is the outstanding feature of the Martian desert landscape.

"Looks like he built the fire around there so nobody on the same level would see him," he hazarded. He set the altitude control to fifty feet. There was part of the globular skeleton of a desert hog in the fire; whoever had built it had dined most satisfyingly not long before, and as the fugitives looked their stomachs contracted painfully.

"I could eat a whole one of them myself," Tolto said wistfully.

The urge to descend here was strong upon Sime too. He realized that the fire might have been made by some dangerous criminal--a fugitive from justice; but dangerous men are no novelty to the I. F. P. On the other hand, there was a possibility that it was just some political offender, driven into the desert by persecution. Or a prospector. At any rate, he would have food, or would know where it could be procured.

They had drifted some hundreds of yards farther and the ground was getting constantly more broken, so the best time to land was as soon as possible. Slowly the little ship settled, scraped on a rock and arrested its slight forward motion, crunching solidly in the stony soil.

"Take a neuro, Tolto," Sime advised. "Whoever's here, if he or they are dangerous, we won't get close enough to touch 'em with a sword."

Tolto took the weapon without a word. They locked the door of the ship. Men have been marooned for neglecting that little precaution.

They walked in a spiral course, making an ever-widening circle, looking sharply from left to right. Presently they came to the remains of the fire. The ashes were hotter than the ground, proving that they had been recently made.

But nowhere was there any sign of men. They shouted, but only weird echoes answered.

The ship was now out of sight, and solitude pressed upon them. They felt an uneasy desire to get within comfortable constricting walls.

They found the ship without difficulty.

"Well, whoever it was has lammed," Sime concluded. "Tolto, you climb on top of that rock. Watch me. If you see anybody after me, let 'em have it. I'm going to see if I can scare up a desert hog somewhere."

Neither had stirred from his place, however, before they were suddenly stricken to the ground. They felt the familiar sensation of cold and suffocation--the paralysis caused by a diffused beam from a neuro-pistol. Tolto was a little slower to fall, but he only lasted a second longer. They knew that someone was taking the weapons out of their helpless hands. Then life returned.

"Get up," said a languid voice back of them, "and let's have a look at the looks of ye."

CHAPTER VII

The Flight of a Princess

The province of Hanlon, Prince Joro's hereditary domain, began about fifty miles west of South Tarog. It was a region of thorn forests, yielding a wood highly valued for ship-building, and the canal was lined with shipyards, most of which belonged to the prince. The so-called republic had been established before Joro was born, but the
reigning family of Hanlon had always been richly endowed with astuteness. Deprived of their feudal holdings by a coup of state, they had won back nearly all they had lost in the fields of finance and trade. Joro was a monarchist for sentimental reasons, not for the profits that might accrue to him.

It was the purity of Joro’s devotion to his ideal that made him so dangerous to all who might oppose him. Lesser men might be bribed, frightened, distracted. Not Joro: he believed that the monarchy would soothe the rumblings of internal dissension that continually disturbed the peace and tranquility of Mars. He drove forward to that consummation with a steadfastness and singleness of purpose such as have carried other fanatics to glory or to the grave. And in addition to his zeal he carried into the struggle his exceptional ability, a knowledge of government and of people.

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He had need for all of his rare skill now. It had been an easy matter to carry forcibly the Princess Sira to his palace in Hanlon. Tolto was safely out of the way; Mellie had been dismissed. As for the other palace servants, they had been silenced with bribery or the stiletto.

But Sira had remained adamant, and Joro, abstractedly toying with his laboratory apparatus in the basement of his palace, tried to find the key to her change of heart.

"Can't understand it!" he mused. "She always seemed to have all the royal instincts: cold to suitors, with that delicacy and reserve one finds ideal in a princess. She does all things well, handles a sword nearly as well as I do. Her mind is as keen and limpid as a diamond. She swims like an eel...."

He sighed. "I thought she and I saw eye to eye in this matter. Not more than a week ago she seemed eager for news of the accord I was arranging. She had no great aversion to Scar Balta. Now she says she will die before she espouses him."

He paused, thought a moment, added, with that absolute fairness and impartiality that was characteristic of him: "True, Balta is not the ideal prince consort. He would not add kingly qualities to the royal line. But he would confer cunning upon his offspring; and energy--neither to be despised in a royal family that must forever resist intrigue." He sighed again. "The responsibility of king-making is a hard one!"

A sudden thought struck him. "She spoke warmly about the proposed war; could that be at the root of her strange change of heart? After all, she is a woman, and with all her fine, true temper she has a gentle heart. To her the death of a few thousands of her subjects may not outweigh the unhappiness that millions are now experiencing. But the financiers demand the war to consolidate their position, and Wilcox is solidly with them."

With new hope he set down the beaker he was toying with. "Perhaps we can outwit them."

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He left the laboratory, climbed a flight of stairs, entered the spacious reception hall. This, like most Martian buildings, was domed. It was richly furnished. The walls were hung with burnished, metallic draperies of gorgeous colors, the floor a lustrous black, the furniture of glittering metal. As the prince entered a servant stepped forward.

"Go at once to the Princess Sira’s chamber!" Joro commanded sharply. "Request her to come here. Tell her I have thought of the solution to our difficulty."

Impatiently he paced up and down, stopping at a window for a moment and looking out into the night.

"Your Highness! Your Highness!" The servant was sobbing with excitement. "Your Highness, Princess Sira has escaped!"

Joro left the man babbling, dashed up the broad stairs, unheeding the servants who scattered before him. Their punishment could wait. Just inside the princess’s chamber, still unconscious from a blow on the head, lay the guard whose duty it had been to stand before that door. How long ago had she gone? Probably not more than a few minutes.

Joro saw to it that her start would not be much longer. In a few seconds men and women were scouring the palace grounds, and radio orders to the provincial police of Hanlon were crowding the ether.

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Sira had contrived her escape without any particular plan in mind. In fact, it had been initiated on impulse. The fellow on guard at her door had excited intense dislike in her. High-strung, and excited by her kidnaping, she had been further annoyed by his officiousness, his fawning, which thinly disguised impudence. The third or fourth time that he intruded on her privacy to ask if she wanted anything she was ready, with the heavy leg, unscrewed from a chair. She felled him in the middle of a smirk, and seized the opportunity created.

It happened that there was a service corridor close at hand. Down this she sped, into the darkness of a boat-house. The doors were barred and locked, of course, but the depths of the water showed a faint greenish glimmer of light. Sira dived in, unhesitatingly, and after an easy underwater swim she emerged in the open canal. There was a considerable swell, for there was a slight breeze blowing from the north across twenty miles of water, but this did not distress Sira at all. She undulated through the waves with perfect comfort. Phobos was just rising in the west,
and orientating herself by this tiny moon she struck out in a north-easterly direction, seeking a favorable current to carry her toward Tarog.

Early explorers on Mars were astonished to find that the canals were not stagnant bodies of water, but possessed currents, induced by wind, by evaporation, and the influx of fresh water from the polar ice caps.

This was near the equator, however, and the water was not unreasonably cold, although the night air was, as usual, chilly. After a few minutes Sira discarded her clothing, and so settled down to a long swim.

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Ten miles out she struck a brisk easterly current, flowing toward Tarog, and she gave herself up to it. Floating on her back she saw the lights of the prince's ships flying back and forth over the water in search of her--or her body. But none came near her, and she was content.

The abrupt tropical dawn found her in mid-canal, half-way to Tarog. She had no intention of swimming all the way to the capital city, to be fished ignominiously out of the canal by the police. She was in need, not only of clothing, but of clothing that would disguise her. Her coral pink body near the surface of the water would attract attention for considerable distance, and would lead to unwelcome inquiries.

She was glad when she saw a fishing scow anchored in the current ahead of her. The man who owned it had his back to her, fishing down-current. She approached the boat silently and worked her way around it by holding to the gunwale.

Sira now saw that the fisherman was old, gnarled and sunburned so dark that he was almost black, despite the dilapidated and dirty pith helmet he was wearing. His lumpish face was deeply seamed and wrinkled. His sunken mouth told of missing teeth, and his long, unkempt hair was bleached to a dirty gray.

"Have you an old coat you can lend me?" Sira asked, swimming into view.

The rheumy eyes rolled, settled on the water nymph. The old man showed no surprise, but pious disgust. His eyes rolled up, and in a cracked voice intoned:

"Wicked, wicked! O great Pantheus, thy temptations are great--thy visions tormenting. In my old age must I ever and ever live over--"

"Foolish old man!" Sira snapped. "I'm not a vision!" She dragged down an old sack that hung over the gunwale, washed it, and tearing holes in the rotten fabric for her arms and head, slipped it on. It was a large sack, coming to her knees; satisfied, she climbed aboard, where she spread her black hair to dry.

"Not a vision?" the old man quavered. "Then thou art reality, come to gladden my old age--nay--to return youth to me! In my hut there is an old hag. She shall go--"

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Sira did not answer. She was neither disgusted nor amused by the dark torrent that stirred in this decrepit old fisherman. She saw only that he had pulled in his nets and was bowing his long arms to the oars, pulling for shore.

It took about two hours before they reached the fisherman's hut, a nondescript, low-ceilinged shelter of logs, driftwood and untarnished metal plates off some wreck. Several times they were hailed by other fishermen, who addressed the old man as "Deacon" and asked jocularly about what kind of a fish he had there.

The deacon's wife awaited them. The old man's description of her as a hag had not been far wrong. She, was as diminutive and weakened as he was ponderous and heavy. She was acid. Her skin was like a pickled apple's; her expression sour, her voice sharp.

"Hoy there, you old hypocrite!" she hailed when they came in earshot. "So this is the way you lose a day! Who's the hussy with you?"

The deacon nosed the old and evil-smelling scow into the bank. His eyes rolled piously.

"The great Pantheus sent her. He said--"

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The old woman came closer and inspected Sira, who endured her gaze calmly. That look was like the bite of acid that reveals the structure of crystal in metals.

"Why, she's a lady!" she exclaimed then. "Not fittin' to be on the same canal with you! Come in, my dear. You must be nearly dead!"

She conducted Sira into the hut, which was far neater and cleaner than its exterior suggested.

"A lady!" she repeated. "In that heat! Young woman, what made you do it? Look at those arms--near burnt! Let me take off that old sack. But wait!"

She tip-toed to the door, threw back the faded curtain sharply. The deacon, too surprised to move, was standing there in the attitude of one who seeks to see and hear at the same time. He lingered long enough to receive two resounding slaps before fleeing to his boat, followed by a string of curdling remarks.

Back inside, she proceeded to anoint Sira's body, exclaiming her pleasure at its perfection. The oil smelled fishy, but it was soothing, and it was not long before the claimant to the throne of Mars was deep in restful slumber.
Late that afternoon the deacon returned and hung his nets up to dry. He was dour, his fever having left him. But he had a strange story to impart.

"I think that girl I picked up is the Princess Sira," he told the old woman. "On the fish buyer's barge, in the teletabloid machine, I saw the forecast of her wedding to Scar Balta. And I'll swear it's the same girl!"

"And why," queried his wife, "would she be swimming in the middle of the canal if she was getting ready to marry Scar Balta?"

"That's just it!" the deacon exclaimed, and his eyes began to roll again. "They say it's not a love match! Oh, not in the teletabloid! They wouldn't dare hint such a thing. But the men on the barge. They say there's a rumor that she ran away. And she looks like the girl I picked up, though I thought--"

"Never mind what you thought!" she snapped. "It may be, I served the oligarchy and the noble houses--before I was fool enough to run away with a no-good fisherman--and I can see she is a lady. Well, she can trust in me."

"They say," the deacon hinted, "that if one went to Tarog, and inquired at the proper place, there would be a reward."

The little old woman chilled him, she looked so deadly.

"Deacon Homms!" she hissed. "If you sell this poor little girl to Scar Balta, your hypocritical white eyes will never roll again, because I'll tear them out and feed them to the fish. Understand?"

Considerably shaken, the deacon said he understood.

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But the next morning, on the placid bosom of the canal, he forgot her warning. The fleshpots of Tarog called him. Tarog, where he had spent youth and money with a lavish hand. Tarog, where a reward awaited him.

He hauled in his anchor, gave the unwieldy boat to the current and bent to the oars.

Back in the hut, unsuspecting of treachery, Mrs. Homms and Sira were rapidly striking up a friendship. A shrewd judge, of character herself, Sira did not hesitate to admit her identity, and without any prying questioning the old woman soon had the whole story. It thrilled her, this review of the life she had once seen as a servant.

"I wonder if I will ever see Tarog again!" she sighed wistfully.

"You shall!" Sira promised, "if you help me."

"I will do what I can gladly."

"I need a workingman's trousers and blouse, and a sun-hat that will shade my face. I have a plan, but I must get to Tarog. Can you get me these things?"

"I have no money, but wait!" She rummaged with gnarled fingers in a chink in the wall, withdrew a small brooch-pin of gold, with a pink terrestrial pearl in its center.

"My last mistress gave me this," she said smiling sadly. "I will row to the trading boat and buy what you need. There will be a little money left to buy your passage on a freight barge."

And that was why, when the deacon arrived at the head of a squad of soldiers that evening, there was no girl of any description to be found. Ignoring the cowering and unhappy reward seeker, the old woman delivered her dictum to the sergeant in charge.

"Princess? Ha! The deacon, sees princesses and mermaids in every mud bank. His imagination grew too and crowded out his conscience. No, mister, there ain't any princess here."

CHAPTER VIII

In the Desert

Mellie, Sira's personal maid, was too disturbed by her mistress's kidnaping to seek other employment. She saw the teletabloid forecasts of the wedding, made life-like by clever technical faking, but rumors of the princess' escape were circulating freely despite a rigid censorship. She imagined that lovely body down in the muck of the canal, crawled over by slimy things, and she was sick with horror.

Mellie lived with her brother, Wasil Hopspur, and her aged mother. Wasil was an accomplished technician in the service of the Interplanetary Radio and Television Co., and his income was ample to provide a better than average home on the desert margin of South Tarog. Here Mellie sat in the glass-roofed garden, staring moodily at the luxuriant vegetation.

She looked abstractedly at the young man coming down the garden walk, annoyed by the disturbance. There was something familiar in the sway of his hips as he walked.

And then she flew up the path. Her arms went around the visitor, and Mellie, the maid, and Princess Sira kissed.

Mellie was immediately confused. A terrible breach of etiquette, this. But Sira laughed.

"Never mind, Mellie. It is good for me, a fugitive, to find a home. Will you keep me here?"

"Will I?" Mellie poured into these words all her adoration.

"Mellie, the time has come for action. Not for the monarchy. I am sick of my claims. I would give it all--You
remember the young officer of the I. F. P.? The one who kissed me?"

"Yes."

"Well, that comes later. First I must consider the war conspiracy. Have you heard of it?"

"There are rumors."

"They are true. Will Wasil help me?"

"He has worshiped you, my princess, ever since the time I let him help me serve you at the games."

"One more question." Sira's eyes were soft and misty. "My dear Mellie, you realize that I may be trailed here? What may happen to you?"

"Yes, my princess. And I don't care!"

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As Murray parted from his brother-in-arms, Sime Hemingway, on the roof of the cylindrical fortress in the Gray Mountains, he felt the latter's look of bitter contempt keenly. He longed bitterly to give Sime some hint, some assurance, but dared not, for Scar Balta's cynical smile somehow suggested that he could look through men and read what was in their hearts. So Murray played out his renegade part to the last detail, even forcing his thoughts into the role that he had assumed in order that some unregarded detail should not give him away. He convinced the other I. F. P. man, anyway.

But Murray had an uneasy feeling that Balta was laughing at him, and when the shifty soldier politician invited him into his ship for the ride back to Tarog, Murray had a compelling intuition that he would not be in a position to step out of the ship when it landed on the parkway of Scar Balta's hotel.

Having infinite trust in his intuitions, Murray thereupon made certain plans of his own.

He noted that the ship, which was far more luxurious than one would expect a mere army colonel to own, had a trap-door in the floor of the main salon. Murray pondered over the purpose of this trap. He could not assign any practical use for it, in the ordinary use of the ship.

But he could not escape the conviction that it would be a splendid way to get rid of an undesirable passenger. Dropped through that trap-door a man's body would have an uninterrupted fall until it smashed on the rocks below.

Murray then examined the neuro-pistol that had been given him. It looked all right. But when he broke the seal and unscrewed the little glass tube in the butt, he discovered that it was empty. The gray, synthetic radio-active material from which it drew its power had been removed.

Murray grinned at this discovery, without mirth. It was conclusive.

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At the first opportunity he jostled one of the soldiers, knocking his neuro-pistol to the floor--his own, too. And when he apologetically stooped and retrieved them the mollified soldier had the one with the empty magazine.

So far, so good. Murray noted that the wall receptacles were all provided with parachutes. It would be simple to take one of these, make a long count, and be on the ground before he was missed. Provided that he could leave unobserved.

The ship was now well in the air, and beginning to move away from the fort. But they were only ten miles away, and Murray had hardly expected that Balta would be in such a hurry.

"You get off here!" Balta said, and Murray felt the muzzle of the neuro-pistol on his spinal column.

A grinning soldier seized a countersunk ring and raised the trap-door.

"So you're going to murder me," Murray said, speaking calmly.

"I take no chances," was Balta's short answer. "Step!"

Murray stepped, swaying like a man in deadly fear. He lowered his feet through the hole. Looking down, he saw that they were about to pass over a bitter salt lake, occasionally found in the Martian desert. He looked up into the muzzle of the menacing neuro-pistol.

"Balta, you're a dog!" he stated coldly.

"A live dog, anyway," the other remarked with a twisted grin. "You know the saying about dead lions."

Murray's fingers clenched on the edge of the rug. It was thin and strong, woven of fine metal threads. They were just over the edge of the salt lake.

Murray dropped through, but retained his death-like grip on the rug. It followed jerkily, as the men above tripped, fell, and rolled desperately clear.

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Murray's heart nearly stopped as he fell the first thousand feet. The rug, sheer as the finest silk, failed to catch the wind. It ran out like a thin rivulet of metal, following Murray in his unchecked drop.

But he had a number of seconds more to fall, and he occupied the time left to him. He fumbled for corners, found two, lost precious time looking for the others. He had three corners wrapped around one hand when the wind finally caught the sheer fabric, bellied it out with a sharp crack. The sudden deceleration nearly jerked his arm out.
Even so, he was still falling at a fearful rate. The free corner was trailing and snapping spitefully, and the greasy white waters of the lake were rushing up!

At any rate, the rug held him upright, so that he did not strike the water flat. His toes clove the water like an arrow, and the rug was torn from his grasp. The water crashed together over his head with stunning force. After that it seemed to Murray that he didn't care. It didn't matter that his eyes stung--that his throat was filled with bitter alkali. All of his sensations merged in an all-pervading, comfortable warmth. There was a feeling of flowing blackness, of time standing still.

Murray's return to consciousness was far less pleasant. His entire body was a crying pain: every internal organ that he knew of harbored an ache of its own. He groaned, and by that token knew that he was breathing.

As unwillingly he struggled back to consciousness he realized that he was inside a rock cave, lying on a thin, folded fabric that might well be the rug that had served as an emergency parachute. He could see the irregular arch of the cave opening, could catch hints of rough stone on the interior.

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He sat up with an effort. There was a vile taste in his mouth, and he looked around for something to drink. There was a desert water bottle standing on the floor beside him. That meant he had been found and rescued by some Martian desert rat who had probably witnessed his fall. He rinsed out his mouth with clean, sweet spring water from the bottle, drank freely. His stomach promptly took advantage of the opportunity to clear itself of the alkali, and Murray, controlling his desire to vomit, crawled outside into the blinding light of the Martian afternoon. He saw that the cave was high up on the side of one of the more prominent cliffs. There were many such hollowed places, indicating that the sloping shelf on which he now lay had once been the beach of a vast sea which at some time must have covered all but the higher peaks of the Gray Mountains. It was, of course, the sea that had deposited the scanty soil which here and there covered the rocks. During geologic ages it shrunk until it all but disappeared, leaving only a few small and bitter lakes in unexpected pockets.

There was a succession of prehistoric beaches below Murray's vantage point, marking each temporary sea level, giving the mountain a terraced appearance. A thousand feet below was the white lake, sluggish and dead.

Murray was looking for the man who had saved him. He was able to discern him, after a little effort, toiling up the steep slopes. He was still nearly all the way down. He could see only that he seemed to be dressed in white desert trousers and blouse, and that he wore a broad-brimmed sun helmet. He was carrying something in a bag over his shoulder. He was making the difficult ascent with practiced ease, his body thrown well forward, making fast time for such an apparently deliberate gait.

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The desert glare hurt Murray's eyes. He closed them and fell asleep. He awoke to the shaking of his shoulder, looked up into a black-bearded face, a beard as fierce and luxuriant as his own. But where Murray was bald, this man's hair was as thick and black as his beard. He had thrown off his helmet, so that his massive head was outlined against the sky. His torso was thick, his shoulders broad. Large, intelligent eyes and brilliant coral skin proclaimed the man to be a native of Mars.

The man's white teeth flashed brilliantly when he spoke.
"Feeling better? Man, you can feel good to be here at all! Time and again have I seen Scar Balta drop 'em into that lake, but you're the first one ever to break the surface again. He gave you a break, though. First time he ever gave anybody as much as a pocket handkerchief to ease his fall. That lake is useful to Scar. It keeps the bodies he gives it, and none ever turn up for evidence."

Murray was still struggling with nausea. "Want to thank you," he managed. "I got it bad enough. Ow! I feel sick!"

The Martian bestirred himself. He scraped up the ancient shingle, making a little pillow of sand for Murray's head. The Sun was already nearing the western horizon, and its heat was no longer excessive. Murray watched through half-closed lids as the big man descended a short distance, returning with an armful of short, greasy shrubs. He broke the shrub into bits, made a neat stack; stacked a larger ring of fuel around this, until he had a flat conical pile about eight inches high and two feet in diameter.

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From a pocket safe he procured a tiny fire pellet. This he moistened with saliva and quickly dropped into the center of his fuel stack. The pellet began to glow fiercely, throwing off an intense heat. In a few seconds the fuel caught, burning briskly and without smoke.
"Wouldn't dare do this in the open," the Martian explained, "if this stuff gave off any smoke at all. The pulpwod mounds down in the flats make a nice fire, but they smoke and leave black ashes, easy to see from the sky. Now you just rest easy. You'll feel better soon as you get some skitties under your belt."

The skitties proved to be a species of quasi-shellfish, possessing hemispherical houses. In lieu of the other half
of their shell they attached themselves to sedimentary rocks. They were the only form of life that had been able to adapt themselves to the chemicalization of the ancient sea-remnant. The Martian had left them thin flakes of rock. Now he placed the shells in the red-hot coals, and in a very short time the skitties were turning out, crisp and appetizing. Following his host's example, Murray speared one with the point of his stiletto, blew on it to cool it. It proved to be delicious, although just a trifle salty.

"Drink plenty water with it," the Martian advised him. " Plenty more about five hundred feet down. Artesian spring there. Fact is, that's all that keeps that lake from drying up. You ought to see the mist rise at night."

Murray ate four of the skitties. Then, because the sun was getting ready to plop down, they carefully extinguished the fire, scattering the ashes. The I. F. P. agent felt greatly strengthened by his meal and assisted his host with the evening chores. Nightfall found them in their darkened cave, ready for an evening's yarning.

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"I took the liberty of examining your effects," the Martian began. "Sort of introduced you to myself. The fact that you wore the Martian army uniform was no fine recommendation to me, though I once wore it myself. Your weapons I hid, except for the knife you needed to eat. But you'll find them in that little hollow right over your head. The fact that you're an enemy of Scar Balta is enough for the present. That alone is repayment for the labor of carrying you up all this way."

Murray then told him of work on Mars. There was no use concealing anything from one who was obviously a fellow fugitive, and who might be persuaded to do away with his guest, should he have strong enough suspicions. He told of the war cabal, of the financial-political oligarchy and its opposing monarchists. He related his own discovery and arrest; the pretended enlistment in Scar Balta's forces which terminated in Scar's prompt and ruthless action. When he finished he sensed that he had made a deep impression on his host. The latter spoke.

"What you have told me, Murray, relieves me very much," he said. "I know that we can work together. You might as well know how I came to be here. Perhaps I look forty or fifty years old. Well, I'm thirty. I was news director for the televistor corporations. I didn't have to be very smart to realize that a lot of the stuff we were ordered to send out was propaganda, pure and simple. Propaganda for the war interests, propaganda for the financiers. Commercial propaganda too.

"Why, the stuff we put out was a crime! The service to the teletabloids was the worst. You know how they outstrip the news; hired actors take the part of personages in the news. Ever watch 'em? The way they enact a murder is good, isn't it?"

*I* * * * *

"We got orders to bear down on your service too, the I. F. P. Your crew has too many points of contact, hiking from planet to planet. The high command couldn't see things the bankers liked, I guess.

"So whenever a man of the I. F. P. figured in the news we always gave him the worst of it. We hired bums to play his part, criminals, vicious degenerates. People believe what they see--that's the idea. I had seen very few of your men but I knew we were giving them a dirty deal. Orders were orders, though. We got lots of orders we didn't understand. Then secret deals were made, and those orders countermanded.

"But the order against the I. F. P. remained standing, and we certainly did effective work against 'em. The people had no way of knowing the difference, either, for the company controls all means of communication, and the I. F. P. does most of its work in out of the way places. Why just to show you how effective our work was--the people, in a special plebiscite, voted to withdraw their support from the Plutonian campaign! But that was going too far; the financiers quietly reversed that.

"At the same time, we got orders to glorify Wilcox, the planetary president. It was Wilcox signing a bill to feed the hungry--after their property had been stripped by the taxes. It was Wilcox the benevolent; Wilcox the superman. Wilcox, in carefully rehearsed dramatic situations, reproduced on the stereo-screens in every home. You know who put over the slogan, 'Wilcox, the Solar Savior?' We did it. It was easy!" He laughed shortly.

"The only time we failed was, when they wanted to end, once and for all, the prestige of the royal house. That was after they had bought the assassination of the claimant, his wife and their son. Didn't dare take Princess Sira too, because she has always been a popular darling. It would have been too raw, wiping out the whole family. They left one claimant, see? And then put it up to us to discredit her!

"Man! That fell down! The first attempt was very smooth, at that. But it brought in such a storm of condemnation they had to drop that.

"You can guess how we boys at the central office felt about it. No wonder we got cynical and lost all self-respect. We couldn't have stood it at all, but sometimes we'd put on a special party, just to let off steam. Did we rip 'em up high and handsome? The more outrageous the flattery we sent out, disguised as news, the more baldly truthful we were in those early morning rehearsals, with the mikes and telegs dead. Wilcox was our special meat.

"Of course, it was foolhardy. One night a mixer in the room below us got his numbers mixed, killing a banquet
program on a trunk channel and sending our outrageous burlesque out instead. When the poor fellow discovered his mistake he made for the bottom of the canal. As for me, I made for the desert. I never heard what became of the others, and that was six years ago. I wonder if I've changed much."

"What's your name?" Murray asked suddenly.

"Tuman. Nay Tuman."

"The others must have been caught. As for yourself, orders have been sent all over the solar system to kill you on sight. They hung the killing of that electrician on you."

"That's their way!" Nay Tuman absented gloomily. "A price on my head. They thought I'd stow away on some rocket liner, I suppose."

"Weren't you afraid some desert rat would give you away?"

"No danger. They're just about all fugitives themselves. They hid me till I grew this foliage. They showed me how to find food and water where seemingly there was none. The desert isn't sterile. Why, I know of three or four men within fifty miles of here! Sometimes they stop at my spring for water. As for the harness frames at the fort, those sojers might as well be blind, considering all they miss."

"You asked a while ago if you've changed much. You have. I remember your picture. All of us studied it, because there's a 100,000 I. P. dollar reward out. You were a slim lad then, not the fuzzy bear you are now. How would you like to go in to Tarog with me? They seem to have us licked now--but did you ever hear that the I. F. P. is most dangerous when it's been thoroughly licked?"

"I don't know--I'm used to the solitude," Tuman demurred. "In the city I'd be lost."

But Murray won him over. He had a persuasive way with him.

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The next morning they started, guiding their course by the Sun. They made no attempt to travel fast, but the going was easy. Although they rested during the heat of the day, and buried themselves for the nights in the sun-warmed sand, they made about fifteen miles a day. They saw no other human being. These desert dwellers did not meet for mere sociability.

They left the mountains on the second day, descending to the lower level of a broad, sterile plain which was studded by the low, greenish pulp-mounds, that resembled mossy rocks more than vegetation. After two days more they came to a region where huge blocks of stone, of the prevailing orange or brick color, lay scattered around on the plain.

"They look good to me," Tuman said. "If some patrol comes along now we'll have plenty of cover, at least. This belt is a hundred miles wide, maybe a little more. Good hunting there. Plenty of desert hogs, as fat and as round as a ball of bovine butter. I can knock 'em over with a rock, and you can use your neuro, in a pinch."

They did, in fact, succeed in capturing one of the little creatures soon afterward, and, dropping a moistened fire pellet on top of a pulp-mound, soon were roasting their meat.

Not once, however, did either one relax his vigilance. Almost simultaneously they discovered the little black dot that seemed to pop out of the irregular southern horizon. They leaped to their feet, kicked out the fire. They would have covered the ashes with sand but for hundreds of feet in either direction there was nothing but bare rock.

"Never mind!" Murray said. "Let's make for cover. They may think it's an old fireplace. With rains only about once in three years that spot will look like that indefinitely."

"Yes," Tuman agreed, running along. "If they didn't see the smoke!"

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As the craft neared they could make out the orange and green of the Martian army.

"From the fort," Murray guessed. "Scar Balta must have had his doubts about me. He ordered them out to finish the job, if necessary."

"It's drifting," Tuman observed. "The driving tail seems to be missing."

"Well, anyway, it's coming down, and where an army ship comes down is no place for us."

They heard the scrape of her keel as she settled down. Murray gave a gasp of surprise.

"Tuman," he muttered, "that fellow wearing the Martian uniform is an I. F. P. agent named Hemingway. The uniform doesn't fit and I bet the man he took it from is no longer alive. Do you know the giant with him?"

"Under that dirt and blood, I'd say he's Tolto, Princess Sira's special pet. No other man of Mars could be that big! Seven or eight years ago--she was just a kid, you know--she picked him up in some rural province. Kids just naturally do run to pets, don't they? And the princess was no exception. But he looks like nobody's pet now. I'd rather have him peg me with his neuro, though, than to take me in his hands!"

They watched as Sime and Tolto slowly walked about in widening circles, and when they were sufficiently far away Murray and Tuman closed in. They had no expectation of finding the ship unlocked, and wasted no time trying to get it. Instead they climbed a flat-topped block of stone about ten feet high. From this position they could
command, with Murray's neuro, anyone who might seek to enter the ship.

"These fellows are our best hope," Murray told Tuman. "But we have to convince 'em that we're friends first. Otherwise we're liable to be cold meat, and cold meat can't convince anybody. Keep your head down."

The necessity of lying flat, in order to keep from silhouetting themselves against the sky, deprived them of the opportunity to see. Nevertheless, they could tell, by the sound of their voices, when Sime and Tolto returned. When it seemed that they were directly beneath, Murray risked a look. There they were.

Murray carefully set the little focalizer wheel for maximum diffusion. He felt sure that it would not be fatal, considering the distance and the physical vigor of the men he meant to hold. He pressed the trigger.

"Get down quick!" he snapped. "I'll let up for a second; you grab their neuros."

Tuman executed the order with dispatch. Stepping back, he trained the pistols on their late owners, while Sime and Tolto, a little dazed, stumbled to their feet. A man may argue, or take chances, when menaced by a needle-ray, but mere bravery does not count with the neuros. All men's nervous systems are similar, and when nerves are stricken, courage is of no avail.

CHAPTER IX

Plot and Counter-Plot

As these four men faced one another in the slanting rays of the setting Sun far out on the desert, the planetary president, Wilcox, sat in his office in the executive palace in South Tarog, situated, as were so many of the public buildings, on the banks of the canal.

Wilcox was in his sixties. A gray man, pedantic in his speech, his features were strong: his nose, short and straight, somehow, expressed his intense intolerance of opposition. His long, straight lower jaw protruded slightly, symbolizing his tenacity, his lust for power. His eyes, large, gray, intolerant, looked before him coldly. Wilcox was the result of the union of two root-stocks of the human race, of a terrestrial father, a Martian mother. He had inherited the intelligence of both--the conscience of neither.

Now he sat in a straight, severe chair, before a severe, heavy table. Even the room seemed to frown. Wilcox's face was free of wrinkles, yet it frowned too. He seemed not to see the flaming path the setting Sun drew across the broad expanse of the canal, for he was thinking of bigger things. Wilcox was a little mad, but he was a madman of imagination and resource, and he was not the first one to control the destinies of a world.

"Waffins!" His voice rang out sharp and querulous. A servant, resplendent in the palace livery of green and orange, was instantly before him bowing low.

"Who awaits our pleasure?"

"Scar Balta, sire," answered Waffins, bowing low again.

"We will see him."

Waffins disappeared. Scar Balta came in alone, sleek as usual showing no trace of his irritation over his long wait. He did not even glance at the somber hangings that concealed a number of recesses in the wall. Scar knew that guards stood back of those hangings, armed with neuro-pistols or needle-rays as a precaution against the ever-present menace of assassination. And of the loopholes back of these recesses, with still other armed men, as a constant warning to any of the inner guards whose thoughts might turn to treachery.

Scar Balta bowed respectfully.

"Your Excellency desired to see me?"

"I wished to see you, or I should not have had you called," Wilcox replied irritably. "I wish to have an explicit understanding with you as to our proceeding next week at our conference with the financial delegates. Sit here, close to me. It is not necessary for us to shout our business to the world."

Balta took the chair beside Wilcox, and they conversed in low tones.

"First of all," Wilcox wanted to know, "how is your affair with the Princess Sira progressing?"

"Your Excellency knows," answered Balta, "that the news agencies have been sending out pictorial forecasts--"

"Save your equivocation for others!" Wilcox interrupted sharply. "I am aware of the propaganda work. It was by my order that the facilities were extended to you. I am also aware that the princess escaped from Joro's palace. An amazing piece of bungling! Did she really escape or is Joro forwarding some plot of his own?"

"He seems genuinely disturbed. He has spent a fortune having the canal searched by divers, flying ships and surface craft. If Sira fails to marry me Joro's life ambition will fail, for the hopes of the monarchists will then be forever lost."

"True; but his Joro some larger plan? His is a mind I do not understand, and therefore I must always fear. A man with no ambition for himself, but only for an abstract. It is impossible!"

"Not impossible!" Balta insisted. "Joro is a strange man. He believes that the monarchy would improve
conditions for the people. And, Your Excellency, wouldn't I be a good king?"

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Wilcox looked at him morosely. His low voice carried a chill.

"Do not anticipate events, my friend! There are certain arrangements to be made with the bankers regarding the election of a solar governor!" His large gray eyes burned. "Solar governor! Never in history has there been a governor of the entire solar system. Destiny shapes all things to her end, and then produces a man to fill her needs!"

"And that man sits here beside me, Balta added adroitly. Wilcox did not sense the irony of the quick take-up. He had been about to complete the sentence himself. But his mind was practical.

"The bankers must be satisfied. The terrestrial war must be assured before they will lend their support."

"It is practically assured now," Balta insisted. "Our propaganda bureau has been at work incessantly, and public feeling is being worked up to a satisfactory pitch. Only last night two terrestrial commercial travelers were torn to pieces by a mob on suspicion that they were spies."

"Good!" Wilcox approved. "Let there be no interruption in the work. Our terrestrial agents report excellent results on Earth. They succeeded in poisoning the water supply of the city of Philadelphia. Thousands killed, and the blame placed on Martian spies. Our agents found it necessary to inspire a peace bloc in the pan-terrestrial senate in order to keep them from declaring war forthwith. But these things are of no concern to you. Have you made the necessary arrangements with the key men of the army?"

"I have, Your Excellency. They are chafing for action. The overt act will be committed at the appointed time, and the terrestrial liner will be disintegrated without trace."

"And have you made arrangements for the disposal of the ship's records?"

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"Our own ship? I thought it best to have a time bomb concealed aboard. That way not only the records will be destroyed but there will be no men left to talk when the post-war investigating commission comes around."

"Well managed!" Wilcox approved shortly. "See that there is no failure!" He dismissed the young man by withdrawing to his inner self, where he rioted among stupendous thoughts.

Scar Balta emerged into the streets, brightly illuminated with the coming of night, and his thoughts were far from easy. The absence of the princess was a serious handicap--might very easily be disastrous. With her consent and help it would have been so simple! The people, entirely unrealizing that their emotions were being directed into just the channels desired, could most easily be reached through the princess.

First the war, of course, and then, when the threatened business uprising against financial control had been crushed, a planet-wide sentimental spree over the revival of the monarchy and the marriage of the beautiful and popular princess. As prince consort, Scar would then find it a simple matter to maneuver himself into position as authentic king.

But without the princess! Ah, that was something else again! For the first time in his devious and successful career, Scar Balta felt distinctly unhappy. He had schemed, suffered and murdered to put himself in reach of this glittering opportunity, and he would inevitably lose it unless he could find Sira.

In the midst of his unhappy reflections he thought of Mellie.

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Sira knew well that Wasil adored her. He had for her the same dog-like devotion that Mellie had. She knew she could ask for his life and he would give it. And what she had planned for him was almost equivalent to asking for his life.

She told him as much, sitting beside him on a bench in the garden. His smooth coral face was alight, his large eyes inspired.

"I will do just as you have commanded me!" he declared solemnly, and would have kissed her hand.

"You must not only do it; you must keep every detail to yourself. You must not even tell Mellie. Do you promise?"

"I promise!"

She kissed him on the forehead. "Farewell, Wasil. I have been here two days already--far longer than prudence allows. They will be here looking for me. Have you any money?"

Wasil produced a roll of I. P. scrip; handed it to her.

"Kiss Mellie for me," she called, as she slipped out of the garden. She was still dressed in the coarse laborer's attire that she had bought on the trading boat, and mingled readily with the crowds in the streets. She hoped she would not meet Mellie, for the girl's devotion might outweigh her judgment.

The rest of that day Sira prowled about the city. Mingling with the common people, she came to have a new insight in their struggles, their sorrows. Passing the walls of her own palace, now locked and sealed, she felt, strangely, resentment that there should be such piled-up wealth while people all around lacked almost the necessities
She surprised herself, also, by a changing attitude toward the life ambition of Prince Joro. The old man's discussions of social conditions that could be corrected by a benevolent monarch had always before seemed to her merely academic and without great interest. Such co-operation as she had given him was motivated entirely by personal ambition. Now she recalled some of Joro's theories, reviewed them in her mind, half consenting.

Always she would strike a barrier when she came to Scar Balta. The more she thought of him the more he repelled her. She puzzled over that. Scar was quite personable.

Tarog, every industrial city along the equatorial belt, and even the remotest provinces, were seething with war talk. The teletabloids at the street corners always had intent audiences. Sira watched one of them. Disease germs had been found in a shipment of fruit juices from the Earth. The teletabloids showed, in detail, diabolical looking terrestrials in laboratory aprons infecting the juices. Then came shocking clinical views of the diseases produced. Men, on turning away, growled deep in their throats and women chattered shrilly. The parks were milling with crowds who came to hear the patriotic speakers.

There was hardly anyone at the stereo-screens, where the news of real importance was given.

"President Wilcox announced to-day that an interplanetary conference of financiers will be held in his office three days from to-day, beginning at the third hour after sunrise. President Wilcox, whose efforts have been unremittent to prevent the war which daily seems more inevitable, declared that the situation may yet be saved unless some overt act occurs." At the same time the device showed a three-dimensional picture of the planetary president, impressive, dominating, stern with a sternness that could mean almost anything.

Sira, hurrying home to an inexpensive lodging house, thought:

"Three days from to-day! I have done what I could. The hopes of the solar system now rest with Wasil. I am only a helpless spectator."

Tarog awaited the conference on the morrow bedecked like a bride. The Martian flag, orange and green, fluttered everywhere. On both sides of the canal the brilliantly lighted thoroughfares were restless with pedestrians, and the air was swarming with taxicabs. Excitement was universal, and business was good.

The glare of the twin cities could be seen far out in the cold desert. Four men, stumbling along wearily, occasionally estimated the distance with wearied eyes and plodded onward.

After a long silence Murray remarked:

"It's just as well that the levitators gave out when they did. We were drifting mighty slow--making practically no time at all. Probably we'd have been spotted if we'd gone much further."

"Yeh?" Sime Hemingway conceded doubtfully. "But they may spot us anyway. We have no passes, and none of us looks very pretty. As for Tolto, we could hide a house as easy as him."

"But we must go on," said Tuman, the Martian. "Yonder lights seem too bright, too numerous for an ordinary day. There's some kind of celebration."

They trudged on for several hours more. Although weariness made their feet leaden and pressed on their eyelids, they dared not halt. Each one nursed some secret dread. Tolto thought of his princess, his child goddess, and mentally fought battle with whomever stood between him and her. Sime and Murray saw in those lights only war, swift and horrible. Tuman imagined a city full of enemies, ruthless and powerful.

Gradually, as they came closer, the lights began to go out one by one. The city was going to bed.

An hour later they came to an illuminated post marking the end of a street. A teletabloid was affixed to this post, buzzing, but its stereo-screen blank. Murray found a coin, inserted it in the slot.

"Marriage of the Princess Sira and Scar Balta will be held immediately after the financial congress," the machine intoned briskly, and in time with its running comments it began to display pictures.

Sime, watching indifferently, caught his breath. It seemed to him that he knew this girl, who appeared to be walking toward him up a stately garden alley. She came steadily forward with a queenly, effortless stride. And now it seemed as if she had seen him, for she turned and looked straight into his eyes. It seemed that her expression changed from laughing to pleading. And he recognized the girl with the stiletto whom he had caught in his hotel room.

He said nothing, however. He could hardly explain the feeling of sadness that came over him. He stood silent, while the others commented excitedly over the overshadowing war news.

"It's all in the box," Tuman said gloomily. "Many times I've helped cook up something like this. The boys in the central offices are laughing, or swearing, as the cast may be. The poor devils don't own their own souls, if they're equipped with any. I'd rather be here, expecting to be thrown into a cell by daylight!" He shivered in the night chill.
They ran into a little luck when they needed it most. A roving taxi swooped down upon them, hailed them for fares. They flew the rest of the way in. Their luck held. A city policeman, noting their stumbling walk as they lurched into a cheap hotel, did not trouble them for their passes. He had seen many such men that night, soldier and civilian, with clothes bloody and torn. The excitement of the day, coupled with the fact that nearly everyone carried arms, had led to numerous fights, not a few of which ended fatally.

"Mercite!" grinned the policeman, suppressing a hiccup of his own. "And besides, that big 'un would make two of me."

CHAPTER X

One Thousand to One

The scheme that Sira had imparted to Wasil was simple--simple and direct. Moreover, it was sure, provided it succeeded. Its execution was something else again. Its chances were, mathematically expressed, about as follows:

If every single detail worked as expected, a great and smashing success. Ratio: 1:1,000.

If one single detail failed, immediate and certain death for Wasil. Ratio: 1,000:1.

The princess knew that the power of Wilcox, his supporting oligarchy and the interplanetary bankers, was all based on the skilful use of propaganda. If the people of Mars and of Earth knew the forces that were influencing them, their revulsion would be swift and terrible. There would be no war. There would be events painful and disastrous to their present rulers, but a great betterment of humanity's condition.

The key to the situation was the news monopoly, the complete control of all broadcasting--of the stereoscreens, the teletabloids--that colored all events to suit the ends of the ruling group. The people of Mars as well as of Earth were capable of intelligent decision, of straight thinking, but they rarely had an opportunity to learn the truth.

They had now, by a knowing play on their emotions, directed by psychologists, been wrought to a point of frenzy where they demanded war. Their motives were of the highest in many individuals--pure patriotism, the desire to make the solar system safe for civilization. The bright, flaming spirit of self-sacrifice burned clear above the haze and smoke of passion.

What would happen if all these eager millions of two neighboring planets were to learn the true state of affairs? Sira knew what transpired in those secret conventions, when double guards stood at all doors and at the infrequent windows; when all communication was cut off and the twin lenses of the telestereos and the microphones were dead. Prince Joro had told her, with weary cynicism. But Joro had also told her that the oligarchs guarded this vital and vulnerable point with painstaking care.

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Sira had reached inside their first defense, however. Wasil was loyal to his salt, but he had both loyalty and affection for Princess Sira. As the day of the interplanetary financial conference leaped into being, he was on his way to the executive hall that lay resplendently on the south canal bank, ready to lay down his life.

The hall proper was really only the west wing of the magnificent, high-arched building. Its brilliant, polished metal facade reflected the light of the rising Sun redly. The east wing, besides housing various minor executive offices, also contained the complicated apparatus for handling the propaganda broadcasts. On the roof, towering high into the air, was a huge, globular structure, divided into numerous zones, from which were sent various wave bands to the news screens both on Mars and on Earth. The planetary rulers had taken no chances of tampering with their propaganda. The central offices, where news and propaganda were dramatized, were in another building, but as everything from that source had to pass the reviewing officer, a trusted member of the oligarchy himself, in his locked and guarded office, this did not introduce any danger of the wrong information going out to the public.

When Wasil reached the broadcasting plant, he was admitted by four armed guards. He locked the door behind him, to find his associates already busy, testing circuits and apparatus. Stimson, the chief engineer, was sitting at his desk studying orders.

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A few minutes later he called the men to him. There were three others besides Wasil: young Martians, keen, efficient, and, like most techies, loyal to the government that employed them.

"Sure are careful to-day," Stimson grunted, scratching his snow-white hair, which was stiffly upstanding and showed a coral tinge from his scalp. "Must be mighty important to get this out right. Wilcox personally wrote the order. If any man fumbles to-day, it's the polar penal colony for him!" The Sun-loving old Martian shivered.

"And here's another bright idea. Only one man's to be allowed in the plant after the circuits are all tested! How'n the name of Pluto will he handle things if a fuse blows? But what do they care about that! We're techies! We're supposed to know everything, and never have anything go wrong!"

"But why only one man?" cried Scarba, one of the associate engineers. "It's asking too much! I'll not take it on, far as I'm concerned. My resignation will be ready soon's I can get a blank!"

"I too! I'm with you, Scarba!" "We work like dogs to get everything in first-line condition, and then--"
hard-working and uncomplaining technies were outspoken in their resentment.

"Oh, I see your point," Stimson agreed. "I could stand Balta, but Wilcox is just one too many for me. But do you boys think for one minute we could get away with a strike?" He laughed angrily. "I can remember when the technies were able to demand their guild rights. But you boys weren't even born then. Now, let's get this straight:

"We are going to do just as we are told. Wilcox, of course, never explains an order, but the reason for having only one operator on the job is simply to concentrate responsibility on that one man. There will be no excuse if he fails. Before the convention starts, and after it is over, there will be a message to send out. The convention itself will be secret, as usual. During the convention, there will be some kind of filler stuff from the central office."

"Yeh!" snorted one of the men. "That's the dope, all right. One of us is stuck, but if it's me I'll walk out and head for the desert."

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Stimson looked at him with a sardonic smile. "I forgot to mention: the doors will be locked and barred, and of course there's no such thing as windows."

Wasil whistled. "They're sure careful. Well, Stimson. I haven't a thing to do all day. I'll take it on."

They all looked at him, not sure that they had heard him right.

"What's the matter, sonny?" Stimson said slowly. "Too much Merclite last night? You're shaking!"

"It's an opening!" Wasil insisted.

"An opening to tramp ice at the pole for the rest of your life!"

"All right. I'll chance it!"

They consented, without very much argument, to let Wasil have the dangerous responsibility. At 2:30, two and a half hours after sunrise by the Martian reckoning, he signed a release acknowledging all circuits to be in proper order, and was locked behind the heavy doors, alone with a maze of complicated apparatus and cables that filled the large room from floor to ceiling.

Now it was done! Chance had thrown Wasil into a position where he could, without great danger of failure, carry out his plan. But at the same time things had so fallen that he, Wasil, must now die, regardless of the outcome!

If he succeeded in broadcasting the proceedings of the convention, and if they had the effect of arousing the public against Wilcox, there would still be no escape for Wasil. Wilcox, or Scar Balta, would come straight for this prison, neuro-pistol or needle-ray in hand!

Even if he should fail, death would be his portion for the attempt.

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So thinking, Wasil sat down and carefully re-checked the circuits. The filler broadcast from central office must be sent to the twin cities of Tarog. Otherwise the convention would learn too soon what was happening, and would interrupt its business. The thousands who waited outside on the broad terraces must be regaled with entertainment, as had been originally planned.

But as for the rest of Mars, and Earth, they would get the truth for once. Those bankers would speak frankly, in the snug isolation of the hall. No supervision here. Conventions, empty politeness, would be forgotten. Sharp tirades, biting facts, threats, veiled and open, would pass across the table between these masters of money and men.

But this time they would be pitilessly bared to the worlds!

Feverishly, Wasil inspected the repeater. It was a little-used device that would, an hour or two later, as desired, give out the words and pictures fed into it. Although Tarog would not learn the convention's secrets as quickly as the rest of Mars, or Earth, Tarog would learn. Wasil threw over the links and clamped down the bolts with a grunt of satisfaction. When a man is about to die, he wants to do his last job well.

Suddenly a red light glowed, and a voice spoke.
"Special broadcast. Tarog circuit only!"


The central office man held up a thick bundle of I. P. scrip, smiled pleasantly, saying:

"Somebody in North or South Tarog, or in the surrounding territory, is going to be 100,000 I. P. dollars richer by to-morrow. How would you like to have 100,000 dollars? You all would like this reward. It represents the price of a snug little space cruiser for your family; a new home on the canal; maybe an island of your own. It would take you on a trip to the baths of Venus and leave you some money over. Of course you all want this reward!

"Now, if you'll excuse me a moment--"

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The man's picture faded, and the screen glowed with the life and beauty of Princess Sira--Sira, smiling and alluring.

"You all know this young lady," the announcer's voice went on. "The beloved and lovable Sweetheart of Mars, the bride of Scar Balta--"
The Martian's sleek and well-groomed head appeared beside that of the girl.

"--Scar Balta, whose services to Mars have been great beyond his years; who, in the threatening war with Earth, would be one of our greatest bulwarks of security."

The announcer's face appeared again, stern and sorrowful.

"A great disaster has befallen these lovers--and all the world loves a lover, you know. Some thugs, believed by the police to be terrestrial spies, have kidnapped the princess from the palace of her uncle, Prince Joro of Hanlon. It is believed that they had drugged her and hypnotized her, so that she has forgotten her duty to her lover and her country."

The green light flashed, and Wasil broke the circuit. The central man lingered a moment, favoring Wasil with a long wink.

"What a liar you're getting to be!" Wasil remarked coldly. But the central man, not offended, laughed.

So they were offering a reward! And urging further treachery as an act of patriotism! Wasil was not too much excited, however. The disguise the princess had chosen would probably serve her well. Besides, she had promised to keep in retirement as much as possible.

Clack! Clack! The electrically controlled lock of the door was opening. Only Wilcox knew the wave combination. Wasil felt a chill of apprehension as the door opened and Scar Balta strode in. He was fully armed, dressed in the military uniform; but the former colonel was now wearing on his shoulder straps the concentric rings denoting a general's rank.

CHAPTER XI

Giant Against Giant

Although Princess Sira had promised to keep out of the way, she could not resist the powerful attraction of the executive hall, in which, on this day, the fate of two planets was to be decided. As the crowds of people began to drift toward the hall, she joined them, still dressed in her laboring man's shapeless garments, the broad sun-helmet hiding her face effectively. Her long, black hair was concealed under the clothing. Having nearly been drawn into a brawl the day before, she now carried a stained but still very serviceable short sword that she had purloined from a mercite-drunken reveler in a gutter.

Thousands were already on the terraces surrounding the government buildings. They were milling about, for it was still too soon after the night's chill to sit down or lie on the rubbery red sward. Taxis were bringing swarms over the canal from North Tarog, and water vehicles were crossing over in almost unbroken lines.

Already the mercite vendors were busy, making their surreptitious way from group to group, selling the highly intoxicating and legally proscribed gum that would lift the users from the sordid, miserable plane of their daily existence to exalted, reckless heights.

War vessels now began to course overhead, their solid, heavily plated hulls glinting dully in the sun. Their levitator helices moaned dismally, and as their long, slanting shadows slid over the assembled thousands, it seemed that they cast a prophetic pall; that there was a hush of foreboding.

But the psychological expert high in a nearby tower immediately noted the slump in the psycho-radiation meter whose trumpet-shaped antenna pointed downward. At the turn of the dial the air was filled with throbbing martial music, and the expert noted with contemptuous satisfaction that the needle now stood even higher than before.

Sira, caught like all the rest of the people in that stirring flood of music, felt her own pulse leap. But she thought:

"This is the day! Wasil, could I only be with you!"

She thought sadly of Joro, whose shrewd observations and counsel she missed more than she had ever thought possible.

"Poor, dear Joro! You would be a better king than any man you could ever find! I wish I could have done as you wished me to."

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There was a stir near the main entrance of the hall. A large private yacht was slowly descending. She was bedecked with the green and gold bunting of the terrestrial government, the green and orange of Mars. Her hull glittered goldenly.

"Back!" shouted the captain of a Martian guard detail, the soldiers running with pennant-decked ropes looping after them. The crowd surged against the barrier, but more guards were sent out as reinforcements, until they had cleared a space for the ship and a lane to the hall entrance.

"Mars greets the distinguished guests from our sister planet!" boomed the giant loudspeaker in the tower. Immediately afterward came the strains of the song--"Terrestria--Fair Green Terrestria"--in a rushing torrent of sound. But the frank and fluent melody was strangely distorted, with unpleasant minor turns and harsh whisperings of menace, and the tower psychologist noted a further rise of the needle.
There was a diversion of interest now. The mob of first arrivals, as well as the ever-freshening stream of newcomers, was moving toward the teletabloids and the more conservative stereo-screens. On this occasion they were both carrying the same message, however. Sira heard the propaganda division's latest fabrication about her alleged kidnaping by terrestrial agents. She needed no radiation meter to tell her of the intense wave of hatred for the Earth that swept over the densely packed area. And this was followed by another emotion—a wave of cupidity—set up by the offer of 100,000 I. P. dollars reward for her return. She saw about her faces greedy, faces wistful, even compassionate faces. But outnumbering them by far were faces set in turbulent mold.

Sira moved restlessly from place to place, feeling more deeply depressed with every moment. She felt as if she had been left entirely out of life, friendless, alone. Among all these thousands she had no friend. It seemed to her that never before had there been such a paucity of monarchists. Sharp-featured, with a wire-drawn manner of efficiency and resolution about them, they had constituted almost another race among this practically enslaved people, maintaining for themselves a tolerable position despite the opposition of the oligarchy. Now, however, they seemed to have vanished. All that morning Sira had not seen one. She would not have disclosed her identity, but it would have been comforting to see one of those friends of old.

She was stopped by a jam. Looking between the bodies of two large and sweaty men, she realized that someone was standing on a surveyor's marking block, delivering a speech.

"The great Pantheus has so decreed it," the speaker was shouting in a cracked voice that at times dribbled into a whine. "We must shake off forever this menace from the green planet—this planet dominated by wicked women.

"Oh, my friends, last night they came to me in dreams, these pale women of the green star. They tempted me and they mocked me. They laid their cold hands on my throbbing brow, and their cold hands burned me!"

"Oh great Pantheus! How I have suffered! The creatress who in her malice created this wicked world beyond the gulf—"

The Martians were entertained by the quavering denunciation. Some grinned broadly at one another; others placed their thumbs in their ears and wiggled their fingers. But the old man continued. Finally, two of the foremost spectators, sensing the tiny body crowded between them, stepped aside.

"Don't miss this, my little man. Listen, and maybe you will laugh yourself a little bigger." He gave Sira a gentle shove, so that she almost stumbled over the block on which the speaker was standing.

And that old man suddenly stopped talking, so that his toothless mouth sucked in, then stood agape. The rheumy eyes rolled, and a wisp of dirty gray hair strayed across his gnarled face. He lifted a shaking hand, pointed a knotty finger.

"There she is!" he croaked. "There she is! I claim—"

"There she is!" guffawed a tipsy merciliti chewer. "The creatress, come to punish you! Cut off his nose, O creatress, and stuff it into his mouth!"

There were shouts of laughter, a surge to see better.

"No! No! I, Deacon Homms, claim the reward!" the old man screamed. "She is the princess; I know her. She came out of the canal to tempt me! She is the Princess Sira. Now shall I at last enter the Palace of Joys! I claim the 100,000 dollars!"

But he still had to catch Sira. The crowd, suddenly sensing that this old fanatic might be telling the truth, rushed in savagely, each eager to seize the prize, or at least to establish some claim to a share of the award. Men and women went down, to be trampled mercilessly. Inevitably they got in one another's way, and soon swords were rising redly, falling again.

"Guards! Guards! A riot!" Some were fleeing the scene; others rushing in, grateful for the opportunity to expend excess pugnacity. A fresh platoon of soldiers tumbled out of a kiosk leading to an underground barracks like ants out of a disturbed nest. They deployed, holding their neuro-pistols before them, focalizers set for maximum dispersion, therefore non-fatal—merely of paralyzing intensity. Some of the rioters now turned to run, but others persisted, willing to be rendered unconscious, just so it would be near the valuable princess.

A few moments later the captain of the guard surveyed the mass of paralysed bodies and the sword-slashcd corpses, all intermingled.

"What's this all about?" he demanded of a scarred, evil-looking fellow who was the first to rise to his elbow.

"The Princess Sira! I claim the reward. In there! She stood right there!"

"Get out, you galoon!" the captain growled, knocking the fellow unconscious with the heavy barrel of his neuro. "Sort 'em out there. Moggins, Schkamitch. On the double. You will share, according to rank."

But eagerly as they searched, they did not find Sira. Creeping between the legs of the maddened reward seekers, she had fought clear, had gained the shelter of a tall, red conical tree whose closely laced branches pressed
her to the ground, clinging to the greasy trunk.

She realized that her sanctuary was none too secure. There would surely be a methodical search after the first excitement, and she would be discovered. She had lost her sun-helmet, but nevertheless she must risk making a break. A large proportion of the people were wearing such helmets. Perhaps she could snatch one.

But before such an opportunity came, she saw a chance to dash to a nearby clump of shrubbery. On the other side was a long hedge, leading to an alley back of a group of warehouses. If she could gain this alley, she felt sure she would be safe for the time being.

All over the park, which was thirty or forty acres in extent, there were minor riots, as some unfortunate was mistaken for the princess and blindly struggled for.

Sira lost no time. She scuttered along the hedge like a frightened kangrat. But as she crossed a small open space, a stentorian voice shouted:

"There she is! That's her! The princess!"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him, running toward her lumberingly, his great arms outspread. Tuman had been wrong in saying that on all of Mars there was no man as big as Tolto. This one was, and he looked more formidable. Instead of Tolto's normally good-natured face, this one looked like an enraged terrestrial gorilla, although at the moment it was really expressing joy and eagerness.

Several other men joined the chase, and then scores. They were fleeter of foot than the ape-man, but as they passed him in the narrow alley he smashed them to the pavement with casual blows of his terrifying hands. Thereafter he was undisputedly in the lead; the others content to follow in his rear, although many were armed, and the giant was not.

This was an advantage to Sira. The whole mob was slowed by the lumbering pace of the ape-man, and she was able to keep in the lead without difficulty. Several times some of her pursuers ran ahead by other routes, intent on snatching her into some doorway. But each time she slashed at them with her sword, springing past.

She had not run very far when her fear of another danger was realized. There was a high, keen whistle overhead, and a scouting police car flashed near. Under the neuro-pistols both hounds and hare would be paralyzed, and she would be easily taken. Sira longed for one of these handy weapons herself, but they were too expensive: she had been unable to secure one.

Now the police car was coming back. The sliding forward door was drawn back, and a man was leaning out, neuro alert. Judging the distance expertly, he pulled the trigger, and a hundred men fell unconscious.

"Got 'em!" he snapped over his shoulder. "The princess as well. Down quick!"

Sira, spared because of the officer's unwillingness to take a chance on injuring her, leaped through a gap in a wall and sprinted through a garden smothered with thick, leathery-leaved weeds, some of them higher than her head. She almost laughed with relief, but as she flitted around the corner of a house toward the street she saw the gorilla faced giant again in pursuit, and beyond the garden wall the police ship was just settling to the ground.

It just seemed to be raining giants that day. Sira ran out of a narrow gate at the front of the house into the street, to be stopped by a tremendous human framework as solid and unyielding as a mountain. She stepped back, drew her sword--

"Softly! Softly!" a rumbling bass implored. "Doesn't the Princess Sira recognize her servant, Tolto?"

"Tolto!" All at once the tautness went out of her, and Sira leaned against the wall, divided between laughing and crying.

"Tolto and his good friends were looking for you," the big man rumbled anxiously. "The teletabloids said there was a riot coming--"

He got no further. The gorilla-faced pursuer catapulted himself sideways through the portal, being too wide to go through in the regular way. He emitted a raucous shout of triumph:

"I got her! It's her, all right! I claim--"

As he reached out his enormous sun-blackened arm there was a thud that seemed to shake the ground. Instantly enraged, the man's little red-rimmed eyes jerked quietly to the dealer of that shocking blow. Then the conical little head sank between the bulging shoulders, the long, thick arms bowed outward, and the ape-man launched himself at Tolto.

That was a battle! On the one side devotion, simple-minded loyalty and a fighting heart in a body of such mechanical perfection as Mars had never seen before or since. On the other side a primal beast, just as huge, rage-driven, atavistic, savage.

Fists as large as an average man's head, or larger, crashed against unprotected face and body. Gigantic muscles
rippled and crackled. Blows echoed from wall to house and seemed to thud against the hearts of the spectators.

It was as if time and memory had come to a standstill. The present was not, nor present ambitions and duties. The soldiers came plunging out into the street, swords in their hands, but they stopped to watch. Sime, Murray and Tuman, used to instant and automatic battle, watched. A struggle so titanic, by tacit, by unconsidered consent, must be left to decide its own course.

Tolto seemed to be slowly gaining an advantage. During his novitiate as a palace guard the other men had instructed him in the science of their pastime-fighting. Although he scorned to guard against the blows of his savage antagonist, he placed his own punches more shrewdly, more effectively. The ape-faced one, through a red film, sensed that he was being beaten, and that this fight would end in death.

Suddenly he changed his tactics. Rushing in, he threw his arms around Tolto's great torso. He opened his jaws, and his long yellow fangs bit into the flesh of Tolto's shoulder.

Tolto, taken slightly by surprise, met this new menace promptly. Placing his powerful forearm against the battered, hairy face, he attempted to bend the head back. But it was so small, in proportion, and so slippery with blood, that he was unable to dislodge it.

So Tolto matched brute strength against brute strength. His arms encircled his enemy's body, and the tremendous muscles of his shoulders and body began to arch.

Slowly, like the agonizingly slow plastic creep of metal under great pressure, the gorilla-faced giant was yielding. His dark skin became mottled. His breath came gaspingly. His rope-knotted arms slipped a little.

But it was not in him to surrender, which might still have saved his life. With a vicious twisting motion of his head he tried to drag his fangs through the thick muscles of Tolto's shoulder. The wound began to bleed more freely, choking the savage at each labored breath.

Now Tolto began to walk forward. Always his antagonist had to yield a little, unwillingly, grudgingly, just enough to keep the paralyzing pressure on his spine from becoming unbearable. And slowly, inexorably, Tolto followed. His arms tightened. His leg slipped suddenly between the ape-faced man's supports. Tolto grunted. The sound seemed to labor upward from his innermost being, his body's protest as he called upon it for its last reserve of strength.

Like an echo, there was a dull crack, a brief, agonized moan from the ape-faced one; and the savage, unknown giant slumped to the pavement, dead with a broken back. Tolto staggered to the wall, breathing deeply.

"Man, what a fight! What a fight!" The young Martian captain passed a shaking hand over his face. The battle had stirred him more deeply than he wanted to admit. But in a few seconds he came out of his mental maze.

"Attention! All right, men, you're under arrest. As for the girl—"

"As for the girl," came a clear feminine voice, as Sira stepped out from the shelter of a buttress some dozen feet away, "the girl took advantage of your preoccupation to relieve you of your neuros. As you see I have two of them in my hand. The rest of them are over by that wall. No! Don't try to rush! You are welcome to your swords, but they are useless here."

CHAPTER XII

"He Must Be a Man of Earth"

Friend and foe looked stupefied. But they were used to the give and take of battle. That this girl should disarm a detachment of soldiers while they and their own men were absorbed in such a common thing as a fight struck them as humorous. They laughed.

"This is a better break then we deserve," Sime said, grinning with a trace of sheepishness. "Captain, you take your men across the street and hold 'em there. We're going to borrow your car. No funny stuff!" Civilians were flooding into the streets. There would soon be a mob.

"We will not," replied the captain, "try any funny stuff. Some day, my friend, I hope to open you up with my sword," he added.

"By all means," Sime agreed pleasantly. "My time is pretty well occupied, but there's no telling when I may meet you again, in my business. Good day, Captain!"

Tuman stayed at the front gate with his neuro while the others struggled through the weedy garden to the police ship in the alley, rejoining them as they were ready to rise.

A crowd had gathered. If they wondered at the appearance of these ragged, scarred and bewhiskered men; at sweat and blood-covered giant Tolto; the obviously high-bred girl in the laboring man's garments, they wisely refrained from comment or action, in deference to the neuros with which the party was bristling.
Once inside and safely in the air, they had time to breathe. Murray, with a gallantry that sat ill on the scarecrow figure he was, cleared matters up a trifle.

"Princess Sira? As I thought. Princess, or Your Highness, to be formal, I am your humble and disreputable servant, Lige Murray, of the Interplanetary Flying Police. Likewise this gentleman behind the brush--Sime Hemingway. You know Tuman? You've missed something, Your Highness! And Tolto! Lucky man!"

Sira recovered quickly from her reaction following the fight. She found a first-aid kit, bandaged Tolto's wounded shoulder skilfully and quickly. She had given no sign of recognition as Sime awkwardly bowed, during Murray's introduction, but now, as Sime held a roll of bandage for her, she gave him a sidewise look, agleam with mischief.

"But I have decided to remit the punishment--the sentence I passed on you, Mr. Hemingway," she said, her sweet, child-like face innocent.

"What punishment?" Sime gasped.

"Why, the punishment of death! For kissing me that night!" she laughed, turning her back.

Murray was heading back for the government park. It was a short distance with the police car. Soon the broad grounds, with their scattered, magnificent buildings, lay below them. But the parks were strangely bare of living creatures. Here and there lay the bodies of men or women.

"Something's happened!" Murray shouted excitedly. "Look out!"

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He swerved the ship sharply. They escaped damage as an atomic bomb, unskilfully aimed, exploded far to one side.

"Funny thing, firing on a police car," Sime puzzled. "They might have got news from that detachment we grounded, but how do they know this isn't some other police or military car?"

"Those aren't soldiers," Murray decided. "There's been a riot, and some civilian's got hold of an ato-projector."

"I know what's happened!" Sira exclaimed suddenly. "Wasil--a technie--has managed to broadcast the secret session! That upset their psychology. Oh!" Her face was alight, and she threw up her arms in ecstasy. As quickly she subsided, and tears came to her eyes.

"Wasil!" she cried. "If he is dead, Mellie will never forgive me!"

"Where is this technie?" Sime asked bruskly.

"In the broadcast room. But they have probably killed him."

"Never can be sure. Head her smack for the main entrance, Murray!"

Murray threw the car into a steep dive, and the hall portal rushed up to meet them. A soldier came partially out of concealment, waved a signal. Murray paid him no heed.

They struck with a crash. The stout car crushed through the glittering doors of metal and glass, and before the fragments fell the four men were in the thick of short, sharp and decisive battle. Their neuros hissed venomously, spanged as they met opposing beams. And the princess, struggling through the wreckage, wept tears of rage as the coarse fabric of her clothing caught, entangled hopelessly, and held her.

"Something queer!" Murray said, as they halted for breath after routing what little opposition they had encountered. "Maybe it's a trap. But what an expensive trap for somebody! Where's this broadcasting plant?"

"This way!" Tuman called eagerly. "Maybe we can still save the poor fellow who turned the trick. Broadcast the secret sessions! Don't tell me that little girl isn't fit to rule!"

The heavy metal doors were open, and they hurried in. But Tolto, noting that the princess had not followed, hurried out in search for her.

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Sime stumbled over a body. It had been a dark, sleek, youngish man. A jagged burn on his throat told of the needle-ray. "Who's this fellow, Murray?"

Murray glanced at the body. He smiled a brief smile of satisfaction.

"That's Scar Balta. Got what's coming to him at last. Help me with this bird: he's still alive. Cold, though!"

"Got a shot of neuro. Could this be the technie?"

Sime found a fountain of water. He filled a cup, dashed it over the still face. The shock made the man's lips move.

"Mellie, I did it!" he whispered.

"Who's Mellie?" Sime asked.

"Mellie? Seems to me the princess mentioned her name, This is her brother. He's the right guy! Take it easy, brother!"

But Wasil was able to sit up.

"I sure fooled him!" he gasped. "Mixed up the circuits. Scar Balta sat right here while I broadcast the secret
sessions, and he was watching a lot o' haywah in the control screen.

"When Wilcox got word from outside he knew he was done. He thought Scar'd double-exed him, so came here in person and gave him the needle-ray."

Despite his nausea, Wasil looked happy.

"Wilcox tried for me, but I dodged back of those frames. So he tried for me with the neuro. The mob was getting wild outside; there was--"

He could not finish. There was an explosion that shook the building to its foundations. Tolto came running in. Sira close after him:

"Joro is coming. Joro has detonated the warships. The hall guards have surrendered. The council is locked up. It can't escape!"

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Events were transpiring too fast for comprehension. It was several days later, on a bench in Prince Joro's palace grounds, that Sira summed it up for Sime Hemingway.

"I'm going to accept the throne!" she said. "I'm going to be a real queen. Joro has convinced me that it will be a real service to Mars. The dear old man has schemed and worked so long, so unselfishly."

"Yeh, and he wasn't afraid to fight!" Sime added admiringly. "When he came charging out of those ships with his gang of monarchists, swords flashing, it was a pretty sight to see. And when they closed in on that gang of cheap politicians! Talk about rats in a corner!"

"The prince can fight with his brains as well as with his sword." Sira submitted. "The whole thing would have been hopeless, if he hadn't invented the detonating ray that disposed of the warships. You remember those heavy explosions, shortly after we dropped in the hall, as one might say? Those were the last of them."

A silence fell between them, and Sime was now conscious of the fragile-seeming, so deceiving beauty of this Martian girl. Something had come between them, stripped away the masculine frankness that had existed during their short and dangerous time together. Perhaps it was the softly revealing drape of the thread-of-gold robe she was wearing--true queenly garb, donned by her for the first time.

"There is one requirement that Joro insists on," Sira said in a low voice.

"What's that?" asked Sime, marveling that such transparently pink fingers should handle a sword so well.

"He says that I must choose a mate, to insure the stability of the royal house."

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It seemed to Sime that this announcement gave him a pang out of all proportion.

"That should be easy," he managed. "Every Martian is crazy about you."

"He may not be a Martian. He must be a man of Earth," Sira stated firmly.

"Is that so?" Sime asked, genuinely surprised. "Why does Joro insist on that?"

"It is not Joro who insists. It is myself."

Sime found himself looking into eyes filled with shy pleading. He could not, would not, for all of the solar system, have committed the unpardonable affront of rejecting the love so frankly offered. And yet he did not know how to accept this miracle. He did it clumsily, haltingly disclosing the secret recesses of his own heart and what had transpired there since the night he had taken the knife away from her and kissed her.
Ben Tilman sat down in the easiest of all easy chairs. He picked up a magazine, flipped pages; stood up, snapped fingers; walked to the view wall, walked back; sat down, picked up the magazine.

He was waiting, near the end of the day, after hours, in the lush, plush waiting room--"The customer's ease is the Sales Manager's please"--to see the Old Man. He was fidgety, but not about something. About nothing. He was irritated at nobody, at the world; at himself.

He was irritated at himself because there was no clear reason for him to be irritated at anything.

There he sat, Ben Tilman, normally a cheerful, pleasant young man. He was a salesman like any modern man and a far better salesman than most. He had a sweet little wife, blonde and pretty. He had a fine, husky two-year-old boy, smart, a real future National Sales Manager. He loved them both. He had every reason to be contented with his highly desirable, comfortable lot.

And yet he had been getting more sour and edgy ever since about six months after the baby came home from the Center and the novelty of responsibility for wife and child had worn off. He had now quit three jobs, good enough sales jobs where he was doing well, in a year. For no reason? For petty, pointless reasons.

With Ancestral Insurance, "Generations of Protection," he'd made the Billion Dollar Club--and immediately begun to feel dissatisfied with it--just before cute, sexy, blonde Betty had suddenly come from nowhere into his life and he had married her. That had helped, sure. But as soon after that as he had started paying serious attention to his job again, he was fed up with it. "Too much paper work. All those forms. It's work for a robot, not a man," he'd told Betty when he quit. A lie. The paper work was, as he looked back on it, not bad at all; pleasant even, in a way. It was just--nothing. Anything.

Indoor-Outdoor Climatizers--sniffles, he said, kept killing his sales presentation even though his record was good enough. Ultra-sonic toothbrushes, then, were a fine product. Only the vibration, with his gold inlay, seemed to give him headaches after every demonstration. He didn't have a gold inlay. But the headaches were real enough. So he quit.

So now he had a great new job with a great organization, Amalgamated Production for Living--ALPRODLIV. He was about to take on his first big assignment.

For that he had felt a spark of the old enthusiasm and it had carried him into working out a bright new sales approach for the deal tonight. The Old Man himself had taken a personal interest, which was a terrific break. And still Ben Tilman felt that uneasy dissatisfaction. Damn.

"Mr. Robb will see you now, Mr. Tilman," said the cool robot voice from the Elec-Sec Desk. It was after customer hours and the charming human receptionist had gone. The robot secretary, like most working robots, was functional in form--circuits and wires, mike, speaker, extension arms to type and to reach any file in the room, wheels for intra-office mobility.

"Thanks, hon," said Ben. Nevertheless, robot secretaries were all programmed and rated female--and it was wise to be polite to them. After all, they could think and had feelings. There were a lot of important things they could do for a salesman--or, sometimes, not do. This one, being helpful, stretched out a long metal arm to open the door to the inner office for Ben. He smiled his appreciation and went in.

* * * * *

The Old Man, Amalgamated's grand old salesman, was billiard bald, aging, a little stout and a little slower now. But he was still a fine sales manager. He sat at his huge, old fashioned oak desk as Ben walked across the office.

"Evening, sir." No response. Louder, "Good evening, Mr. Robb. Mr. Robb, it's Ben, sir. Ben Tilman. You memo'd me to come--" Still no sign. The eyes, under the great, beetling brows, seemed closed.

Ben grinned and reached out across the wide desk toward the small, plastic box hanging on the Old Man's chest. The Old Man glanced up as Ben tapped the plastic lightly with his fingernail.

"Oh, Ben. It's you." The Old Man raised his hand to adjust the ancient style hearing aid he affected as Ben sank into a chair. "Sorry Ben. I just had old Brannic Z-IX in here. A fine old robot, yes, but like most of that model, long-winded. So--" He gestured at the hearing aid.

Ben smiled. Everyone knew the Old Man used that crude old rig so he could pointedly tune out conversations he didn't care to hear. Any time you were talking to him and that distant look came into his half closed eyes, you could be sure that you were cut off.

"Sorry, Ben. Well now. I simply wanted to check with you, boy. Everything all set for tonight?"
"Well, yes, sir. Everything is set and programmed. Betty and I will play it all evening for the suspense, let them wonder, build it up—and then, instead of the big pitch they'll be looking for, we'll let it go easy."

"A new twist on the old change-up. Ben, boy, it's going to go. I feel it. It's in the air, things are just ripe for a new, super-soft-sell pitch. Selling you've got to do by feel, eh Ben? By sales genius and the old seat of the pants. Good. After tonight I'm going all out, a hemisphere-wide, thirty day campaign. I'll put the top sales artist of every regional office on it. They can train on your test pattern tapes. I believe we can turn over billions before everybody picks up the signal and it senilesces. You give an old man a new faith in sales, Ben! You're a salesman."

"Well, sir--" But the Old Man's knack with the youthful-enthusiasm approach was contagious. For the moment Ben caught it and he felt pretty good about the coming night's work. He and Betty together would put the deal over. That would be something.

Sure it would...

"How do you and your wife like the place, Ben?" It was some place, for sure, the brand new house that Amalgamated had installed Ben, Betty and Bennie in the day after he had signed up.

"It's--uh--just fine, sir. Betty likes it very much, really. We both do." He hoped his tone was right.

"Good, Ben. Well, be sure to stop by in the morning. I'll have the tapes, of course, but I'll want your analysis. Might be a little vacation bonus in it for you, too."

"Sir, I don't know how to thank you."

The Old Man waved a hand. "Nothing you won't have earned, my boy. Robots can't sell." That was the set dismissal.

"Yes, sir. Robots can't manage sales, or--" He winked. The Old Man chuckled. An old joke was never too old for the Old Man. The same old bromides every time; and the same hearty chuckle. Ben left on the end of it.

* * * * *

Dialing home on his new, Company-owned, convertible soar-kart, he felt not too bad. Some of the old lift in spirits came as the kart-pilot circuits digested the directions, selected a route and zipped up into a north-north-west traffic pattern. The Old Man was a wonderful sales manager and boss. The new house-warming pitch that he and Betty would try tonight was smart. He could feel he had done something.

Exercising his sales ability with fair success, he fed himself this pitch all along the two hundred mile, twenty-minute hop home from the city. The time and distance didn't bother him. "Gives me time to think," he had told Betty. Whether or not this seemed to her an advantage, she didn't say. At least she liked the place, "Amalgamated's Country Gentleman Estate--Spacious, Yet fully Automated."

"We are," the Old Man told Ben when he was given the Company-assigned quarters, "starting a new trend. With the terrific decline in birth rate during the past 90 to 100 years, you'll be astonished at how much room there is out there. No reason for everyone to live in the suburban centers any more. With millions of empty apartments in them, high time we built something else, eh? Trouble with people today, no initiative in obsolescing. But we'll move them."

Home, Ben left the kart out and conveyed up the walk. The front door opened. Betty had been watching for him. He walked to the family vueroom, as usual declining to convey in the house. The hell with the conveyor's feelings, if so simple a robot really had any. He liked to walk.

"Color pattern," Betty ordered the vuescreen as he came in, "robot audio out." With people talking in the house it was still necessary to put the machines under master automatic and manual control. Some of the less sophisticated robots might pick up some chance phrase of conversation and interpret it as an order if left on audio.

"Ben," said Betty, getting up to meet him, "you're late."

Ben was too good a salesman to argue that. Instead, he took her in his arms and kissed her. It was a very good sixty seconds later that she pushed him away with a severeness destroyed by a blush and a giggle to say, "Late but making up for lost time, huh? And sober, too. You must be feeling good for a change."

"Sure--and you feel even better, sugar." He reached for her again. She slipped away from him, laughing, but his wrist tel-timer caught on the locket she always wore, her only memento from her parents, dead in the old moon-orb crash disaster. She stood still, slightly annoyed, as he unhooked and his mood was, not broken, but set back a little.

"What's got into you tonight anyway, Ben?"

"Oh, I don't know. Did I tell you, the O.M. may give us a vacation? Remember some of those nights up at that new 'Do It Yourself' Camp last summer?"

"Ben!" She blushed, smiled. "We won't get any vacation if we blow our house-warming pitch tonight, you know. And we have three couples due here in less than a half hour. Besides, I have to talk to you about Nana."

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"That damned new CD-IX model. Now what?"

"She's very upset about Bennie. I'm not sure I blame her. This afternoon he simply refused his indoctrination.
All the time he should have been playing store with Playmate he insisted on drawing things—himself, mind you, not Playmate. On the walls, with an old pencil of yours he found somewhere in your things. Nana couldn't do a thing with him. She says you've got to give him a spanking."

"Why me? Why not you?"

"Now Ben, we've been over that and over it. Discipline is the father's job."

"Well, I won't do it. Bennie's just a baby. Let him do a few things himself. Won't hurt him."

"Ben!"

"That Nana is an officious busybody, trying to run our lives."

"Oh, Ben! You know Nana loves little Bennie. She only wants to help him."

"But to what?"

"She'd never dream of lifting a finger against Bennie no matter what he did. And she lives in terror that he'll cut her switch in some temper tantrum."

"Hmph! Well, I'm going up right now and tell her if I hear another word from her about spanking Bennie, I'll cut her switch myself. Then she can go back to Central for reprogramming and see how she likes it."

"Ben! You wouldn't."

"Why not? Maybe she needs a new personality?"

"You won't say a thing to her. You're too soft-hearted."

"This time I won't be."

This time he wasn't. He met Nana CD-IX in the hallway outside Bennie's room. Like all nurse, teaching, and children's personal service robots, she was human in form, except for her control dial safely out of baby's reach, top, center.

The human form was reassuring to children, kept them from feeling strange with parents back. Nana was big, gray-haired, stout, buxom, motherly, to reassure parents.

"Now, Mr. Tilman," she said with weary impatience, "you are too late. Surely you don't intend to burst in and disturb your son now."

"Surely I do."

"But he is having his supper. You will upset him. Can't you understand that you should arrange to be here between 5:30 and 6 if you wish to interview the child?"

"Did he miss me? Sorry, I couldn't make it earlier. But now I am going to see him a minute."

"Mr. Tilman!"

"Nana! And what's this about your wanting Bennie spanked because he drew a few pictures?"

"Surely you realize these are the child's formative years, Mr. Tilman. He should be learning to think in terms of selling now—not doing things. That's robot work, Mr. Tilman. Robots can't sell, you know, and what will people, let alone robots think if you let your boy grow up—"

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"He's growing up fine; and I am going in to see him."

"Mr. Tilman!"

"And for two credits, Nana, I'd cut your switch. You hear me?"

"Mr. Tilman—no! No, please. I'm sorry. Let the boy scrawl a bit; perhaps it won't hurt him. Go in and see him if you must, but do try not to upset him or— All right, all right. But please Mr. Tilman, my switch—"

"Very well Nana. I'll leave it. This time."

"Thank you, Mr. Tilman."

"So we understand each other, Nana. Though, matter of fact, I'm hanged if I ever did quite see why you senior-level robots get so worked up about your identities."

"Wouldn't you, Mr. Tilman?"

"Of course. But—well, yes, I suppose I do see, in a way. Let's go see Bennie-boy."

So Ben Tilman went into the nursery and enjoyed every second of a fast fifteen-minute roughhouse with his round-faced, laughing, chubby son and heir. No doubt it was very bad, just after supper. But Nana, with a rather humanly anxious restraint, confined herself to an unobtrusive look of disapproval.

He left Bennie giggling and doubtless upset, at least to a point of uneagerness for Nana's bedtime story about Billie the oldtime newsboy, who sold the Brooklyn Bridge.

So then he was run through a fast ten-minute shower, shave and change by Valet. He floated downstairs just as Betty came out of the cocktail lounge to say, "Code 462112 on the approach indicator. Must be the Stoddards. They always get every place first, in time for an extra drink."

"Fred and Alice, yes. But damn their taste for gin, don't let Barboy keep the cork in the vermouth all evening. I like a touch of vermouth. I wonder if maybe I shouldn't—"
"No, you shouldn't mix the cocktails yourself and scandalize everybody. You know perfectly well Barboy really does do better anyway."

"Well, maybe. Everything all set, hon? Sorry I was late."

"No trouble here. I just fed Robutler the base program this morning and spent the rest of the day planning my side of our Sell. How to tantalize the girls, pique the curiosity without giving it away. But you know--" she laughed a little ruefully--"I sort of miss not having even the shopping to do. Sometimes it hardly seems as though you need a wife at all."

Ben slid an arm around her waist. "Selling isn't the only thing robots can't do, sugar." He pulled her close. 

"Ben! They're at the door." They were, and then in the door, oh-ing and ah-ing over this and that. And complimenting Barboy on the martinis. Then the Wilsons came and the Bartletts and that was it.

"Three couples will be right," Ben had analyzed it. "Enough so we can let them get together and build up each others' curiosity but not too many for easy control. People that don't know us so well they might be likely to guess the gimmick. We'll let them stew all evening while they enjoy the Country Gentleman House-Warming hospitality. Then, very casually, we toss it out and let it lie there in front of them. They will be sniffing, ready to nibble. The clincher will drive them right in. I'd stake my sales reputation on it." If it matters a damn, he added. But silently.

They entertained three couples at their house-warming party. It was a delightful party, a credit to Ben, Betty and the finest built-in house robots the mind of Amalgamated could devise.

By ten o'clock they had dropped a dozen or more random hints, but never a sales pitch. Suspense was building nicely when Betty put down an empty glass and unobtrusively pushed the button to cue Nana. Perfect timing. They apologized to the guests, "We're ashamed to be so old-fashioned but we feel better if we look in on the boy when he wakes in the night. It keeps him from forgetting us."

Then they floated off upstairs together, ostensibly to see Nana and little Bennie.

Fred Stoddard: "Some place they have here, eh? Off-beat. A little too advanced for my taste, this single dwelling idea, but maybe--Ben sure must have landed something juicy with Amalgamated to afford this. What the devil is he pushing, anyway?"

Scoville Wilson (shrug): "Beats me. You know, before dinner I cornered him at the bar to see if I could slip in a word or two of sell. Damned if he didn't sign an order for my Cyclo-sell Junior Tape Library without even a C level resistance. Then he talked a bit about the drinks and I thought sure he was pushing that new model Barboy. I was all set to come back with a sincere 'think it over'--and then he took a bottle from the Barboy, added a dash of vermouth to his drink and walked off without a word of sell. He always was an odd one."

Lucy Wilson (turns from woman talk with the other two wives): "Oh no! I knew it wasn't the Barboy set. They wouldn't have him set so slow. Besides didn't you hear the way she carried on about the nursery and that lovely Nana? That must have been a build-up, but Ben goofed his cue to move in on Sco and me for a close. Doesn't Amalgamated handle those nurseries?"

Tom Bartlett: "Amalgamated makes almost anything. That's the puzzle. I dunno--but it must be something big. He has to hit us with something, doesn't he?"

Belle Bartlett: "Who ever heard of a party without a sell?"

Nancy Stoddard: "Who ever heard of a party going past ten without at least a warm-up pitch? And Betty promised Fred to send both Ben and Bennie to the Clinic for their Medchecks. You know we have the newest, finest diagnosticians--"

Fred Stoddard: "Nancy!"

Nancy Stoddard: "Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be selling you folks at their party, should I? Come to think, you're all signed with Fred anyway, aren't you? Well, about Ben, I think--"

Lucy Wilson: "Sh-h-h! Here they come."

Smiling, charming--and still not an order form in sight--Ben and Betty got back to their guests. Another half hour. Barboy was passing around with nightcaps. Lucy Wilson nervously put a reducegar to her sophisticated, peppermint-striped lips.

Quickly Ben Tilman was on his feet. He pulled a small, metal cylinder from his pocket with a flourish and held it out on his open palm toward Lucy. A tiny robot Statue of Liberty climbed from the cylinder, walked across Ben's hand, smiled, curtsied and reached out to light the reducegar with her torch, piping in a high, thin voice, "Amalgamated reducegars are cooler, lighter, finer."

"Ben! How simply darling!"

"Do you like it? It's a new thing from Amalgamated NovelDiv. You can program it for up to a hundred selective sell phrases, audio or visio key. Every salesman should have one. Makes a marvelous gift, and surprisingly
reasonable."

"So that's it, Ben. I just love it!"

"Good! It's yours, compliments of Amalgamated."

"But--then you're not selling them? Well, what on earth--?"

"Damn it, Ben," Fred Stoddard broke in, "come on, man, out with it. What in hell are you selling? You've given
us the shakes. What is it? The Barboy set? It's great. If I can scrape up the down payment, I'll--"

"After we furnish a nursery with a decent Nana, Fred Stoddard," Nancy snapped, "and get a second soar-kart.
Ben isn't selling Barboys anyway, are you. Ben? It is that sweet, sweet Nana, isn't it? And I do want one, the whole
nursery, Playmate and all, girl-programmed of course, for our Polly."

"Is it the nursery, Betty?" Lucy pitched in her credit's worth. "Make him tell us, darling. We have enjoyed
everything so much, the dinner, the Tri-deo, this whole lovely, lovely place of yours. Certainly the house warming
has been perfectly charming."

"And that's it," said Ben smiling, a sheaf of paper forms suddenly in his hand.

"What? Not--?"

"The house, yes. Amalgamated's Country Gentleman Estate, complete, everything in it except Bennie, Betty
and me. Your equity in your Center co-op can serve as down payment, easy three-generation terms, issue insurance.
Actually, I can show you how, counting in your entertainment, vacation, incidental, and living expenses, the
Country Gentleman will honestly cost you less."

"Ben!"

"How simply too clever!"

Ben let it rest there. It was enough. Fred Stoddard, after a short scuffle with Scoville Wilson for the pen, signed
the contract with a flourish. Sco followed.

"There!"

"There now, Ben," said Betty, holding Bennie a little awkwardly in her arms in the soar-kart. They had moved
out so the Stoddards could move right in. Now they were on their way in to their reserved suite at Amalgamated's
Guest-ville. "You were absolutely marvellous. Imagine selling all three of them!"

"There wasn't anything to it, actually."

"Ben, how can you say that? Nobody else could have done it. It was a sales masterpiece. And just think. Now
salesmen all over the hemisphere are going to follow your sales plan. Doesn't it make you proud? Happy? Ben, you
aren't going to be like that again?"

No, of course he wasn't. He was pleased and proud. Anyway, the Old Man would be, and that, certainly, was
something. A man had to feel good about winning the approval of Amalgamated's grand Old Man. And it did seem
to make Betty happy.

But the actual selling of the fool house and even the two other, identical houses on the other side of the hill--he
just couldn't seem to get much of a glow over it. He had done it; and what had he done? It was the insurance and the
toothbrushes all over again, and the old nervous, sour feeling inside.

"At least we do have a vacation trip coming out of it, hon. The O.M. practically promised it yesterday, if our
sell sold. We could--"

"--go back to that queer new 'Do It Yourself' camp up on the lake you insisted on dragging me to the last week
of our vacation last summer. Ben, really!" He was going to be like that. She knew it.

"Well, even you admitted it was some fun."

"Oh, sort of, I suppose. For a little while. Once you got used to the whole place without one single machine that
could think or do even the simplest little thing by itself. So, well, almost like being savages. Do you think it would
be safe for Bennie? We can't watch him all the time, you know."

"People used to manage in the old days. And remember those people, the Burleys, who were staying up there?"

"That queer, crazy bunch who went there for a vacation when the Camp was first opened and then just stayed?
Honestly, Ben! Surely you're not thinking of--"

"Oh, nothing like that. Just a vacation. Only--"

Only those queer, peculiar people, the Burleys had seemed so relaxed and cheerful. Grandma and Ma Burley
cleaning, washing, cooking on the ancient electric stove; little Donnie, being a nuisance, poking at the keys on his
father's crude, manual typewriter, a museum piece; Donnie and his brothers wasting away childhood digging and
piling sand on the beach, paddling a boat and actually building a play house. It was mad. People playing robots. And
yet, they seemed to have a wonderful time while they were doing it.

"But how do you keep staying here?" he had asked Buck Burley, "Why don't they put you out?"

"Who?" asked Buck. "How? Nobody can sell me on leaving. We like it here. No robot can force us out. Here
we are. Here we stay."
They pulled into the Guest-ville ramp. Bennie was fussy; the nursery Nana was strange to him. On impulse, Betty took him in to sleep in their room, ignoring the disapproving stares of both the Nana and the Roboy with their things.

They were tired, let down. They went to bed quietly.

In the morning Betty was already up when Ben stumbled out of bed. "Hi," she said, nervously cheerful. "The house Nanas all had overload this morning and I won't stand for any of those utility components with Bennie. So I'm taking care of him myself."

Bennie chortled and drooled vita-meal at his high-chair, unreprimanded. Ben mustered a faint smile and turned to go dial a shave, cool shower and dress at Robather.

That done, he had a bite of breakfast. He felt less than top-sale, but better. Last night had gone well. The Old Man would give them a pre-paid vacation clearance to any resort in the world or out. Why gloom?

He rubbed Bennie's unruly hair, kissed Betty and conveyed over from Guest-ville to office.

Message-sec, in tone respect-admiration A, told him the Old Man was waiting for him. Susan, the human receptionist in the outer office, favored him with a dazzling smile. There was a girl who could sell; and had a product of her own, too.

The Old Man was at his big, oak desk but, a signal honor, he got up and came half across the room to grab Ben's hand and shake it. "Got the full report, son. Checked the tapes already. That's selling, boy! I'm proud of you. Tell you what, Ben. Instead of waiting for a sales slack, I'm going to move you and that sweet little wife of yours right into a spanking new, special Country Gentleman unit I had in mind for myself. And a nice, fat boost in your credit rating has already gone down to accounting. Good? Good. Now, Ben, I have a real, artistic sales challenge that is crying for your talent."

"Sir? Thank you. But, sir, there is the matter of the vacation--"

"Vacation? Sure, Ben. Take a vacation anytime. But right now it seems to the Old Man you're on a hot selling streak. I don't want to see you get off the track, son; your interests are mine. And wait till you get your teeth into this one. Books, Ben boy. Books! People are spending all their time sitting in on Tri-deo, not reading. People should read more, Ben. Gives them that healthy tired feeling. Now we have the product. We have senior Robo-writers with more circuits than ever before. All possible information, every conceivable plot. Maybe a saturation guilt type campaign to start--but it's up to you, Ben. I don't care how you do it, but move books."

"Books, eh? Well, now." Ben was interested. "Funny thing, sir, but that ties in with something I was thinking about just last night."

"You have an angle? Good boy!"

"Yes, sir. Well, it is a wild thought maybe, but last summer when I was on vacation I met a man up at that new camp and--well, I know it sounds silly, sir, but he was writing a book."

"Nonsense!"

"Just what I thought, sir. But I read some of it and, I don't know, it had a sort of a feel about it. Something new, sir, it might catch on."

"All right, all right. That's enough. You're a salesman. You've sold me."

"On the book?" Ben was surprised.

"Quit pulling an old man's leg, Ben. I'm sold on your needing a vacation. I'll fill out your vacation pass right now." The Old Man, still a vigorous, vital figure, turned and walked back to his Desk-sec. "Yes sir," said the secretarial voice, "got it. Vacation clearance for Tilman, Ben, any resort."

"And family," said Ben.

"And family. Very good, sir."

The Old Man made his sign on the pass and said heavily, "All right then, Ben. That's it. Maybe if you go back up to that place for a few days and see that psycho who was writing a book again, perhaps you'll realize how impractical it is."

"But sir! I'm serious about that book. It really did have--" he broke off.

The Old Man was sitting there, face blank, withdrawn. Ben could feel he wasn't even listening. That damned hearing aid of his. The Old Man had cut it off. Suddenly, unreasoningly, Ben was furious. He stood by the huge desk and he reached across toward the hearing aid on the Old Man's chest to turn up the volume. The Old Man looked up and saw Ben's hand stretching out.

A sudden look of fear came into his china blue, clear eyes but he made no move. He sat frozen in his chair.

Ben hesitated a second. "What--?" But he didn't have to ask. He knew.

And he also knew what he was going to do.

"No!" said the Old Man. "No, Ben. I've only been trying to help; trying to serve your best interests the best way
I know. Ben, you mustn't--"

But Ben moved forward.

* * * *

He took the plastic box on the Old Man's chest and firmly cut the switch.

The Old Man, the Robot Old Man, went lifeless and slumped back in his chair as Ben stretched to cut off the Desk-sec. Then he picked up his vacation clearance.

"Robots can't sell, eh?" he said to the dead machine behind the desk. "Well, you couldn't sell me that time, could you, Old Man?"

Clumsily, rustily, Ben whistled a cheerful little off-key tune to himself. Hell, they could do anything at all--except sell.

"You can't fool some of the people all of the time," he remarked over his shoulder to the still, silent figure of the Old Man as he left the office, "it was a man said that." He closed the door softly behind him.

Betty would be waiting.

Betty was waiting. Her head ached as she bounced Bennie, the child of Ben, of herself and of an unknown egg cell from an anonymous ovary, on her knees. Betty 3-RC-VIII, secret, wife-style model, the highest development of the art of Robotics had known instantly when Ben cut the Old Man's switch. She had half expected it. But it made her headache worse.

"But damn my programming!" She spoke abruptly, aloud, nervously fingering the locket around her neck. "Damn it and shift circuit. He's right! He is my husband and he is right and I'm glad. I'm glad we're going to the camp and I'm going to help him stay."

After all, why shouldn't a man want to do things just as much as a robot? He had energy, circuits, feelings too. She knew he did.

For herself, she loved her Ben and Bennie. But still just that wasn't enough occupation. She was glad they were going to the new isolation compound for non-psychotic but unstable, hyper-active, socially dangerous individual humans. At the camp there would be things to do.

At the camp they would be happy.

All at once the headache that had been bothering her so these past months was gone. She felt fine and she smiled at little Bennie. "Bennie-boy," she said, kissing his smooth, untroubled baby forehead. "Daddy's coming." Bennie laughed and started to reach for the locket around Mommy's neck. But just then the door opened and he jumped down to run and meet his daddy.

END
CHAPTER I
BLACK MAGIC

I had just finished breakfast, and deeply perplexed had risen from the table in order to get a box of matches to
light a cigarette, when my black cat got between my feet and tripped me up.

I fell forwards, making a clutch at the table-cloth. My forehead struck the corner of the fender and the last thing
I remembered was a crash of falling crockery. Then all became darkness. My parlour-maid found me lying face
downwards on the hearth-rug ten minutes later. My cat was sitting near my head, blinking contentedly at the fire. A
little blood was oozing from a wound above my left eye.

They carried me up to my bedroom and sent for my colleague, Wilfred Hammer, who lived next door. For three
days I lay insensible, and Hammer came in continually, whenever he could spare the time from his patients, and
brooded over me. On the fourth day I began to move about in my bed, restless and muttering, and Hammer told me
afterwards that I seemed to be talking of a black cat. On the night of the fourth day I suddenly opened my eyes. My
perplexity had left me. An idea, clear as crystal, was now in my mind.

From that moment my confinement to bed was a source of impatience to me. Hammer, large, fair, square-
headed, and imperturbable, insisted on complete rest, and I chafed under the restraint. I had only one desire—to get
up, slip down to St. Dane's Hospital in my car, mount the bare stone steps that led up to the laboratory and begin
work at once.

"Let me up, Hammer," I implored.
"My dear fellow, you're semi-delirious."
"I must get up," I muttered.
He laughed slowly.
"Not for another week or two, Harden. How is the black cat?"
"That cat is a wizard."
I lay watching him between half-closed eyelids.
"He gave me the idea."
"He gave you a nasty concussion," said Hammer.
"It was probably the only way to the idea," I answered. "I tell you the cat is a wizard. He did it on purpose. He's
a black magician."

Hammer laughed again, and went towards the door.
"Then the idea must be black magic," he said.
I smiled painfully, for my head was throbbing. But I was happier than I had ever been, for I had solved the
problem that had haunted my brain for ten years.
"There's no such thing as black magic," I said.
Three weeks later I beheld the miracle. It was wrought on the last day of December, in the laboratory of the
hospital, high above the gloom and squalor of the city. The miracle occurred within a brilliant little circle of light,
and I saw it with my eye glued to a microscope. It passed off swiftly and quietly, and though I expected it, I was
filled with a great wonder and amazement.

To a lay mind the amazement with which I beheld the miracle will require explanation. I had witnessed the
transformation of one germ into another; a thing which is similar to a man seeing a flock of sheep on a hill-side
change suddenly into a herd of cattle. For many minutes I continued to move the slide in an aimless way with
trembling fingers. My temperament is earthy; it had once occurred to me quite seriously that if I saw a miracle I
would probably go mad under the strain. Now that I had seen one, after the first flash of realization my mind was
listless and dull, and all feeling of surprise had died away. The black rods floated with slow motion in the minute
currents of fluid I had introduced. The faint roar of London came up from far below; the clock ticked steadily and
the microscope lamp shone with silent radiance. And I, Richard Harden, sat dangling my short legs on the high
stool, thinking and thinking....

That night I wrote to Professor Sarakoff. A month later I was on my way to Russia.

CHAPTER II
SARAKOFF'S MANIFESTO

The recollection of my meeting with Sarakoff remains vividly in my mind. I was shown into a large bare room,
heated by an immense stove like an iron pagoda. The floor was of light yellow polished wood; the walls were white-washed, and covered with pencil marks. A big table covered with papers and books stood at one end. At the other, through an open doorway, there was a glimpse of a laboratory. Sarakoff stood in the centre of the room, his hands deep in his pockets, his pipe sending up clouds of smoke, his tall muscular frame tilted back. His eyes were fixed on an extraordinary object that crawled slowly over the polished floor. It was a gigantic tortoise—a specimen of Testudo elephantopus—a huge cumbersome brute. Its ancient, scaly head was thrust out and its eyes gleamed with a kind of sharp intelligence. The surface of its vast and massive shell was covered over with scribbles in white chalk—notes made by Sarakoff who was in the habit of jotting down figures and formulae on anything near at hand.

As there was only one chair in the room, Sarakoff eventually thrust me into it, while he sat down on the great beast—whom he called Belshazzar—and told me over and over again how glad he was to see me. And this warmth of his was pleasant to me.

"Are you experimenting on Belshazzar?" I asked at length.
He nodded, and smiled enigmatically.
"He is two hundred years old," he said. "I want to get at his secret."

That was the first positive proof I got of the line of research Sarakoff was intent upon, although, reading between the lines of his many publications, I had guessed something of it.

In every way, Sarakoff was a complete contrast to me. Tall, lean, black-bearded and deep-voiced, careless of public opinion and prodigal in ideas, he was just my antithesis. He was possessed of immense energy. His tousled black hair, moustaches and beard seemed to bristle with it; it shone in his pale blue eyes. He was full of sudden violence, flinging test-tubes across the laboratory, shouting strange songs, striding about snapping his fingers. There was no repose in him. At first I was a little afraid of him, but the feeling wore off. He spoke English fluently, because when a boy he had been at school in London.

I will not enter upon a detailed account of our conversation that first morning in Russia, when the snow lay thick on the roofs of the city, and the ferns of frost sparkled on the window-panes of the laboratory. Briefly, we found ourselves at one over many problems of human research, and I congratulated myself on the fact that in communicating the account of the miracle at St. Dane's Hospital to Sarakoff alone, I had done wisely. He was wonderfully enthusiastic.

"That discovery of yours has furnished the key to the great riddle I had set myself," he exclaimed, striding to and fro. "We will astonish the world, my friend. It is only a question of time."
"But what is the riddle you speak of?" I asked.
"I will tell you soon. Have patience!" he cried. He came towards me impulsively and shook my hand. "We shall find it beyond a doubt, and we will call it the Sarakoff-Harden Bacillus! What do you think of that?"

I was somewhat mystified. He sat down again on the back of the tortoise, smoking in his ferocious manner and smiling and nodding to himself. I though it best to let him disclose his plans in his own way, and kept back the many eager questions that rose to my lips.

"It seems to me," said Sarakoff suddenly, "that England would be the best place to try the experiment. There's a telegraph everywhere, reporters in every village, and enough newspapers to carpet every square inch of the land. In a word, it's a first-class place to watch the results of an experiment."
"On a large scale?"
"On a gigantic scale—an experiment, ultimately, on the world."
I was puzzled and was anxious to draw him into fuller details.
"It would begin in England?" I asked carelessly.
He nodded.
"But it would spread. You remember how the last big outbreak of influenza, which started in this country, spread like wildfire until the waves, passing east and west, met on the other side of the globe? That was a big experiment."
"Of nature," I added.
He did not reply.
"An experiment of nature, you mean?" I urged. At the time of the last big outburst of influenza which began in Russia, Sarakoff must have been a student. Did he know anything about the origin of the mysterious and fatal visitation?
"Yes, of nature," he replied at last, but not in a tone that satisfied me. His manner intrigued me so much that I felt inclined to pursue the subject, but at that moment we were interrupted in a singular way.

The door burst open, and into the room rushed a motley crowd of men. Most of them were young students, but here and there I saw older men, and at the head of the mob was a white-bearded individual, wearing an astrachan cap, who brandished a copy of some Russian periodical in his hand.
Belshazzar drew in his head with a hiss that I could hear even above the clamour of this intrusion.

A furious colloquy began, which I could not understand, since it was in Russian. Sarakoff stood facing the angry crowd coolly enough, but that he was inwardly roused to a dangerous degree, I could tell from his gestures. The copy of the periodical was much in evidence. Fists were shaken freely. The aged, white-bearded leader worked himself up into a frenzy and finally jumped on the periodical, stamping it under his feet until he was out of breath.

Then this excited band trooped out of the room and left us in peace.

"What is it?" I asked when their steps had died away.

Sarakoff shrugged his shoulders and then laughed. He picked up the battered periodical and pointed to an article in it.

"I published a manifesto this morning—that is all," he remarked airily.

"What sort of manifesto?"

"On the origin of death." He sat down on Belshazzar's broad back and twisted his moustaches. "You see, Harden, I believe that in a few more years death will only exist as an uncertain element, appearing rarely, as an unnatural and exceptional incident. Life will be limitless; and the length of years attained by Belshazzar will seem as nothing."

It is curious how the spirit of a new discovery broods over the world like a capricious being, animating one investigator here, another there; partially revealing itself in this continent, disclosing another of its secrets in that, until all the fragments when fitted together make up the whole wonder. It seems that my discovery, coupled with the results of his own unpublished researches, had led Sarakoff to make that odd manifesto. Our combined work, although carried out independently, had given the firm groundwork of an amazing theory which Sarakoff had been maturing in his excited brain for many long years.

Sarakoff translated the manifesto to me. It was a trifle bombastic, and its composition appeared to me vague. No wonder it had roused hostility among his colleagues, I thought, as Sarakoff walked about, declaiming with outstretched arm. Put as briefly as possible, Sarakoff held all disease as due to germs of one sort or another; and decay of bodily tissue he regarded in the same light. In such a theory I stood beside him.

He continued to translate from the soiled and torn periodical, waving his arm majestically.

"We have only to eliminate all germs from the world to banish disease and decay—and death. Such an end can be attained in one way alone; a way which is known only to me, thanks to a magnificent series of profound investigations. I announce, therefore, that the disappearance of death from this planet can be anticipated with the utmost confidence. Let us make preparations. Let us consider our laws. Let us examine our resources. Let us, in short, begin the reconstruction of society."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, and sat staring at him.

He twirled his moustaches and observed me with shining eyes.

"What do you think of it?"

I shrugged my shoulders helplessly.

"Surely it is far fetched?"

"Not a bit of it. Now listen to me carefully. I'll give you, step by step, the whole matter." He walked up and down for some minutes and then suddenly stopped beside me and thumped me on the back. "There's not a flaw in it!" he cried. "It's magnificent. My dear fellow, death is only a failure in human perfection. There's nothing mysterious in it. Religion has made a ridiculous fuss about it. There's nothing more mysterious in it than there is in a badly-oiled engine wearing out. Now listen. I'm going to begin...."

I listened, fascinated.

CHAPTER III
THE BUTTERFLIES

Two years passed by after my return to London without special incident, save that my black cat died. My work as a consulting physician occupied most of my time. In the greater world beyond my consulting-room door life went on undisturbed by any thought of the approaching upheaval, full of the old tragedies of ambition and love and sickness. But sometimes as I examined my patients and listened to their tales of suffering and pain, a curious contraction of the heart would come upon me at the thought that perhaps some day, not so very far remote, all the endless cycle of disease and misery would cease, and a new dawn of hope burst with blinding radiance upon weary humanity. And then a mood of unbelief would darken my mind and I would view the creation of the bacillus as an idle and vain dream, an illusion never to be realized....

One evening as I sat alone before my study fire, my servant entered and announced there was a visitor to see me.

"Show him in here," I said, thinking he was probably a late patient who had come on urgent business.

A moment later Professor Sarakoff himself was shown in.
I rose with a cry of welcome and clasped his hand.
"My dear fellow, why didn't you let me know you were coming?" I cried.
He smiled upon me with a mysterious brightness.
"Harden," he said in a low voice, as if afraid of being heard, "I came on a sudden impulse. I wanted to show you something. Wait a moment."
He went out into the hall and returned bearing a square box in his hands. He laid it on the table and then carefully closed the door.
"It is the first big result of my experiments," he whispered. He opened the box and drew out a glass case covered over with white muslin.
He stepped back from the table and looked at me triumphantly.
"What is it?" I asked.
"Lift up the muslin."
I did so. On the wooden floor of the glass case were a great number of dark objects. At first I thought they were some kind of grub, and then on closer inspection I saw what they were.
"Butterflies!" I exclaimed.
He held up a warning finger and tiptoed to the door. He opened it suddenly and seemed relieved to find no one outside.
"Hush!" he said, closing the door again. "Yes, they are butterflies." He came back to the table and gave one of the glass panels a tap with his finger. The butterflies stirred and some spread their wings. They were a brilliant greenish purple shot with pale blue. "Yes, they are butterflies."
I peered at them.
"The specimen is unknown in England as far as I know."
"Quite so. They are peculiar to Russia."
"But what are you doing with them?" I asked.
He continued to smile.
"Do you notice anything remarkable about these butterflies?"
"No," I said after prolonged observation, "I can't say I do ... save that they are not denizens of this country."
"I think we might christen them," he said. "Let us call them Lepidoptera Sarakoffii." He tapped the glass again and watched the insects move. "But they are very remarkable," he continued. "Do they appear healthy to you?"
"Perfectly."
"You agree, then, that they are in good condition?"
"They seem to be in excellent condition."
"No signs of decay--or disease?"
"None."
He nodded.
"And yet," he said thoughtfully, "they should be, according to natural law, a mass of decayed tissue."
"Ah!" I looked at him with dawning comprehension. "You mean------?"
"I mean that they should have died long ago."
"How long do they live normally?"
"About twenty to thirty hours. At the outside their life is not more than thirty-six hours. These are somewhat older."
I gazed at the little creatures crawling aimlessly about. Aimless, did I say? There they were, filling up the floor of the glass case, moving with difficulty, getting in each other's way, sprawling and colliding, apparently without aim or purpose. At that spectacle my thoughts might well have taken a leap into the future and seen, instead of a crowded mass of butterflies, a crowded mass of humanity. I asked Sarakoff a question.
"How old are they?" I expected to hear they had existed perhaps a day or two beyond their normal limit.
"They are almost exactly a year old," was the reply. I stared, marvelling. A year old! I bent down, gazing at the turbulent restless mass of gaudy colour. A year old--and still vital and healthy!
"You mean these insects have lived a whole year?" I exclaimed, still unconvinced.
He nodded.
"But that is a miracle!"
"It is, proportionately, equal to a man living twenty-five thousand years instead of the normal seventy."
"You don't suggest------?"
He replaced the muslin covering and took out his pipe and tobacco pouch. Absurd, outrageous ideas crowded to my mind. Was it, then, possible that our dream was to become reality?
"I don't suppose they'll live much longer," I stammered.
He was silent until he had lit his pipe.

"If you met a man who had lived twenty-five thousand years, would you be inclined to tell me he would not live much longer, simply on general considerations?"

I could not find a satisfactory answer.

As a matter of fact the question scarcely conveyed anything to me. One can realize only by reference to familiar standards. The idea of a man who has lived one hundred and fifty years is to me a more realistic curiosity than the idea of a man twenty-five thousand years old. But I caught a glimpse, as it were, of strange figures, moving about in a colourless background, with calm gestures, slow speeches, silences perhaps a year in length. The familiar outline of London crumbled suddenly away, the blotsches of shadow and the coloured shafts of light striking between the gaps in the crowds, the violet-lit tubes, the traffic, faded into the conception of twenty-five thousand years. All this many-angled, many-coloured modern spectacle that was a few thousand years removed from cave dwellings, was rolled flat and level, merging into this grey formless carpet of time.

Next morning Sarakoff returned to Russia, bearing with him the wonderful butterflies, and for many months I heard nothing from him. But before he went he told me that he would return soon.

"I have only one step further to take and the ideal germ will be created, Harden. Then we poor mortals will realize the dream that has haunted us since the beginning of time. We will attain immortality, and the fear of death, round which everything is built, will vanish. We will become gods!"

"Or devils, Sarakoff," I murmured.

CHAPTER IV

THE SIX TUBES

One night, just as I entered my house, the telephone bell in the hall rang sharply. I picked up the receiver impatiently, for I was tired with the long day's work.

"Is that Dr. Harden?"

"Yes."

"Can you come down to Charing Cross Station at once? The station-master is speaking."

"An accident?"

"No. We wish you to identify a person who has arrived by the boat-train. The police are detaining him as a suspect. He gave your name as a reference. He is a Russian."

"All right. I'll come at once."

I hung up the receiver and told the servant to whistle for a taxi-cab. Ten minutes later I was picking my way through the crowds on the platform to the station-master's office. I entered, and found a strange scene being enacted. On one side of a table stood Sarakoff, very flushed, with shining eyes, clasping a black bag tightly to his breast. On the other side stood a group of four men, the station-master, a police officer, a plain clothes man and an elderly gentleman in white spats. The last was pointing an accusing finger at Sarakoff.

"Open that bag and we'll believe you!" he shouted.

Sarakoff glared at him defiantly.

I recognized his accuser at once. It was Lord Alberan, the famous Tory obstructionist.

"Anarchist!" Lord Alberan's voice rang out sharply. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his face.

"Arrest him!" he said to the constable with an air of satisfaction. "I knew he was an anarchist the moment I set eyes on him at Dover. There is an infernal machine in that bag. The man reeks of vodka. He is mad."

"Idiot," exclaimed Sarakoff, with great vehemence. "I drink nothing but water."

"He wishes to destroy London," said Lord Alberan coldly. "There is enough dynamite in that bag to blow the whole of Trafalgar Square into fragments. Arrest him instantly."

I stepped forward from the shadows by the door. Sarakoff uttered a cry of pleasure.

"Ah, Harden, I knew you would come. Get me out of this stupid situation!"

"What is the matter?" I asked, glancing at the station-master. He explained briefly that Lord Alberan and Sarakoff had travelled up in the same compartment from Dover, and that Sarakoff's strange restlessness and excited movements had roused Lord Alberan's suspicions. As a consequence Sarakoff had been detained for examination.

"If he would open his bag we should be satisfied," added the station-master. I looked at my friend significantly.

"Why not open it?" I asked. "It would be simplest."

My words had the effect of quieting the excited professor. He put the bag on the table, and placed his hands on the top of it.

"Very well," he said slowly, "I will open it, since my friend Dr. Harden has requested me to do so."

"Stand back!" cried Lord Alberan, flinging out his arms. "We may be so much dust flying over London in a moment."

Sarakoff took out a key and unlocked the bag. There was silence for a moment, only broken by hurting
footsteps on the platform without. Then Lord Alberan stepped cautiously forward.

He saw the worn canvas lining of the bag. He took a step nearer and saw a wooden rack, fitted in the interior, containing six glass tubes whose mouths were stopped with plugs of cotton wool.

"You see, there is nothing important there," said Sarakoff with a smile. "These objects are of purely scientific interest." He took out one of the tubes and held it up to the light. It was half full of a semi-transparent jelly-like mass, faintly blue in colour. The detective, the policeman and the station official clustered round, their faces turned up to the light and their eyes fixed on the tube. The Russian looked at them narrowly, and reading nothing but dull wonderment in their expressions, began to speak again.

"Yes--the Bacillus Pyocyaneus," he said, with a faint mocking smile and a side glance at me. "It is occasionally met with in man and is easily detected by the blue bye-product it gives off while growing." He twisted the tube slowly round. "It is quite an interesting culture," he continued idly. "Do you observe the uniform distribution of the growth and the absence of any sign of liquefaction in the medium?"

Lord Alberan cleared his throat.

"I--er--I think we owe you an apology," he said. "My suspicions were unfounded. However, I did my duty to my country by having you examined. You must admit your conduct was suspicious--highly suspicious, sir!"

Sarakoff replaced the tube and locked the bag. Lord Alberan marched to the door and held it open.

"We need not detain you, sir," said the detective. The policeman squared his shoulders and hitched up his belt. The station official looked nervous.

Dr. Sarakoff, with a gesture of indifference, picked up the bag and, touching the worn leather lovingly, "contains six tubes of the Sarakoff-Harden bacillus. Yes, I have added your name to it. I will make your name immortal--by coupling it with mine."

"But what is the Sarakoff-Harden bacillus?" I cried.

He struck an attitude under the viperish glare of the lamp and smiled. He certainly did look like an anarchist at the moment. He loomed over me, huge, satanic, inscrutable.

A thrill, almost of fear, passed over me. I glanced round in some apprehension. Under an archway near by I saw Lord Alberan looking fixedly at us. The expression of suspicion had returned to his face.

"You mean----?" He nodded. I gulped a little. "You really have----?" He continued to nod. "Then we can try the great experiment?" I whispered, dry throated.

"At once!" The detective passed us, brushing against my shoulder. I caught Sarakoff by the arm.

"Look here--we must get away," I muttered. I felt like a criminal. Sarakoff clasped the bag firmly under his free arm. We began to walk hurriedly away. Our manner was furtive. Once I looked back and saw Alberan talking, with excited gestures, to the detective. They were both looking in our direction. The impulse to run possessed me.

"Quick," I exclaimed, "there's a taxi. Jump in. Drive to Harley Street--like the devil."

Inside the cab I lay back, my mind in a whirl.

"We begin the experiment to-morrow," said Sarakoff at last. "Have you made plans as I told you?"

"Yes--yes. Of course. Only I never believed it possible." I controlled myself and sat up. "I fixed on Birmingham. It seemed best--but I never dreamed----"

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Birmingham, then!"

"Their water supply comes from Wales."

We spoke no more till I turned the key of my study door behind me. It was in this way that the germ, which made so vast and strange an impression on the course of the world's history, first reached England. It had lain under the very nose of Lord Alberan, who opposed everything new automatically. Yet it, the newest of all things, escaped his vigilance.

We decided to put our plans into action without delay, and next morning we set off, carrying with us the precious tubes of the Sarakoff-Harden bacillus. Throughout the long journey we scarcely spoke to each other. Each of us was absorbed in his picture of the future effects of the germ.

There was one strange fact that Sarakoff had told me the night before, and that I had verified. The bacillus was ultra-microscopical--that is, it could not be seen, even with the highest power, under the microscope. Its presence was only to be detected by the blue stain it gave off during its growth.

CHAPTER V

THE GREAT AQUEDUCT

The Birmingham reservoirs are a chain of lakes artificially produced by damming up the River Elan, a tributary
of the Wye. The great aqueduct which carries the water from the Elan, eighty miles across country, travelling through hills and bridging valleys, runs past Ludlow and Cleobury Mortimer, through the Wyre Forest to Kidderminster, and on to Birmingham itself through Frankley, where there is a large storage reservoir from which the water is distributed.

The scenery was bleak and desolate. Before us the sun was sinking in a flood of crimson light. We walked briskly, the long legs of the Russian carrying him swiftly over the uneven ground while I trotted beside him. Before the last rays of the sun had died away we saw the black outline of the Caban Loch dam before us, and caught the sheen of water beyond. On the north lay the river Elan and on the south the steep side of a mountain towered up against the luminous sky. The road runs along the left bank of the river bounded by a series of bold and abrupt crags that rise to a height of some eight hundred feet above the level of the water. Just below the Caban Dam is a house occupied by an inspector in charge of the gauge apparatus that is used to measure the outflow of water from the huge natural reservoirs. The lights from his house twinkled through the growing darkness as we drew near, and we skirted it by a short detour and pressed on.

"How long does water take to get from here to Birmingham?" asked Sarakoff as we climbed up to the edge of the first lake.

"It travels about a couple of miles an hour," I replied. "So that means about a day and a half."

We spoke in low voices, for we were afraid of detection. The presence of two visitors at that hour might well have attracted attention.

"A day and a half! Then the bacillus has a long journey to take." He stopped at the margin of the water and stared across the shadowy lake. "Yes, it has a long journey to take, for it will go round the whole world."

The last glow in the sky tinted the calm sheet of water a deep blood colour. Sarakoff opened his bag and took out a couple of tubes.

He pulled the cotton-wool plugs out of the tubes, and with a long wire, loosened the gelatinous contents. Then, inverting the tubes he flung them into the lake close to the beginning of the huge aqueduct.

I stared as the tubes vanished from sight, feeling that it was too late to regret what had now been done, for nothing could collect those millions of bacilli, that had been set free in the water. Already some of them had perhaps entered the dark cavernous mouth of the first culvert to start on their slow journey to Birmingham. The light faded from the sky and darkness spread swiftly over the lake. Sarakoff emptied the remaining tubes calmly and then turned his footsteps in the direction of Rhayader. I waited a moment longer in the deep silence of that lonely spot; and then with a shiver followed my friend. The bacillus had been let loose on the world.

CHAPTER VI
THE ATTITUDE OF MR. THORNDUCK

We reached London next day in the afternoon. I felt exhausted and could scarcely answer Sarakoff, who had talked continuously during the journey.

But his theory had interested me. The Russian had revealed much of his character, under the stress of excitement. He spoke of the coming of Immortality in the light of a physical boon to mankind. He seemed to see in his mind's eye a great picture of comfort and physical enjoyment and of a humanity released from the grim spectres of disease and death, and ceaselessly pursuing pleasure.

"I love life," he remarked. "I love fame and success. I love comfort, ease, laughter, and companionship. The whole of Nature is beautiful to me, and a beautiful woman is Nature's best reward. Now that the dawn of Immortality is at hand, Harden, we must set about reorganizing the world so that it may yield the maximum of pleasure."

"But surely there will be some limit to pleasure?" I objected.

"Why? Can't you see that is just what there will not be?" he cried excitedly. "We are going to do away with the confining limits. Your imagination is too cramped! You sit there, huddled up in a corner, as if we had let loose a dreadful plague on Birmingham!"

"It may prove to be so," I muttered. I do not think I had any clear idea as to the future, but there is a natural machinery in the mind that doubts golden ages and universal panaceas. Call it superstition if you will, but man's instinct tells him he cannot have uninterrupted pleasure without paying for it. I said as much to the Russian.

He gave vent to a roar of laughter.

"You have all the caution and timidity of your race," he said. "You are fearful even in your hour of deliverance. My friend, it is impossible to conceive, even faintly, of the change that will come over us towards the meaning of life. Can't you see that, as soon as the idea of Immortality gets hold of people, they will devote all their energies to making their earth a paradise? Why, it is obvious. They will then know that there is no other paradise."

He took out his watch and made a calculation. His face became flushed.

"The bacillus has travelled forty-two miles towards Birmingham," he said, just as our train drew in to the
London terminus.

I was busy with patients until dinner-time and did not see anything of Sarakoff. While working, my exhaustion and anxiety wore off, and were replaced by a mild exhilaration. One of my patients was a professor of engineering at a northern university; a brilliant young man, who, but for physical disease, had the promise of a great career before him. He had been sent to me, after having made a round of the consultants, to see if I could give him any hope as to the future. I went into his case carefully, and then addressed him a question.

"What is your own view of your case, Mr. Thornduck?"

He looked surprised. His face relaxed, and he smiled. I suppose he detected a message of hope in my expression.

"I have been told by half-a-dozen doctors that I have not long to live, Dr. Harden," he replied. "But it is very difficult for me to grasp that view. I find that I behave as if nothing were the matter. I still go on working. I still see goals far ahead. Death is just a word--frequently uttered, it is true--but meaningless. What am I to do?"

"Go on working."

"And am I to expect only a short lease of life?"

I rose from my writing-table and walked to the hearth. A surge of power came over me as I thought of the bacillus which was so silently and steadily advancing on Birmingham.

"Do you believe in miracles?" I asked.

"That is an odd question." He reflected for a time. "No, I don't think so. All one is taught now-a-days is in a contrary direction, isn't it?"

"Yes, but our knowledge only covers a very small field--perhaps an artificially isolated one, too."

"Then you think only a miracle will save my life?"

I nodded and gazed at him.

"You seem amused," he remarked quietly.

"I am not amused, Mr. Thornduck. I am very happy."

"Does my case interest you?"

"Extremely. As a case, you are typical. Your malady is invariably fatal. It is only one of the many maladies that we know to be fatal, while we remain ignorant of all else. Under ordinary circumstances, you would have before you about three years of reasonable health and sanity."

"And then?"

"Well, after that you would be somewhat helpless. You would begin to employ that large section of modern civilization that deals with the somewhat helpless."

I began to warm to my theme, and clasped my hands behind my back.

"Yes, you would pass into that class that disproves all theories of a kindly Deity, and you would become an undergraduate in the vast and lamentable University of Suffering, through whose limitless corridors we medical men walk with weary footsteps. Ah, if only an intelligent group of scientists had had the construction of the human body to plan! Think what poor stuff it is! Think how easy it would have been to make it more enduring! The cell--what a useless fragile delicacy! And we are made of millions of these useless fragile delicacies."

To my surprise he laughed with great amusement. He stood there, young, pleasant, and smiling. I stared at him with a curious uneasiness. For the moment I had forgotten what it had been my intention to say. The dawn of Immortality passed out of my mind, and I found myself gazing, as it were, on something strangely mysterious.

"Your religion helps you?" I hazarded.

"Religion?" He mused for a moment. "Don't you think there is some meaning behind our particular inevitable destinies--that we may perhaps have earned them?"

"Nonsense! It is all the cruel caprice of Nature, and nothing else."

"Oh, come, Dr. Harden, you surely take a larger view. Do you think the short existence we have here is all the chance of activity we ever have? That I have a glimpse of engineering, and you have a short phase of doctoring on this planet, and that then we have finished all experience?"

"Certainly. It would not be possible to take any other view--horrible."

"But you believe in some theory of evolution--of slow upward progress?"

"Yes, of course. That is proved beyond all doubt."

"And yet you think it applies only to the body--to the instrument--and not to the immaterial side of us?"

I stared at him in astonishment.

"I do not think there is any immaterial side, Mr. Thornduck."

He smiled.

"A very unsatisfying view, surely?" he remarked.

"Unsatisfying, perhaps, but sound science," I retorted.
“Sound?” He pondered for an instant. “Can a thing be sound and unsatisfying at the same time? When I see a machine that's ugly—that's unsatisfying from the artist's point of view—I always know it's wrongly planned and inefficient. Don't you think it's the same with theories of life?” He took out his watch and glanced at it. "But I must not keep you. Good-bye, Dr. Harden."

He went to the door, nodded, and left the room before I recalled that I meant to hint to him that a miracle was going to happen, and save his life. I remained on the hearth-rug, wondering what on earth he meant.

CHAPTER VII

LEONORA

I found a note in the hall from Sarakoff asking me to come round to the Pyramid Restaurant at eight o'clock to meet a friend of his. It was a crisp clear evening, and I decided to walk. There were two problems on my mind. One was the outlook of Sarakoff, which even I deemed to be too materialistic. The other was the attitude of young Thornduck, which was obviously absurd.

In my top hat and solemn frock-coat I paced slowly down Harley Street.

Thornduck talked as if suffering, as if all that side of existence which the Blue Germ was to do away with, were necessary and salutary. Sarakoff spoke as if pleasure was the only aim of life. Now, though sheer physical pleasure had never entered very deeply into my life, I had never denied the fact that it was the only motive of the majority of my patients. For what was all our research for? Simply to mitigate suffering; and that is another way of saying that it was to increase physical well-being. Why, then, did Sarakoff's views appear extreme to me? What was there in my composition that whispered a doubt when I had the doctrine of maximum pleasure painted with glowing enthusiasm by the Russian in the train that afternoon?

I moved into Oxford Street deeply pondering. The streets were crowded, and from shop windows there streamed great wedges of white and yellow light. The roar of traffic was round me. The 'buses were packed with men and women returning late from business, or on the way to seek relaxation in the city's amusements. I passed through the throng as through a coloured mist of phantoms. My eyes fastened on the faces of those who passed by. Who could really doubt the doctrine of pleasure? Which one of those people would hesitate to plunge into the full tide of the senses, did not the limitations of the body prevent him?

I crossed Piccadilly Circus with a brisker step. It was no use worrying over questions which could not be examined scientifically. The only really important question in life was to be a success.

The brilliant entrance of the Pyramid Restaurant was before me, and within, standing on the marble floor, I saw the tall figure of the Russian. Sarakoff greeted me with enthusiasm. He was wearing evening-dress with a white waistcoat, and the fact perturbed me. I put my hat and stick in the cloakroom.

"Who is coming?" I asked anxiously.

"Leonora," he whispered. "I only found out she was in London this afternoon. I met her when I was strolling in the Park while you were busy with your patients."

"But who is Leonora?" I asked. "And can I meet her in this state?"

"Oh, never mind about your dress. You are a busy doctor and she will understand. Leonora is the most marvellous woman in the world. I intend to make her marry me."

"Is she English?" I stammered.

He laughed.

"Little man, you look terrified, as usual. You are always terrified. It is your habit. No, Leonora is not English. She is European. If you went out into the world of amusement a little more—and it would be good for you—you would know that she has the most exquisite voice in the history of civilization. She transcends the nightingale because her body is beautiful. She transcends the peacock because her voice is beautiful. She is, in fact, worthy of every homage, and you will meet her in a short time. Like all perfect things she is late."

He took out his watch and glanced at the door.

"You are an extraordinary person, Sarakoff," I observed, after watching him a moment. "Will you answer me a rather intimate question?"

"Certainly."

"What precisely do you mean when you say you intend to make the charming lady marry you?"

"Precisely what I say. She loves fame. So far I have been unsuccessful, because she does not think I am famous enough."

"How do you intend to remedy that?"

He stared at me in amazement.

"Do you think that any people have ever been so famous as you and I will be in a few days?"

I looked away and studied the bright throng of visitors in the hall.
"In a few days?" I asked. "Are you not a trifle optimistic? Don't you think that it will take months before the possibilities and meaning of the germ are properly realized?"

"Rubbish," exclaimed Sarakoff. "You are a confirmed pessimist. You are impossible, Harden. You are a mass of doubts and apprehensions. Ah, here is Leonora at last. Is she not marvellous?"

I looked towards the entrance. I saw a woman of medium height, very fair, dressed in some soft clinging material of a pale primrose colour. From a shoulder hung a red satin cloak. Round her neck was a string of large pearls, and in her hair was a jewelled osprey. She presented a striking appearance and I gained the impression of some northern spirit in her that shone out of her eyes with the brilliancy of ice.

Sarakoff strode forward, and the contrast that these two afforded was extraordinary. Tall, dark, warm and animated, he stood beside her, and stooped to kiss her hand. She gazed at him with a smile so slight that it seemed scarcely to disturb the perfect symmetry of her face. He began to talk, moving his whole body constantly and making gestures with his arms, with a play of different expressions in his face. She listened without moving, save that her eyes wandered slowly round the large hall. At length Sarakoff beckoned to me.

I approached somewhat awkwardly and was introduced.

"Leonora," said the Russian, "this is a little English doctor with a very large brain. He was closely connected with the great discovery of which I am going to tell you something to-night at dinner. He is my friend and his name is Richard Harden."

"I like your name," said Leonora, in a clear soft voice.

I took her hand. We passed into the restaurant. It was one of those vast pleasure-palaces of music, scent, colour and food that abounded in London. An orchestra was playing somewhere high aloft. The luxury of these establishments was always sounding a curious warning deep down in my mind. But then, as Sarakoff had said, I am a pessimist, and if I were to say that I have noticed that nature often becomes very prodigal and lavish just before she takes away and destroys, I would be uttering, perhaps, one of the many half-truths in which the pessimistic spirit delights.

Our table was in a corner at an agreeable distance from the orchestra. Sarakoff placed Leonora between him and myself. Attentive waiters hurried to serve us; and the eyes of everyone in our immediate neighbourhood were turned in our direction. Leonora did not appear to be affected by the interest she aroused. She flung her cloak on the back of her chair, put her elbows on the table, and gazed at the Russian intently.

"Tell me of your discovery, Alexis."

He smiled, enchanted.

"I shall be best able to give you some idea of what our discovery means if I begin by telling you that I am going to read your character. Does that interest you?"

She nodded. Then she turned to me and studied me for a moment.

"No, Alexis. Let Richard read my character first."

I blushed successfully.

"Why do you blush?" she asked with some interest.

"He blushed because of your unpardonable familiarity in calling him Richard," laughed Sarakoff.

"I shall be most happy, Leonora," I stammered, making an immense effort, and longing for the waiter to bring the champagne. "But I am not good at the art."

"But you must try."

I saw no way out of the predicament. Sarakoff's eyes were twinkling roguishly, so I began, keeping my gaze on the table.

"You have a well-controlled character, with a considerable power of knowing exactly what you want to do with your life, and you come from the North. I fancy you sleep badly."

"How do you know I sleep badly?" she challenged.

"Your eyes are a clear frosty blue, and you are of rather slight build. I am merely speaking from my own experience as a doctor."

I suppose my words were not particularly gracious or well-spoken. Leonora simply nodded and leaned back from the table.

"Now, Alexis, tell me about myself," she said.

My glass now contained champagne and I decided to allow that wizard to take charge of my affairs for a time.

"Leonora, you are one of those women who visit this dull planet from time to time for reasons best known to themselves. I think you must come from Venus, or one of the asteroids; or it may be from Sirius. From the beginning you knew you were not like ordinary people."

"Alexis," she drawled, "you are boring me."

"Capital!" said Sarakoff. "Now we will descend to facts, as our friend here did. You are the most inordinately
vain, ambitious, cold-hearted woman in Europe, Leonora. You value yourself before everything. You think your voice and your beauty cannot be beaten, and you are right. Now if I were to tell you that your voice and your beauty could be preserved, year after year, without any change, what would you think?"

A kind of fierce vitality sprang into her face.

"What do you mean?" she asked quietly. "Have you discovered the elixir of youth?"

He nodded. She laid her hand on his arm.

"How long does its effect last?"

"Well—for a considerable time."

"You are certain?"

"Absolutely."

She leaned towards him.

"You will let no one else have it, Alexis," she asked softly. "Only me?"

Sarakoff glanced at me.

"Leonora, you are very selfish."

"Of course."

"Well, you are not the only person who is going to have the elixir. The whole world is going to have it."

I watched her with absorbed attention. She seemed to accept the idea of an elixir of youth without any incredulity, and did not find anything extraordinary in the fact of its discovery. In that respect, I fancied, she was typical of a large class of women—that class that thinks a doctor is a magician, or should be. But when Sarakoff said that the whole world was going to have the elixir, a spasm of anger shewed for a moment in her face. She lowered her eyes.

"This is unkind of you, Alexis. Why should not just you and I have the elixir?" She raised her eyes and turned them directly on Sarakoff. "Why not?" she murmured.

The Russian flushed slightly.

"Leonora, it must either not be, or else the whole world must have it. It can't be confined. It must spread. It's a germ. We have let it loose in Birmingham."

She shuddered.

"A germ? What does he mean?" She turned to me.

"It's a germ that will do away with all disease and decay," I said.

"It will make me younger?"

"Of that I am uncertain. It will more probably fix us where we are."

The Russian nodded in confirmation of my view. Leonora considered for a while. I could see nothing in her appearance that she could have wished altered, but she seemed dissatisfied.

"I should have preferred it to make us all a little younger," she said decidedly. Her total lack of the sense of miracles astonished me. She behaved as if Sarakoff had told her that we had discovered a new kind of soap or a new patent food. "But I am glad you have found it, Alexis," she continued. "It will certainly make you famous. That will be nice, but I am sorry you should have given the elixir to Birmingham first. Birmingham is in no need of an elixir, my friend. You should have put something else in their water-supply." She turned to me and examined me with calm criticism. "What a pity you didn't discover the elixir when you were younger, Richard. Your hair is grey at the temples." A clear laugh suddenly came from her. "What a lot of jealousy there will be, Alexis. The old ones will be so envious of the young. Think how Madame Réaour will rage—and Betty, and the Signora—all my friends—oh, I feel quite glad now that it doesn't make people younger. You are sure it won't?"

"I don't think so," said Sarakoff, watching her through half-closed lids. "No, I think you are safe, Leonora."

"And my voice?"

"It will preserve that ... indefinitely, I think."

She was arrested by the new idea. She looked into the distance and fingered the pearls at her throat.

"Then I shall become the most famous singer in the whole world," she murmured. "And I shall have all the money I want. My friend, you have done me a service. I will not forget it." She looked at him and laughed slightly.

"But I do not think you have done the world a service. A great many people will not like the germ. No, they will desire to get rid of it, Alexis."

She shuddered a little. I stared at her.

"I think you are mistaken," said Alexis, gruffly.

She shook her head.

"Come, let us finish dinner quickly and I will take you both to my flat and sing to you a little."

Leonora's flat was in Whitehall Court, and of its luxury I need not speak. I must confess to the fact that, sober and timid as is my nature, I thoroughly enjoyed the atmosphere. Leonora was generous. Her voice was exquisite. I
sat on a deep couch of green satin and gazed at a Chinese idol cut in green jade, that stood on a neighbouring table, with all my senses lulled by the charm of her singing. The sense of responsibility fell away from me like severed cords. I became pagan as I lolled there, a creature of sensuous feeling. Sarakoff lay back in a deep chair in the shadow with his eyes fixed on Leonora. We were both in a kind of delicious drowsiness when the opening of the door roused us.

Leonora stopped abruptly. With some difficulty I removed my gaze from the Chinese figure, which had hypnotized me, and looked round resentfully.

Lord Alberan was standing in the doorway. He seemed surprised to find that Leonora had visitors. I could not help marking a slight air of proprietorship in his manner.

"I am afraid I am interrupting," he said smoothly. He crossed to the piano and leant over Leonora. "You got my telegram?"

"No," she replied; "I did not even know you had returned from France."

"I came the day before yesterday. I had to go down to Maltby Towers. I came up to town to-day and wired you on the way."

He straightened himself and turned towards us. Leonora rose and came down the room. We rose.

"Geoffrey," she said, drawling slightly, "I want to introduce you to two friends of mine. They will soon be very famous--more famous than you are--because they have discovered a germ that is going to keep us all young."

Lord Alberan glanced at me and then looked hard at the Russian. A swiftly passing surprise shewed that he recognized Sarakoff. Leonora mentioned our names casually, took up a cigarette and dropped into a chair.

"Yes," she continued, "these gentlemen have put the germ into the water that supplies Birmingham." She struck a match and lit the cigarette. I noticed she actually smoked very little, but seemed to like to watch the burning cigarette. "Do sit down. What are you standing for, Geoffrey?"

Lord Alberan's attitude relaxed. He had evidently decided on his course of action.

"That is very interesting," he observed, as if he had never seen Sarakoff before. "A germ that is going to keep us all young. It reminds me of the Arabian Nights. I should like to see it."

"You've seen it already," replied Sarakoff, imperturbably.

"You saw it at Charing Cross Station the night before last."

"Yes--you thought I was an anarchist. You saw the contents of my bag. Six tubes containing a blue-coloured gelatine. Perhaps, Lord Alberan, you remember now."

"I remember perfectly," he exclaimed, smiling slightly. "Yes, I regret my mistake. One has to be careful."

"Did you think my Alexis was an anarchist?" cried Leonora. "You are the stupidest of Englishmen."

"Yes--you thought I was an anarchist. You saw the contents of my bag. Six tubes containing a blue-coloured gelatine. Perhaps, Lord Alberan, you remember now."

"I remember perfectly," he exclaimed, smiling slightly. "Yes, I regret my mistake. One has to be careful."

"Did you think my Alexis was an anarchist?" cried Leonora. "You are the stupidest of Englishmen."

It was obvious that Alberan did not like this. He glanced at a thin gold watch that he carried in his waistcoat pocket.

"I will not interrupt you any longer," he remarked gravely. "You are quite occupied, I see, and I much apologize for intruding."

"Don't be still more stupid," she said lazily. "Sit down. Tell me how you like the idea of never dying."

"I am afraid I cannot entertain the idea seriously."

"Do I understand, sir, that you have actually put some germ into the Birmingham water-supply?"

The Russian nodded.

"You'll hear about it in a day or two," he said quietly.

"You had permission to do this?"

"No, I had no permission."

"Are you aware that you are making a very extraordinary statement, sir?"

"Perfectly."

Lord Alberan became very red. The lower part of his face seemed to expand. His eyes protruded.

"Don't gobble," said Leonora.

"Gobble?" stuttered Alberan, turning upon her. "How dare you say I gobble?"

"But you are gobbling."

"I refuse to stay here another moment. I will leave immediately. As for you, sir, you shall hear from me in course of time. To-morrow I am compelled to go abroad again, but when I return I shall institute a vigorous and detailed enquiry into your movements, which are highly suspicious, sir--highly suspicious." He moved to the door and then turned. "Mademoiselle, I wish you good-night." He bowed stiffly and went out.
"Thank heaven, I've got rid of him for good," murmured Leonora. "He proposed to me last week, Alexis."

"And what did you say?" asked Sarakoff.

"I said I would see, but things are different now." She turned her eyes straight in his direction. "That is, if you have told me the truth, Alexis. Oh, isn't it wonderful!" She jumped up and threw out her arms. "Suppose that it all comes true, Alexis! Immortality--always to be young and beautiful!"

"It will come true," he said.
She lowered her arms slowly and looked at him.
"I wonder how long love will last?"

CHAPTER VIII
THE BLUE DISEASE

Next day the first news of the Sarakoff-Harden bacillus appeared in a small paragraph in an evening paper, and immediately I saw it, I hurried back to the house in Harley Street where Sarakoff was writing a record of our researches.

"Listen to this," I cried, bursting excitedly into the room. I laid the paper on the table and pointed to the column. "Curious disease among trout in Wales," I read. "In the Elan reservoirs which have long been famed for their magnificent trout, which have recently increased so enormously in size and number that artificial stocking is entirely unnecessary, a curious disease has made its appearance. Fish caught there this morning are reported to have an unnatural bluish tint, and their flesh, when cooked, retains this hue. It is thought that some disease has broken out. Against this theory is the fact that no dead fish have been observed. The Water Committee of the City Council of Birmingham are investigating this matter."

Sarakoff pushed his chair back and twisted it round towards me. For some moments we stared at each other with almost scared expressions. Then a smile passed over the Russian's face.

"Ah, we had forgotten that. A bluish tint! Of course, it was to be expected."

"Yes," I cried, "and what is more, the bluish tint will show itself in every man, woman or child infected with the bacillus. Good heavens, fancy not thinking of that ourselves!"

Sarakoff picked up the paper and read the paragraph for himself. Then he laid it down. "It is strange that one so persistently neglects the obvious in one's calculations. Of course there will be a bluish tint." He leaned back and pulled at his beard. "I should think it will show itself in the whites of the eyes first, just as jaundice shews itself there. Leonora won't like that--it won't suit her colouring. You see that these fish, when cooked, retained the bluish hue. That is very interesting."

"It's very bad luck on the trout."

"Why?"

"After getting the bacillus into their system, they blunder on to a hook and meet their death straight away."

"The bacillus is not proof against death by violence," replied Sarakoff gravely. "That is a factor that will always remain constant. We are agreed in looking on all disease as eventually due to poisons derived from germ activity, but a bang on the head or asphyxiation or prussic acid or a bullet in the heart are not due to a germ. Yes, these poor trout little knew what a future they forfeited when they took the bait."

"The bacillus is in Birmingham by now," I said suddenly. I passed my hand across my brow nervously, and glanced at the manuscript lying before Sarakoff. "You had better keep those papers locked up. I spent an awful day at the hospital. It dawned on me that the whole medical profession will want to tear us in pieces before the year is out."

"In theory they ought not to."

"Who cares for theory, when it is a question of earning a living? As I walked along the street to-day, I could have shrieked aloud when I saw everybody hurrying about as if nothing were going to happen. This is unnerving me. It is so tremendous."

Sarakoff picked up his pen, and traced out a pattern in the blotting-pad before him.

"The Water Committee of Birmingham are investigating the matter," he observed. "It will be amusing to hear their report. What will they think when they make a bacteriological examination of the water in the reservoir? It will stagger them."

The next morning I was down to breakfast before my friend and stood before the fire eagerly scanning the papers. At first I could find nothing that seemed to indicate any further effects of the bacillus. I was in the act of buttering a piece of toast when my eye fell on one of the newspapers lying beside me. A heading in small type caught my eye.

"The measles epidemic in Ludlow." I picked the paper up.

"The severe epidemic of measles which began last week and seemed likely to spread through the entire town, has mysteriously abated. Not only are no further cases reported, but several doctors report that those already
attacked have recovered in an incredibly short space of time. Doubt has been expressed by the municipal authorities as to whether the epidemic was really measles."

I adjusted my glasses to read the paragraph again. Then I got up and went into my study. After rummaging in a drawer I pulled out and unrolled a map of England. The course of the aqueduct from Elan to Birmingham was marked by a thin red line. I followed it slowly with the point of my finger and came on the town of Ludlow about half-way along. I stared at it.

"Of course," I whispered at length, my finger still resting on the position of the town. "All these towns on the way are supplied by the aqueduct. I hadn't thought of that. The bacillus is in Ludlow."

For about a minute I did not move. Then I rolled up the map and went up to Sarakoff's bedroom. I met the Russian on the landing on his way to the bathroom.

"The bacillus is in Ludlow," I said in a curiously small voice. I stood on the top stair, holding on to the bannister, my big glasses aslant on my nose, and the map hanging down in my limp grasp.

I had to repeat the sentence before Sarakoff heard me.

"Where's Ludlow?"

I sank on my knees and unrolled the map on the floor and pointed directly with my finger.

Sarakoff went down on all fours and looked at the spot keenly.

"Ah, on the line of the aqueduct! But how do you know it is there?"

"It has cut short an epidemic of measles. The doctors are puzzled."

Sarakoff nodded. He was looking at the names of the other towns that lay on the course of the aqueduct.

"Cleobury-Mortimer," he spelt out. "No news from there?"

"None."

"And none from Birmingham yet?"

"None."

"We'll have news to-morrow." He raised himself on his knees. "Trout and then measles!" he said, and laughed.

"This is only the beginning. No wonder the Ludlow doctors are puzzled."

The same evening there was further news of the progress of the bacillus. From Cleobury-Mortimer, ten miles from Ludlow, and twenty from Birmingham, it was reported that the measles epidemic there had been cut short in the same mysterious manner as noticed in Ludlow. But next morning a paragraph of considerable length appeared which I read out in a trembling voice to Sarakoff.

"It was reported a short time ago that the trout in the Elan reservoirs appeared to be suffering from a singular disease, the effect of which was to tint their scales and flesh a delicate bluish colour. The matter is being investigated. In the meanwhile it has been noticed, both in Ludlow and Cleobury-Mortimer, and also in Knighton, that the peculiar bluish tint has appeared amongst the inhabitants. Our correspondent states that it is most marked in the conjunctivæ, or whites of the eyes. There must undoubtedly be some connection between this phenomenon and the condition of the trout in the Elan reservoirs, as all the above-mentioned towns lie close to, and receive water from, the great aqueduct. The most remarkable thing, however, is that the bluish discolouration does not seem to be accompanied by any symptoms of illness in those whom it has affected. No sickness or fever has been observed. It is perhaps nothing more than a curious coincidence that the abrupt cessation of the measles epidemic in Ludlow and Cleobury-Mortimer, reported in yesterday's issue, should have occurred simultaneously with the appearance of bluish discoloration among the inhabitants."

On the same evening, I was returning from the hospital and saw the following words on a poster:--

"Blue Disease in Birmingham."

I bought a paper and scanned the columns rapidly. In the stop-press news I read:--

"The Blue Disease has appeared in Birmingham. Cases are reported all over the city. The Public Health Department are considering what measures should be adopted. The disease seems to be unaccompanied by any dangerous symptoms."

I stood stock-still in the middle of the pavement. A steady stream of people hurrying from business thronged past me. A newspaper boy was shouting something down the street, and as he drew nearer, I heard his hoarse voice bawling out:--

"Blue Disease in Birmingham."

He passed close to me, still bawling, and his voice died away in the distance. Men jostled me and glanced at me angrily.... But I was lost in a dream. The paper dropped from my fingers. In my mind's eye I saw the Sarakoff-Harden bacillus in Birmingham, teeming in every water-pipe in countless billions, swarming in the carafes on dining-room tables, and in every ewer and finger-basin, infecting everything it came in contact with. And the vision of Birmingham and the whole stretch of country up to the Elan watershed passed before me, stained with a vivid blue.
CHAPTER IX
THE MAN FROM BIRMINGHAM
The following day while walking to the hospital, I noticed a group of people down a side street, apparently
looking intently at something unusual. I turned aside to see what it was. About twenty persons, mostly errand boys,
were standing round a sandwich-board man. At the outskirts of the circle, I raised myself on tip-toe and peered over
the heads of those in front. The sandwich-board man's back was towards me.
"What's the matter?" I asked of my neighbour.
"One of the blue freaks from Birmingham," was the reply.
My first impulse was to fly. Here I was in close proximity to my handiwork. I turned and made off a few paces.
But curiosity overmastered me, and I came back. The man was now facing me, and I could see him distinctly
through a gap in the crowd. It was a thin, unshaven face with straightened features and gaunt cheeks. The eyes were
deeply sunken and at that moment turned downwards. His complexion was pale, but I could see a faint bluish tinge
suffusing the skin, that gave it a strange, dead look. And then the man lifted his eyes and gazed straight at me. I
cought my breath, for under the black eye brows, the whites of the eyes were stained a pure sparrow-egg blue.
"I came from Birmingham yesterday," I heard him saying. "There ain't nothing the matter with me."
"You ought to go to a fever hospital," said someone.
"We don't want that blue stuff in London," added another.
"Perhaps it's catching," said the first speaker.
In a flash everyone had drawn back. The sandwich-board man stood in the centre of the road alone looking
sharply round him. Suddenly a wave of rage seemed to possess him. He shook his fist in the air, and even as he
shook it, his eyes caught the blue sheen of the tense skin over the knuckles. He stopped, staring stupidly, and the
rage passed from his face, leaving it blank and incredulous.
"Lor' lumme," he muttered. "If that ain't queer."
He held out his hand, palm downwards. And from the pavement I saw that the man's nails were as blue as
pieces of turquoise.
The sun came out from behind a passing cloud and sent a sudden flame of radiance over the scene in the side
street—the sandwich-board man, his face still blank and incredulous, staring stupidly at his hands; the crowd
standing well back in a wide semi-circle; I further forward, peering through my spectacles and clutching my
umbrella convulsively. Then a tall man, in morning coat and top-hat, pushed his way through and touched the man
from Birmingham on the shoulder.
"Can you come to my house?" he asked in an undertone. "I am a doctor and would like to examine you."
I shifted my gaze and recognized Dr. Symington-Tearle. The man pointed to his boards.
"How about them things?"
"Oh, you can get rid of them. I'll pay you. Here is my card with the address. I'll expect you in half-an-hour, and
it will be well worth while your coming."
Symington-Tearle moved away, and a sudden spasm of jealousy affected me as I watched the well-shaped top-
hat glittering down the street in the strong sunlight. Why should Symington-Tearle be given an opportunity of
impressing a credulous world with some fantastic rubbish of his own devising? I stepped into the road.
"Do you want a five-pound note?" I asked. The man jumped with surprise. "Very well. Come round to this
address at once."
I handed him my card. My next move was to telephone to the hospital to say I would be late, and retrace my
footsteps homewards.
My visitor arrived in a very short time, after handing over his boards to a comrade on the understanding of
suitable compensation, and was shown into my study. Sarakoff was present, and he pored over the man's nails and
eyes and skin with rapt attention. At last he enquired how he felt.
"Ain't never felt so well in me life," said the man. "I was saying to a pal this morning 'ow well I felt."
"Do you feel as if you were drunk?" asked Sarakoff tentatively.
"Well, sir, now you put it that way, I feel as if I'd 'ad a good glass of beer. Not drunk, but 'appy."
"Are you naturally cheerful?"
"I carn't say as I am, sir. My profession ain't a very cheery one, not in all sorts and kinds of weather."
"But you are distinctly more cheerful this morning than usual?"
"I am, sir. I don't deny it. I lost my temper sudden like when that crowd drew away from me as if I'd got the
leprosy, and I'm usually a mild and forbearin' man."
"Sit down," said Sarakoff. The man obeyed, and Sarakoff began to examine him carefully. He told him once or
twice not to speak, but the man seemed in a loquacious mood and was incapable of silence for more than a minute of
time.
"And I ain't felt so clear 'eaded not for years," he remarked. "I seem to see twice as many things to what I used to, and everything seems to 'ave a new coat of paint. I was saying to a pal early this morning what a very fine place Trafalgar Square was and 'ow I'd never seemed to notice it before, though I've known it all my life. And up Regent Street I begun to notice all sort o' little things I'd never seen before, though it was my old beat ' afore I went to Birmingham. O' course it may be because I been out o' London a spell. But blest if I ever seed so many fine shop windows in Regent Street before, or so many different colours."

"Headache?"

"Bless you, no, sir. Just the opposite, if you understand." He looked round suddenly. "What's that noise?" he asked. "It's been worryin' me since I came in here."

We listened intently, but neither I nor Sarakoff could hear anything.

"It comes from there." The man pointed to the laboratory door. I went and opened it and stood listening. In a corner by the window a clock-work recording barometer was ticking with a faint rhythm.

"That's the noise," said the man from Birmingham. "I knew it wasn't no clock, 'cause it's too fast."

Sarakoff glanced significantly at me.

"All the senses very acute," he said. "At least, hearing and seeing." He took a bottle from the laboratory and uncorked it in one corner of the study. "Can you smell what this is?"

The man, sitting ten feet away, gave one sniff.

"Ammonia," he said promptly, and sneezed. "This 'ere Blue Disease," said the man after a long pause, "is it dangerous?"

He spread out his fingers, squeezing the turquoise nails to see if the colour faded. He frowned to find it fixed. I was standing at the window, my back to the room and my hands twisting nervously with each other behind me.

"No, it is not dangerous," said Sarakoff. He sat on the edge of the writing-table, swinging his legs and staring meditatively at the floor. "It is not dangerous, is it, Harden?"

I replied only with a jerky, impatient movement.

"What I mean," persisted the man, "is this--supposin' the police arrest me, when I go back to my job. 'Ave they a right? 'Ave people a right to give me the shove--to put me in a 'ospital? That crowd round me in the street--it confused me, like--as if I was a leper." He paused and looked up at Sarakoff enquiringly. "What's the cause of it?"

"A germ--a bacillus."

"Same as what gives consumption?"

Sarakoff nodded. "But this germ is harmless," he added.

"Then I ain't going to die?"

"No. That's just the point. You aren't going to die," said the Russian slowly. "That's what is so strange."

I jumped round from the window.

"How do you know?" I said fiercely. "There's no proof. It's all theory so far. The calculations may be wrong."

The man stared at me wonderingly. He saw me as a man fighting with some strange anxiety, with his forehead damp and shining, his spectacles aslant on his nose and the heavy folds of his frock-coat shaken with a sudden impetuosity.

"How do you know?" I repeated, shaking my fist in the air. "How do you know he isn't going to die?"

Sarakoff fingered his beard in silence, but his eyes shone with a quiet certainty. To the man from Birmingham it must have seemed suddenly strange that we should behave in this manner. His mind was sharpened to perceive things. Yesterday, had he been present at a similar scene, he would probably have sat dully, finding nothing curious in my passionate attitude and the calm, almost insolent, inscrutability of Sarakoff. He forgot his turquoise finger nails, and stared, open-mouthed.

"Ain't going to die?" he said. "What do yer mean?"

"Simply that you aren't going to die," was Sarakoff's soft answer.

"Yer mean, not die of the Blue Disease?"

"Not die at all."

"Garn! Not die at all." He looked at me. "What's he mean, Mister?" He looked almost surprised with himself at catching the drift of Sarakoff's sentence. Inwardly he felt something insistent and imperious, forcing him to grasp words, to blunder into new meanings. Some new force was alive in him and he was carried on by it in spite of himself. He felt strung up to a pitch of nervous irritation. He got up from his chair and came forward, pointing at Sarakoff. "What's this?" he demanded. "Why don't you speak out? Yer cawn't hide it from me." He stopped. His brain, working at unwonted speed, had discovered a fresh suspicion. "Look 'ere, you two know something about this blue disease." He came a step closer, and looking cunningly in my face, said: "That's why you offered me a five-pound note, ain't it?"

I avoided the scrutiny of the sparrow-egg blue orbs close before me.
"I offered you the money because I wished to examine you," I said shortly. "Here it is. You can go now."

I took a note from a safe in the corner of the room, and held it out. The man took it, felt its crispness and stowed it away in a secure pocket. His thoughts were temporarily diverted by the prospect of an immediate future with plenty of money, and he picked up his hat and went to the door. But his turquoise finger nails lying against the rusty black of the hat brought him back to his suspicions. He paused and turned.

"My name's Wain," he said. "I'm telling you, in case you might 'ear of me again. 'Erbert Wain. I know what yours is, remember, because I seed it on the door." He twisted his hat round several times in his hands and drew his brows together, puzzled at the speed of his ideas. Then he remembered the card that Symington-Tearle had given him.

He pulled it out and examined it. "I'm going across to see this gent," he announced. "It's convenient, 'im living so close. Perhaps he'll 'ave a word to say about this 'ere disease. Fair spread over Birmingham, so they say. It would be nasty if any bloke was responsible for it. Good day to yer." He opened the door slowly, and glanced back at us standing in the middle of the room watching him. "Look 'ere," he said swiftly, "what did 'e mean, saying I was never going to die and----" The light from the window was against his eyes, and he could not see the features of Sarakoff's face, but there was something in the outline of his body that checked him. "Guv'ner, it ain't true." The words came hoarsely from his lips. "I ain't never not going to die."

Sarakoff spoke.

"You are never going to die, Mr. Herbert Wain ... you understand?... Never going to die, unless you get killed in an accident--or starve."

I jerked up my hand to stop my friend.

Wain stared incredulously. Then he burst into a roar of laughter and smacked his thigh.

"Gor lumme!" he exclaimed, "if that ain't rich. Never going to die! Live for ever! Strike me, if that ain't a notion!" The tears ran down his cheeks and he paused to wipe them away. "If I was to believe what you say," he went on, "it would fair drive me crazy. Live for ever--s'elp me, if that wouldn't be just 'ell. Good-day to yer, gents. I'm obliged to yer."

He went out into the sunlit street still roaring with laughter, a thin, ragged, tattered figure, with the shadow of immortality upon him.

CHAPTER X

THE ILLNESS OF MR. ANNOT

The departure of Mr. Herbert Wain was a relief. I turned to Sarakoff at once and spoke with some heat.

"You were more than imprudent to give that fellow hints that we knew more about the Blue Disease than anybody else," I exclaimed. "This may be the beginning of incalculable trouble."

"Nonsense," replied the Russian. "You are far too apprehensive, Harden. What can he do?"

"What may he not do?" I cried bitterly. "Do you suppose London will welcome the spread of the germ? Do you think that people will be pleased to know that you and I were responsible for its appearance?"

"When they realize that it brings immortality with it, they will hail us as the saviours of humanity."

"Mr. Herbert Wain did not seem to accept the idea of immortality with any pleasure," I muttered. "The suggestion seemed to strike him as terrible."

Sarakoff laughed genially.

"My friend," he said, "Mr. Herbert Wain is not a man of vision. He is a cockney, brought up in the streets of a callous city. To him life is a hard struggle, and immortality naturally appears in a poor light. You must have patience. It will take some time before the significance of this immortality is grasped by the people. But when it is grasped, all the conditions of life will change. Life will become beautiful. We will have reforms that, under ordinary circumstances, would have taken countless ages to bring about. We will anticipate our evolution by thousands of centuries. At one step we will reach the ultimate goal of our destiny."

"And what is that?"

"Immortality, of course. Surely you must see by now that all the activities of modern life are really directed towards one end--towards solving the riddle of prolonging life and at the same time increasing pleasure? Isn't that the inner secret desire that you doctors find in every patient? So far a compromise has only been possible, but now that is all changed."

"I don't agree, Sarakoff. Some people must live for other motives. Take myself ... I live for science."

"It is merely your form of pleasure."

"That's a quibble," I cried angrily. "Science is aspiration. There's all the difference in the world between aspiration and pleasure. I have scarcely known what pleasure is. I have worked like a slave all my life, with the sole ambition of leaving something permanent behind me when I die."

"But you won't die," interposed the Russian. "That is the charm of the new situation."
"Then why should I work?" The question shaped itself in my mind and I uttered it involuntarily. I sat down and stared at the fire. A kind of dull depression came over me, and for some reason the picture of Sarakoff's butterflies appeared in my mind. I saw them with great distinctness, crawling aimlessly on the floor of their cage. "Why should I work?" I repeated.

Sarakoff merely shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Questions of that kind did not seem to bother him. His was a nature that escaped the necessity of self-analysis. But I was different, and our conversation had aroused a train of odd thought. What, after all, was it that kept my nose to the grindstone? What had I slaved incessantly all my life, reading when I might have slept, examining patients when I might have been strolling through meadows, hurrying through meals when I might have eaten at leisure? What was the cause behind all the tremendous activity and feverish haste of modern people? When Sarakoff had said that I would not die, and that therein lay the charm of the new situation, it seemed as if scales had momentarily fallen from my eyes. I beheld myself as something ridiculous, comparable to a hare that persists in dashing along a country lane in front of the headlight of a motor car, when a turn one way or another would bring it to safety. A great uneasiness filled me, and with it came a determination to ignore these new fields of thought that loomed round me--a determination that I have seen in old men when they are faced by the new and contradictory--and I began to force my attention elsewhere. I was relieved when the door opened and my servant entered. She handed me a telegram. It was from Miss Annot, asking me to come to Cambridge at once, as her father was seriously ill. I scribbled a reply, saying I would be down that afternoon.

After the servant had left the room, I remained gazing at the fire, but my depression left me. In place of it I felt a quiet elation, and it was not difficult for me to account for it.

"I was wrong in saying that I had scarcely known what pleasure is," I observed at length, looking up at Sarakoff with a smile. "I must confess to you that there is one factor in my life that gives me great pleasure."

Sarakoff placed himself before me, hands in pockets and pipe in mouth, and gazed at me with an answering smile in his dark face.

"A woman?"

I flushed. The Russian seemed amused.

"I thought as much," he remarked. "This year I noticed a change in you. Your fits of abstraction suggested it. Well, may I congratulate you? When are you to be married?"

"That is out of the question at present," I answered hurriedly. "In fact, there is no definite arrangement--just a mutual understanding.... She is not free."

Sarakoff raised his shaggy eyebrows.

"Then she is already married?"

This cross-examination was intensely painful to me. Between Miss Annot and myself there was, I hoped, a perfect understanding, and I quite realized the girl's position. She was devoted to her father, who required her constant attention and care, and until she was free there could be no question of marriage, or even an engagement, for fear of wounding the old man's feelings. I quite appreciated her situation and was content to wait.

"No! She has an invalid father, and--""

"Rubbish!" said Sarakoff, with remarkable force. "Rubbish! Marry her, man, and then think of her father. Why, that sort of thing----" He drew a deep breath and checked himself.

I shook my head.

"That is impossible. Here, in England, we cannot do such things.... The girl's duty is plain. I am quite prepared to wait."

"To wait for what?"

I looked at him in unthinking surprise.

"Until Mr. Annot dies, of course."

Sarakoff remained motionless. Then he took his pipe out of his mouth, strolled to the window, and began to whistle to himself in subdued tones. A moment later he left the room. I picked up a time-table and looked out a train, a little puzzled by his behaviour.

I reached Cambridge early in the afternoon and took a taxi to the Annots' house. Miss Annot met me at the door.

"It is so good of you to come," she said with a faint smile. "My father behaved very foolishly yesterday. He insisted on inviting the Perrys to lunch, and he talked a great deal and insisted on drinking wine, with the result that in the night he had a return of his gastritis. He is very weak to-day and his mind seems to be wandering a little."

"You should not have allowed him to do that," I remonstrated. "He is in too fragile a state to run any risks."

"Oh, but I couldn't help it. The Perrys are such old friends of father's, and they were only staying one day in Cambridge. Father would have fretted if they had not come."
I had taken off my coat in the hall, and we were now standing in the drawing-room.
"You are tired, Alice," I said.
"I've been up most of the night," she replied, with an effort towards brightness. "But I do feel tired, I admit."
I turned away from her and went to the window. For the first time I felt the awkwardness of our position. I had a strong and natural impulse to comfort her, but what could I do? After a moment's reflection, I made a sudden resolution.
"Alice," I said, "you and I had better become engaged. Don't you think it would be easier for you?"
"Oh, don't," she cried. "Father would never endure the idea that I belonged to another man. He would worry about my leaving him continually. No, please wait. Perhaps it will not be----"
She checked herself. I remained silent, staring at the pattern of the carpet with a frown. To my annoyance, I could not keep Sarakoff's words out of my mind. And yet Alice was right. I felt sure that no one is a free agent in the sense that he or she can be guided solely by love. It is necessary to make a compromise. As these thoughts formed in my mind I again seemed to hear the loud voice of Sarakoff, sounding in derision at my cautious views. A conflict arose in my soul. I raised my eyes and looked at Alice. She was standing by the mantelpiece, staring listlessly at the grate. A wave of emotion passed over me. I took a step towards her.
"Alice!" And then the words stuck in my throat. She turned her head and her eyes questioned me. I tried to continue, but something prevented me, and I became suddenly calm again. "Please take me up to your father," I begged her. She obeyed silently, and I followed her upstairs.
Mr. Annot was lying in a darkened room with his eyes closed. He was a very old man, approaching ninety, with a thin aquiline face and white hair. He lay very still, and at first I thought he was unconscious. But his pulse was surprisingly good, and his breathing deep and regular.
"He is sleeping," I murmured.
She leaned over the bed.
"He scarcely slept during the night," she whispered. "This will do him good."
"His pulse could not be better," I murmured.
She peered at him more closely.
"Isn't he very pale?"
I stooped down, so that my face was close to hers. The old man certainly looked very pale. A marble-like hue lay over his features, and yet the skin was warm to the touch.
"How long has he been asleep?" I asked.
"He was awake over an hour ago, when I looked in last. He said then that he was feeling drowsy."
"I think we'll wake him up."
Alice hesitated.
"Won't you wait for tea?" she whispered. "He would probably be awake by then."
I shook my head.
"I must get back to London by five. Do you mind if we have a little more light?"
She moved to the window and raised the blind half way. I examined the old man attentively. There was no doubt about the curious pallor of his skin. It was like the pallor of extreme collapse, save for the presence of a faint colour in his cheeks which seemed to lie as a bright transparency over a dead background. My fingers again sought his pulse. It was full and steady. As I counted it my eyes rested on his hand.
I stooped down suddenly with an exclamation. Alice hurried to my side.
"Where did those friends of his come from?" I asked swiftly.
"The Perrys? From Birmingham."
"Was there anything wrong with them?"
"What do you mean?"
Before I could reply the old man opened his eyes. The light fell clearly on his face. Alice uttered a cry of horror. I experienced an extraordinary sensation of fear. Out of the marble pallor of Mr. Annot's face, two eyes, stained a sparrow-egg blue, stared keenly at us.
CHAPTER XI
THE RESURRECTION
For some moments none of us spoke. Alice recovered herself first.
"What is the matter with him?" she gasped.
I was incapable of finding a suitable reply, and stood, tongue-tied, staring foolishly at the old man. He seemed a little surprised at our behaviour.
"Dr. Harden," he said, "I am glad to see you. My daughter did not tell me you were coming."
His voice startled me. It was strong and clear. On my previous visit to him he had spoken in quavering tones.
"Oh, father, how do you feel?" exclaimed Alice, kneeling beside the bed.
"My dear, I feel extremely well. I have not felt so well for many years." He stretched out his hand and patted his daughter's head. "Yes, my sleep has done me good. I should like to get up for tea."
"But your eyes----" stammered Alice "Can you see, father?"
"See, my dear? What does she mean, Dr. Harden?"
"There is some discolouration of the conjunctivæ," I said hastily. "It is nothing to worry about."
At that moment Alice caught sight of his finger nails.
"Look!" she cried, "they're blue."
The old man raised his hands and looked at them in astonishment.
"How extraordinary," he murmured. "What do you make of that, doctor?"
"It is nothing," I assured him. "It is only pigmentation caused--er--caused by some harmless germ."
"I know what it is," cried Alice suddenly. "It's the Blue Disease. Father, you remember the Perrys were telling us about it yesterday at lunch. They said it was all over Birmingham, and that they had come south partly to escape it. They must have brought the infection with them."
"Yes," I said, "that is certainly the explanation. And now, Mr. Annot, let me assure you that this disease is harmless. It has no ill effects."
Mr. Annot sat up in bed with an exhibition of vigour that was remarkable in a man of his age.
"I can certainly witness to the fact that it causes no ill effects, Dr. Harden," he exclaimed. "This morning I felt extremely weak and was prepared for the end. But now I seem to have been endowed with a fresh lease of life. I feel young again. Do you think this Blue Disease is the cause of it?"
"Possibly. It is difficult to say," I answered in some confusion. "But you must not think of getting up, Mr. Annot. Rest in bed for the next week is essential."
"Humbug!" cried the old man, fixing his brilliant eyes upon me. "I am going to get up this instant."
"Oh, father, please don't be so foolish!"
"Foolish, child? Do you think I'm going to lie here when I feel as if my body and mind had been completely rejuvenated? I repeat I am going to get up. Nothing on earth will keep me in bed."
The old man began to remove the bedclothes. I made an attempt to restrain him, but was met by an outburst of irritation that warned me not to interfere. I motioned Alice to follow me, and together we left the room. As we went downstairs I heard a curious sound proceeding from Mr. Annot's bedroom. We halted on the stairs and listened. The sound became louder and clearer.
"Father is singing," said Alice in a low voice. Then she took out her handkerchief and began to sob.
We continued our way downstairs, Alice endeavouring to stifle her sobs, and I in a dazed condition of mind. I was stunned by the fact that that mad experiment of ours should have had such a sudden and strange result. It produced in me a fear that was far worse to bear than the vague anxiety I had felt ever since those fatal tubes of the Sarakoff-Harden bacillus had been emptied into the lake. I stumbled into the drawing-room and threw myself upon a chair. My legs were weak, and my hands were trembling.
"Alice," I said, "you must not allow this to distress you. The Blue Disease is not dangerous."
She lifted a tear-stained face and looked at me dully.
"Richard, I can't bear it any longer. I've given half my life to looking after father. I simply can't bear it."
I sat up and stared at her. What strange intuition had come to her?
"What do you mean?"
She sobbed afresh.
"I can't endure the sight of him with those blue eyes," she went on, rather wildly. "Richard, I must get away. I've never been from him for more than a few hours at a time for the last fifteen years. Don't think I want him to die."
"I don't."
"I'm glad he's better," she remarked irrelevantly.
"So am I."
"The Perrys were saying that the doctors up in Birmingham think that the Blue Disease cut short other diseases, and made people feel better." She twisted her handkerchief for some moments. "Does it?" she asked, looking at me directly.
"I--er--I have heard it does."
An idea had come into my mind, and I could not get rid of it. Why should I not tell her all that I knew?
"I'm thirty-five," she remarked.
"And I'm forty-two." I tried to smile.
"Life's getting on for us both," she added.
"I know, Alice. I suggested that we should get engaged a short while ago. Now I suggest that we get married--as soon as possible." I got up and paced the room. "Why not?" I demanded passionately.

She shook her head, and appeared confused.

"It's impossible. Who could look after him? I should never be happy, Richard, as long as he was living."

I stopped before her.

"Not with me?"

"No, Richard. I should be left a great deal to myself. A doctor's wife always is. I've thought it out carefully. I would think of him."

After a long silence, I made a proposal that I had refused to entertain before.

"Well, there's no reason why he should not come and live with us. There is plenty of room in my house at Harley Street. Would that do?"

It was a relief to me when she said that she would not consent to an arrangement of that kind. I sat down again.

"Alice," I said quietly, "it is necessary that we should decide our future. There are special reasons."

She glanced at me enquiringly. There was a pause in which I tried to collect my thoughts.

"Your father," I continued, "is suffering from a very peculiar disease. It is wrong, perhaps, to call it a disease.

You wouldn't call life a disease, would you?"

"I don't understand."

"No, of course not. Well, to put it as simply as possible, it is likely that your father will live a long time now. When he said he felt as if his mind and body had been rejuvenated he was speaking the truth."

"But he will be ninety next year," she said bluntly.

"I know. But that will make no difference. This germ, that is now in his body, has the power of arresting all further decay. Your father will remain as he is now for an indefinite period."

I met her eyes as steadily as I could, but there was a quality in her gaze that caused me to look elsewhere.

"How do you know this?" she asked after a painful silence.

"I--er--I can't tell you." The colour mounted to my cheeks, and I began to tap the carpet impatiently with the toe of my boot. "You wouldn't understand," I continued in as professional a manner as I could muster. "You would need first to study the factors that bring about old age."

"Where did the Blue Disease come from? Tell me. I can surely understand that!"

"You have read the paper, haven't you?"

"I've read that no one understands what it is, and that the doctors are puzzled."

"How should I know where it comes from?"

She regarded me searchingly.

"You know something about it," she said positively. "Richard, you are keeping it back from me. I have a right to know what it is."

I was silent.

"If you don't tell me, how can I trust you again?" she asked. "Don't you see that there will always be a shadow between us?"

It was not difficult for me to guess that my guilty manner had roused her suspicions. She had seen my agitation, and had found it unaccountable. I resolved to entrust her with the secret of the germ.

"Do you remember that I once told you my friend, Professor Sarakoff, had succeeded in keeping butterflies alive for over a year?"

She nodded.

"He and I have been experimenting on those lines and he has found a germ that has the property of keeping human beings alive in the same way. The germ has escaped ... into the world ... and it is the cause of the Blue Disease."

"How did it escape?"

I winced. In her voice I was conscious of a terrible accusation.

"By accident," I stammered.

She jumped to her feet.

"I don't believe it! That is a lie!"

"Alice, you must calm yourself! I am trying to tell you exactly what happened."

"Was it by accident?"

The vision of that secret expedition to the water supply of Birmingham passed before me. I felt like a criminal. I could not raise my eyes; my cheeks were burning. In the silence that followed, the sound of Mr. Annot's voice became audible. Alice stood before me, rigid and implacable.

"It was--by accident," I said. I tried to look at her, and failed. She remained motionless for about a minute.
Then she turned and left the room. I heard her go slowly upstairs. A door banged. Actuated by a sudden desire, I stepped into the hall, seized my coat and hat and opened the front door. I was just in time. As I gently closed the door I heard Mr. Annot on the landing above. He was singing some long-forgotten tune in a strange cracked voice.

I stood outside on the doorstep, listening, until, overcome by curiosity, I bent down and lifted the flap of the letter-box. The interior of the hall was plainly visible. Mr. Annot had ceased singing and was now standing before the mirror which hung beside the hatstand. He was a trifle unsteady, and swayed on his frail legs, but he was staring at himself with a kind of savage intensity. At last he turned away and I caught the expression on his face.... With a slight shiver, I let down the flap noiselessly. There was something in that expression that for me remains unnamable; and I think now, as I look back into those past times, that of all the signs which showed me that the Sarakoff-Harden bacillus was an offence against humanity, that strange look on the nonagenarian's face was the most terrible and obvious.

CHAPTER XII
MR. CLUTTERBUCK'S OPINION

When I reached London it was dusk, and a light mist hung in the darkening air. The lamps were twinkling in the streets. I decided to get some tea in a restaurant adjoining the station. When I entered it was crowded, and the only seat that was empty was at a small table already occupied by another man. I sat down, and gave my order to the waitress, and remained staring moodily at the soiled marble surface of the table. My neighbour was engrossed in his paper.

During my journey from Cambridge I had come to a certain conclusion. Sarakoff was of the opinion that we should publish a statement about the germ of immortality, and now I was in agreement with him. For I had been reflecting upon the capacity of human mind for retaining secrets and had come to the conclusion that it is so constructed that its power of retention is remarkably small. I felt that it would be a matter of extraordinary relief if everyone in that tea-shop knew the secret of the Blue Germ.

I began to study the man who sat opposite me. He was a quietly dressed middle-aged man. The expression on his rather pale, clean-shaven face suggested that he was a clerk or secretary. He looked reliable, unimaginative, careful and methodical. He was reading his newspaper with close attention. A cup of tea and the remains of a toasted muffin were at his elbow. It struck me that here was a very average type of man, and an immense desire seized upon me to find out what opinion he would pronounce if I were to tell him my secret. I waited until he looked up.

"Is there any news?" I asked.

He observed me for a moment as if he resented my question.

"The Blue Disease is spreading in London," he remarked shortly, and returned to his paper. I felt rebuffed, but reflected that this, after all, was how an average man might be expected to behave.

"A curious business," I continued. "I am a doctor, and therefore very much interested in it."

His manner changed. He assumed the attitude of the average man towards a doctor at once, and I was gratified to observe it.

"I was just thinking I'd like to hear what a doctor thinks about it," he said, laying down his paper. "I thought of calling in on Dr. Sykes on my way home to-night; he attends my wife. Do you know Dr. Sykes?"

"Which one?" I asked cautiously, not willing to disappoint him.

"Dr. Sykes of Harlesden," he said, with a look of surprise.

"Oh, yes, I know Dr. Sykes. Why did you think of going to see him?"

He smiled apologetically and pointed to the paper.

"It sounds so queer ... the disease. They say, up in Birmingham, that it's stopping all diseases in the hospitals ... everywhere. People getting well all of a sudden. Now I don't believe that."

"Have you seen a case yet?"

"Yes. A woman. In the street this afternoon as I was coming from lunch. The police took her. She was mad, I can tell you. There was a big crowd. She screamed. I think she was drunk." He paused, and glanced at me. "What do you think of it?"

I took a deep breath.

"I don't think, I know," I said, in as quiet a manner as possible. He stared a moment, and a nervous smile appeared and swiftly vanished. He seemed uncertain what to do.

"You've found out something?" he asked at length, playing with his teaspoon and keeping his eyes on the table. I regarded him carefully. I was not quite certain if he still thought I was a doctor.

"I'm not a lunatic," I said. "I'm merely stating a rather extraordinary fact. I know all about the germ of the Blue Disease."

He raised his eyes for an instant, and then lowered them. His hand had stopped trifling with the teaspoon.

"Yes," he said, "the doctors think it's due to a germ of some sort." He made a sort of effort and continued. "It is
funny, some of these germs being invisible through microscopes. Measles and chickenpox and common things like
that. They've never seen the germs that cause them, that's what the papers say. It seems odd--having something you
can't see." He turned his head, and looked for his hat that hung on a peg behind him.

"One moment," I said. I took out my card-case. "I want you to read this card. Don't think I'm mad. I want to talk
to you for a particular reason which I'll explain in a moment." He took the card hesitatingly and read it. Then he
looked at me. "The reason why I am speaking to you is this," I said. "I want to find out what a decent citizen like
yourself will think of something I know. It concerns the Blue Disease and its origin."

He seemed disturbed, and took out his watch.
"I ought to get home. My wife----"
"Is your wife ill?"
"Yes."
"What's the matter with her?"
He frowned.
"Dr. Sykes thinks it's lung trouble."
"Consumption?"
He nodded, and an expression of anxiety came over his face.
"Good," I exclaimed. "Now listen to what I have to say. Before the week is out your wife will be cured. I swear
it."

He said nothing. It was plain that he was still suspicious.
"You read what they say in the papers about the Blue Disease cutting short other diseases? Well, that Blue
Disease will be all over London in a day or two. Now do you understand?"

I saw that I had interested him. He settled himself on his chair, and began to examine me. His gaze travelled
over my face and clothes, pausing at my cuff-links and my tie and collar. Then he looked at my card again. Inwardly
he came to a decision.
"I'm willing to listen to what you've got to say," he remarked, "if you think it's worth saying."
"Thank you. I think it's worth hearing." I leaned my arms on the table in front of me. "This Blue Disease is not
an accidental thing. It was deliberately planned, by two scientists. I was one of those scientists."
"You can't plan a disease," he remarked, after a considerable silence.
"You're wrong. We found a way of creating new germs. We worked at the idea of creating a particular kind of
germ that would kill all other germs ... and we were successful. Then we let loose the germ on the world."
"How?"
"We infected the water supply of Birmingham at its origin in Wales."
I watched his expression intently.
"You mean that you did this secretly, without knowing what the result would be?" he asked at last.
"We foresaw the result to a certain extent."
He thought for some time.
"But you had no right to infect a water supply. That's criminal, surely?"
"It's criminal if the infection is dangerous to people. If you put cholera in a reservoir, of course it's criminal."
"But this germ...?"
"This germ does not kill people. It kills the germs in people."
"What's the difference?"
"All the difference in the world! It's like this.... By the way, what is your name?"
"Clutterbuck." The word escaped his lips by accident. He looked annoyed. I smiled reassuringly.
"It's like this, Mr. Clutterbuck. If you kill all the germs in a person's body, that person doesn't die. He lives ...
indefinitely. Now do you see?"
"No, I don't see," said Clutterbuck with great frankness. "I don't understand what you're driving at. You tell me
that you're a doctor and you give me a card bearing a well-known specialist's name. Then you say you created a
germ and put it in the Birmingham water supply and that the result is the Blue Disease. This germ, you say, doesn't
kill people, but does something else which I don't follow. Now I was taught that germs are dangerous things, and it
seems to me that if your story is true--which I don't believe--you are guilty of a criminal act." He pushed back his
chair and reached for his hat. There was a flush on his face.
"Then you don't believe my tale?"
"No, I'm sorry, but I don't."
"Well, Mr. Clutterbuck, will you believe it when you see your wife restored to health in a few days' time?"
He paused and stared at me.
"What you say is impossible," he said slowly. "If you were a doctor you'd know that as well as I do."
"But the reports in the paper?"
"Oh, that's journalistic rubbish."
He picked up his umbrella and beckoned to the waitress. I made a last attempt.
"If I take you to my house will you believe me then?"
"Look here," he said in an angry tone, "I've had enough of this. I can't waste my time. I'm sure of one thing and that is that you're no doctor. You've got somebody's card-case. You don't look like a doctor and you don't speak like one. I should advise you to be careful."

He moved away from the table. Some neighbouring people stared at me for a moment and then went on eating. Mr. Clutterbuck paid at the desk and left the establishment. I had received the verdict of the average man.

CHAPTER XIII
THE DEAD IMMORTAL

When I reached home, Sarakoff was out. He had left a message to say he would not be in until after midnight, as he was going to hear Leonora sing at the opera, and purposed to take her to supper afterwards. Dinner was therefore a solitary meal for me, and when it was all over I endeavoured to plunge into some medical literature. The hours passed slowly. It was almost impossible to read, for the process, to me, was similar to trying to take an interest in a week-old newspaper.

The thought of the bacillus made the pages seem colourless; it dwarfed all meaning in the words. I gave up the attempt and set myself to smoking and gazing into the fire. What was I to do about Alice?

Midnight came and my mind was still seething. I knew sleep was out of the question and the desire to walk assailed me. I put on a coat and hat and left the house. It was a cold night, clear with stars. Harley Street was silent. My footsteps led me south towards the river. I walked rapidly, oblivious of others. The problem of Alice was beyond solution, for the simple reason that I found it impossible to think of her clearly. She was overshadowed by the wonder of the bacillus. But the picture of her father haunted me. It filled me with strange emotions, and at moments with stranger misgivings.

There are meanings, dimly caught at the time, which remain in the mind like blind creatures, mewing and half alive. They pluck at the brain ceaselessly, seeking birth in thought. Old Annot's face peering into the hall mirror--what was it that photographed the scene so pitilessly in my memory? I hurried along, scarcely noticing where I went, and as I went I argued with myself aloud.

On the Embankment I returned to a full sense of my position in space. The river ran beneath me, cold and dark. I leaned over the stone balustrade and stared at the dark forms of barges. Yes, it was true enough that I had not realized that the germ would keep Mr. Annot alive indefinitely. Sarakoff's significant whistle that morning came to my mind, and I saw that I had been guilty of singular denseness in not understanding its meaning.

And now old Annot would live on and on, year after year. Was I glad? It is impossible to say. It was that expression in the old man's face that dominated me. I tried to think it out. It had been a triumphant look; and more than that ... a triumphant toothless look. Was that the solution? I reflected that triumph is an expression that belongs to youth, to young things, to all that is striving upwards in growth. Surely old people should look only patient and resigned--never triumphant--in this world? Some strong action with regard to Alice's position would be necessary. It was absurd to think that her father should eternally come between her and me. It would be necessary to go down to Cambridge and make a clean confession to Alice. And then, when forgiven, I would insist on an immediate arrangement concerning our marriage. Marriage! The word vibrated in my soul. The solemnity of that ceremony was great enough to mere mortals, but what would it mean to us when we were immortals? Sarakoff had hinted at a new marriage system. Was such a thing possible? On what factors did marriage rest? Was it merely a discipline or was it ultimately selfishness?

My agitation increased, and I hurried eastwards, soon entering an area of riverside London that, had I been calmer, might have given me some alarm. It must have been about two o'clock in the morning when the pressure of thoughts relaxed in my mind. I found myself in the great dock area. The forms of giant cranes rose dimly in the air. A distant glare of light, where nightshifs were at work, illuminated the huge shapes of ocean steamers. The quays were littered with crates and bales. A clanking of buffers and the shrill whistles of locomotives came out of the darkness. For some time I stood transfixed. In my imagination I saw these big ships, laden with cargo, slipping down the Thames and out into the sea, carrying with them an added cargo to every part of the earth. For by them would the Blue Germ travel over the waterways of the world and enter every port. From the ports it would spread swiftly into the towns, and from the towns onwards across plain and prairie until the gift of Immortality had been received by every human being. The vision thrilled me....

A commotion down a side street on my right shattered this glorious picture. Hoarse cries rang out, and a sound of blows. I could make out a small dark struggling mass which seemed to break into separate parts and then coalesce again. A police whistle sounded. The mass again broke up, and some figures came rushing down the street in my
direction. They passed me in a flash, and vanished. At the far end of the street two twinkling lights appeared. After a period of hesitation—what doctor goes willingly into the accidents of the streets?—I walked slowly in their direction.

When I reached them I found two policemen bending over the body of a man, which lay in the gutter face downwards.

"Good evening," I said. "Can I be of any service? I am a doctor."
They shone their lamps on me suspiciously. "What are you doing here?"
"Walking," I replied. Exercise had calmed me. I felt cool and collected. "I often walk far at nights. Let me see the body."

I stooped down and turned the body over. The policemen watched me in silence. The body was that of a young, fair-haired sailor man. There was a knife between his ribs. His eyes were screwed up into a rigid state of contraction which death had not yet relaxed. His whole body was rigid. I knew that the knife had pierced his heart. But the most extraordinary thing about him was his expression. I have never looked on a face either in life or death that expressed such terror. Even the policemen were startled. The light of their lamps shone on that monstrous and distorted countenance, and we gazed in horrified silence.

"Is he dead?" asked one at last.
"Quite dead," I replied, "but it is odd to find this rigidity so early." I began to press his eyelids apart. The right eye opened. I uttered a cry of astonishment.
"Look!" I cried. They stared.
"Blest if that ain't queer," said one. "It's that Blue Disease. He must 'ave come from Birmingham."
"Queer?" I said passionately. "Why, man, it's tragedy—unadulterated tragedy. The man was an Immortal."
They stared at me heavily.
"Immortal?" said one.
"He would have lived for ever," I said. "In his system there is the most marvellous germ that the world has ever known. It was circulating in his blood. It had penetrated to every part of his body. A few minutes ago, as he walked along the dark street, he had before him a future of unnumbered years. And now he lies in the gutter. Can you imagine a greater tragedy?"
The policemen transferred their gaze from me to the dead man. Then, as if moved by a common impulse, they began to laugh. I watched them moodily, plunged in an extraordinary vein of thought. When I moved away they at once stopped me.

"No, you don't," said one. "We'll want you at the police station to give your evidence. Not," he continued with a grin, "to tell that bit of information you just gave us, about him being an angel or something."
"I didn't say he was an angel."
They laughed tolerantly. Like Mr. Clutterbuck, they thought I was mad.
"Let's hope he's an angel," said the other. "But, by his face, he looks more like the other thing. Bill, you go round for the ambulance. I'll stay with the gentleman."
The policeman moved away ponderously and vanished in the darkness.
"What was that you were saying, sir?" asked the policeman who remained with me.
"Never mind," I muttered, "you wouldn't understand."
"I'm interested in religious matters," continued the policeman in a soft voice. "You think that the Blue Disease is something out of the common?"
I am never surprised at London policemen, but I looked at this one closely before I replied.
"You seem a reasonable man," I said. "Let me tell you that what I have told you about the germ—that it confers immortality—is correct. In a day or two you will be immortal."
He seemed to reflect in a calm massive way on the news. His eyes were fixed on the dead man's face.
"An Immortal Policeman?"
"Yes."
"You're asking me to believe a lot, sir."
"I know that. But still, there it is. It's the truth."
"And what about crime?" he continued. "If we were all Immortals, what about crime?"
"Crime will become so horrible in its meaning that it will stop."
"It hasn't stopped yet...."
"Of course not. It won't, till people realize they are immortal."
He shifted his lantern and shone it down the road.
"Well, sir, it seems to me it will be a long time before people realize that. In fact, I don't see how anyone could ever realize it."
"Just think," he said, with a large air. "Supposing crime died out, what would happen to the Sunday papers? Where would those lawyers be? What would we do with policemen? No, you can't realize it. You can't realize the things you exist for all vanishing. It's not human nature." He brooded for a time. "You can't do away with crime," he continued. "What's behind crime? Woman and gold--one or the other, or both. Now you don't mean to tell me, sir, that the Blue Disease is doing away with women and gold in a place like Birmingham? Why, sir, what made Birmingham? What do you suppose life is?"

"I have never been asked the question before by a policeman," I said. "I do not know what made Birmingham, but I will tell you what life is. It is ultimately a cell, containing protoplasm and a nucleus."

A low rumbling noise began somewhere in his vast bulk. It gradually increased to a roar. I became aware that he was laughing. He held his sides. I thought his shining belt would burst. At length his hilarity slowly subsided, and he became sober. He surveyed the dead body at his feet.

"No, sir," he said, "don't you believe it. Life is women and gold. It always was that, and it always will be." He shone his lamp downwards so that the light fell on the terrible features of the dead sailor. "Now this man, sir, was killed because of money, I'll wager. And behind the money I reckon you'll find a woman." He mused for a time.

"Not necessarily a pretty woman, but a woman of some sort."

"How do you account for that look of fear on his face?"

"I couldn't say. I've never seen anything like it. I've seen a lot of dead faces, but they are usually quiet enough, as if they were asleep. But I'll tell you one thing, sir, that I have noticed, and that is that money--which includes diamonds and such like, makes a man die worse and more bitter than anything else."

He turned his lantern down the street. A sound of wheels reached us.

"That's the ambulance."

"Will you really require me at the police station?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Will it be necessary to prove who I am?"

He smiled.

"You won't need to prove that you're a doctor, sir," he said genially. "We have a lot to do with doctors. I could tell you were a doctor after talking a minute with you. You are all the same."

"What do you mean?"

"Well--it's the things you say. Now only a doctor could have said what you did--about life being a cell. Do you know, sir, I sometimes believe that doctors is more innocent than parsons. It's the things they say...."

The low rumbling began again in his interior. I waited silently until the ambulance came up. I felt a slight shade of annoyance. But how could I expect the enormous uneducated bulk beside me to take a really intelligent and scientific view of life? Of course life was a cell. Every educated person knew that--and now that cell was, for the first time in history, about to become immortal--but what did the policeman care? How stupid people were, I reflected. We moved off in a small procession towards the police station. Half an hour later I was on my way west, deeply pondering on the causes of that extraordinary expression of fear in the dead sailor's face. Never in my life before had I seen so agonized a countenance, but I was destined to see others as terrible. As I walked, the strangeness of the dead man's tragedy grew in my mind and filled me with a tremendous wonder, for who had ever seen a dead Immortal?

On reaching home I roused Sarakoff and related to him what I had seen.
seemed far above my head. The walls seemed to have receded many feet. In my astonishment I uttered an
exclamation. The result was startling. My voice seemed to reverberate and re-echo as if I had shouted with all my
strength. Considerably startled, I remained in a sitting posture, gazing at my unfamiliar surroundings. The persistent
noise that had first roused me continued, and for a long time I could not account for it. It appeared to come from
under my bed. I leaned over the edge, but could see nothing. And then, in a flash, I knew what it was. It was the
sound of my watch, that lay under my pillow.

I drew it out and stared at it in a state of mystification. Each of its ticks sounded like a small hammer striking
sharply against a metal plate. I held it to my ear and was almost deafened. For a moment I wondered whether I were
not in the throes of some acute nervous disorder, in which the senses became sharpened to an incredible degree.
Such an exultation of perception could only be due to some powerful intoxicant at work on my body. Was I going
mad? I laid the watch on the counterpane and in the act of doing it, the explanation burst on my mind. For the
recollection of Mr. Herbert Wain and the Clockdrum suddenly came to me. I flung aside the bedclothes, ran to the
window and drew the curtains. The radiance of the day almost blinded me. I pressed my hands to my eyes in a kind
of agony, feeling that they had been seared and destroyed, and dropped on my knees. I remained in this position for
over a minute and then gradually withdrew my hands and gazed at the carpet. I dared not look up yet. The pattern of
the carpet glowed in colours more brilliant than I had ever seen before. As I knelt there, in attitude of prayer, it
seemed to me that I had never noticed colour before; that all my life had been passed without any consciousness of
colour. At last I lifted my sight from the miracle of the carpet to the miracle of the day. High overhead, through the
dingy windowpane, was a patch of clear sky, infinitely sweet, remote and inaccessible, framed by golden clouds. As
I gazed at it an indescribable reverence and joy filled my mind. In the purity of the morning light, it seemed the most
lovely and wonderful thing I had ever beheld. And I, Richard Harden, consulting physician who had hitherto looked
on life through a microscope, remained kneeling on my miraculous carpet, gazing upwards at the miraculous
heavens. Acting on some strange impulse I stretched out my hands, and then I saw something which turned me into
a rigid statue.

It was in this attitude that Sarakoff found me.

He entered my room violently. His hair was tousled and his beard stuck out at a grotesque angle. He was clad in
pink pyjamas, and in his hand he carried a silver-backed mirror. My attitude did not seem to cause him any surprise.
The door slammed behind him, with a noise of thunder, and he rushed across the room to where I knelt, and
stooping, examined my finger nails at which I was staring.

"Good!" he shouted. "Good! Harden, you've got it too!"

He pointed triumphantly. Under the nails there was a faint tinge of blue, and at the nail-bed this was already
intense, forming little crescent-shaped areas of vivid turquoise.

Sarakoff sat down on the edge of my bed and studied himself attentively in the hand mirror.

"A slight pallor is perceptible in the skin," he announced as if he was dictating a note for a medical journal,
"and this is due, no doubt, to a deposit of the blue pigment in the deeper layers of the epidermis. The hair is at
present unaffected save at the roots. God knows what colour blond hair will become. I am anxious about Leonora.
The expression--I suppose I can regard myself as a typical case, Harden--is serene, if not animated. Subjectively,
one may observe a great sense of exhilaration coupled with an extraordinary increase in the power of perception.
You, for example, look to me quite different."

"In what way?" I demanded.

"Well, as you kneel there, I notice in you a kind of angular grandeur, a grotesque touch of the sublime, that was
not evident to me before. If I were a sculptor, I would like to model you like that. I cannot explain why--I am just
saying what I feel. I have never felt any impulse towards art until this morning." He twisted his moustache. "Yes,
you have quite an interesting face, Harden. I can see in it evidence that you have suffered intensely. You have taken
life too seriously. You have worked too hard. You are stunted and deformed with work."

I regarded him with some astonishment.

"Work is all very well," he continued, "but this morning I see with singular clarity that it is only a means of
development. My dear Harden, if it is overdone, it simply dwarfs the soul. Our generation has not recognized this
properly."

"But you were always an apostle of hard work," I remarked irritably.

"May be." He made a gesture of dismissal. "Now, I am an Immortal, and you are an Immortal. The background
to life has changed. Formerly, the idea of death lurked constantly in the depths of the unconscious mind, and by its
vaguely-felt influences spurred us on to continual exertion. That is all changed. We have, at one stroke, removed this
dire spectre. We are free."

He rose suddenly and flung the mirror across the room.

"What do we need mirrors for?" he cried. "It is only when we fear death that we need mirrors to tell us how
long we have to live." He strode over to me and halted. "You seem in no hurry to get up from that carpet," he observed. His remark made me realize that I had been kneeling for some minutes. Now this was rather odd. I am restless by nature and rarely remain in one position for any length of time, and to stay like that, kneeling before the window, was indeed curious. I got up and moved to the dressing-table, thinking. Sarakoff must have been thinking in the same direction, for he asked me a question.

"Did you realize you were kneeling?"

"Yes," I replied. "I knew what I was doing. It merely did not occur to me that I should change my position."

"The explanation is simple," said the Russian. "Restlessness, or the idea that we must change our position, or that we should be doing something else, belongs to the anxious side of life; and the anxious side of life is nourished and kept vigorous by the latent fear of death. All that is removed from you, and therefore you see no reason why you should do anything until it pleases you."

I began to study myself in the glass on the dressing-table. The examination interested me immensely. There was certainly a marble-like hue about the skin. The whites of my eyes were distinctly stained, but not so intensely as had been the case with Mr. Herbert Wain, showing that I had not suffered from the Blue Disease as long as he had. But when I began to study my reflection from the aesthetic point of view, I became deeply engrossed.

"I don't agree with you, Sarakoff," I remarked at length. "We still need mirrors. In fact I have never found the mirror so interesting in my life."

"Don't use that absurd phrase," he answered. "It implies that something other than life exists."

"So it does."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if I stick this pair of scissors into your heart you will die, my dear fellow." He was silent, and a frown began to gather on his brow. "Yes," I continued, "your psychological deductions are not entirely valid. The fear of death still exists, but now limited to a small sphere. In that sphere, it will operate with extreme intensity." I picked up the scissors and made a stealthy movement towards him. To my amazement I obtained an immediate proof of my theory. He sprang up with a loud cry, darted to the door and vanished. For a moment I stood in a state of bewilderment. Was it possible that he, with all his size and strength, was afraid of me? And then a great fit of laughter overcame me and I sank down on my bed with the tears coming from my eyes.

CHAPTER XV
THE TERRIBLE FEAR

On coming down to breakfast, I found Sarakoff already seated at the table devouring the morning papers. I picked up a discarded one and stood by the fire, glancing over its contents. There was only one subject of news, and that was the spread of the Blue Disease. From every part of the north cases were reported, and in London it had broken out in several districts.

"So it's all come true," I remarked.
He nodded, and continued reading. I sauntered to the window. A thin driving snow was now falling, and the passers-by were hurrying along in the freezing slush, with collars turned up and heads bowed before the wind.

"This is an ideal day to spend indoors by the fireside," I observed. "I think I'll telephone to the hospital and tell Jones to take my work."

Sarakoff raised his eyes, and then his eyebrows.

"So," he said, "the busy man suddenly thinks work a bother. The power of the germ, Harden, is indeed miraculous."

"Do you think my inclination is due to the germ?"

"Beyond a doubt. You were the most over-conscientious man I ever knew until this morning."

For some reason I found this observation very interesting. I wished to discuss it, and I was about to reply when the door opened and my housemaid announced that Dr. Symington-Tearle was in the hall and would like an immediate interview.

"Shew him in," I said equably. Symington-Tearle usually had a most irritating effect upon me, but at the moment I felt totally indifferent to him. He entered in his customary manner, as if the whole of London were feverishly awaiting him. I introduced Sarakoff, but Symington-Tearle hardly noticed him.

"Harden," he exclaimed in his loud dominating tones, "I am convinced that there is no such thing as this Blue Disease. I believe it all to be a colossal plant. Some practical joker has introduced a chemical into the water supply."

"Probably," I murmured, still thinking of Sarakoff's observation.

"I'm going to expose the whole thing in the evening papers; I examined a case yesterday--a man called Wain--and was convinced there was nothing wrong with him. He was really pigmented. And what is it but mere pigmentation?" He passed his hand over his brow and frowned. "Yes, yes," he continued, "that's what it is--a colossal joke. We've all been taken in by it--everyone except me." He sat down by the breakfast table suddenly and once more passed his hand over his brow.

"What was I saying?" he asked.

Sarakoff and I were now watching him intently.

"That the Blue Disease was a joke," I said.

"Ah, yes--a joke." He looked up at Sarakoff and stared for a moment. "Do you know," he said, "I believe it really is a joke."

An expression of intense solemnity came over his face, and he sat motionless gazing in front of him with unblinking eyes. I crossed to where he sat and peered at his face.

"I thought so," I remarked. "You've got it too."

"Got what?"

"The Blue Disease. I suppose you caught it from Wain, as we did." I picked up one of his hands and pointed to the faintly-tinted fingernails. Dr. Symington-Tearle stared at them with an air of such child-like simplicity and gravity that Sarakoff and I broke into loud laughter.

The humour of the situation passed with a peculiar suddenness and we ceased laughing abruptly. I sat down at the table, and for some time the three of us gazed at one another and said nothing. The spirit-lamp that heated the silver dish of bacon upon the table spurted at intervals and I saw Symington-Tearle stare at it in faint surprise.

"Does it sound very loud?" asked Sarakoff at length.

"Extraordinarily loud. And upon my soul your voice nearly deafens me."

"It will pass," I said. "One gets adjusted to the extreme sensitiveness in a short time. How do you feel?"

"I feel," said Symington-Tearle slowly, "as if I were newly constructed from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet. After a Turkish bath and twenty minutes' massage I've experienced a little of the feeling."

He stared at Sarakoff, then at me, and finally at the spirit lamp. We must have presented an odd spectacle. For there we sat, three men who, under ordinary circumstances, were extremely busy and active, lolling round the unfinished breakfast table while the hands of the clock travelled relentlessly onward.

Relentlessly? That was scarcely correct. To me, owing to some mysterious change that I cannot explain, the clock had ceased to be a tyrannous and hateful monster. I did not care how fast it went or to what hour it pointed. Time was no longer precious, any more than the sand of the sea is precious.

"Aren't you going to have any breakfast?" asked Symington-Tearle.

"I'm not in the least hurry," replied Sarakoff. "I think I'll take a sip of coffee. Are you hungry, Harden?"

"No. I don't want anything save coffee. But I'm in no hurry."

My housemaid entered and announced that the gentleman who had been waiting in Dr. Symington-Tearle's car, and was now in the hall, wished to know if the doctor would be long.

"Oh, that is a patient of mine," said Symington-Tearle, "ask him to come in."

A large, stout, red-faced gentleman entered, wrapped in a thick frieze motor coat. He nodded to us briefly.
"Sorry to interrupt," he said, "but time's getting on, Tearle. My consultation with Sir Peverly Salt was for half past nine, if you remember. It's that now."

"Oh, there's plenty of time," said Tearle. "Sit down, Ballard. It's nice and warm in here."

"It may be nice and warm," replied Mr. Ballard loudly, "but I don't want to keep Sir Peverly waiting."

"I don't see why you shouldn't keep him waiting," said Tearle. "In fact I really don't see why you should go to him at all."

Mr. Ballard stared for a moment. Then his eyes travelled round the table and dwelt first on Sarakoff and then on me. I suppose something in our manner rather baffled him, but outwardly he showed no sign of it.

"I don't quite follow you," he said, fixing his gaze upon Tearle again. "If you recollect, you advised me strongly four days ago to consult Sir Peverly Salt about the condition of my heart, and you impressed upon me that his opinion was the best that was obtainable. You rang him up and an appointment was fixed for this morning at half-past nine, and I was told to call on you shortly after nine."

He paused, and once more his eyes dwelt in turn upon each of us. They returned to Tearle. "It is now twenty-five minutes to ten," he said. His face had become redder, and his voice louder. "And I understood that Sir Peverly is a very busy man."

"He certainly is busy," said Tearle. "He's far too busy. It is very interesting to think that business is only necessary in so far——."

"Look here," said Mr. Ballard violently. "I'm a man with a short temper. I'm hanged if I'll stand this nonsense. What the devil do you think you're all doing? Are you playing a joke on me?"

He glared round at us, and then he made a sudden movement towards the table. In a moment we were all on our feet. I felt an acute terror seize me, and without waiting to see what happened, I flung open the door that led into my consulting room, darted to the further door, across the hall and up to my bedroom.

There was a cry and a rush of feet across the hall. Mr. Ballard's voice rang out stormily. A door slammed, and then another door, and then all was silent.

I became aware of a movement behind me, and looking round sharply, I saw my housemaid Lottie staring at me in amazement. She had been engaged in making the bed.

"Whatever is the matter, sir?" she asked.

"Hush!" I whispered. "There's a dangerous man downstairs."

I turned the key in the lock, listened for a moment, and then tiptoed my way across the floor to a chair. My limbs were shaking. It is difficult to describe the intensity of my terror. There was a cold sweat on my forehead. "He might have killed me. Think of that!"

Her eyes were fixed on me.

"Oh, sir, you do look bad," she exclaimed. "Whatever has happened to you?" She came nearer and gazed into my eyes. "They're all blue, sir. It must be that disease you've got."

A sudden irritation flashed over me. "Whatever is the matter, sir?" she asked.

"Hush!" I whispered. "There's a dangerous man downstairs."

I turned the key in the lock, listened for a moment, and then tiptoed my way across the floor to a chair. My limbs were shaking. It is difficult to describe the intensity of my terror. There was a cold sweat on my forehead. "He might have killed me. Think of that!"

Her eyes were fixed on me.

"Oh, sir, you do look bad," she exclaimed. "Whatever has happened to you?" She came nearer and gazed into my eyes. "They're all blue, sir. It must be that disease you've got."

I wiped my brow with a handkerchief.

"Good heavens, Sarakoff," I exclaimed, "this kind of thing will lead to endless trouble. I had no idea the terror would be so uncontrollable."

"I'm glad you feel it as I do," said the Russian. "When you threatened me with a pair of scissors this morning I felt mad with fear."

"It's awful," I murmured. "We can't be too careful." We began to descend the stairs. "Sarakoff, you remember I told you about that dead sailor? I see now why that expression was on his face. It was the terror that he felt."

"Extraordinary!" he muttered. "He couldn't have known. It must have been instinctive."

"Instincts are like that," I said. "I don't suppose an animal knows anything about death, or even thinks of it, yet it behaves from the very first as if it knew. It's odd."

A door opened at the far end of the hall, and Symington-Tearle emerged. There was a patch of coal-dust on his forehead. His hair, usually so flat and smooth that it seemed like a brass mirror, was now disordered.

"Has he gone?" he enquired hoarsely.

We nodded. I pointed to the chain on the door.

"It's bolted," I said. "Come into the study."
I led the way into the room. Tearle walked to the window, then to a chair, and finally took up a position before
the fire.

"This is extraordinary!" he exclaimed.
"What do you make of it?" I asked.
"I can make nothing of it. What's the matter with me? I never felt anything like that terror that came over me
when Ballard approached me."
Sarakoff took out a large handkerchief and passed it across his face. "It's only the fear of physical violence," he
said. "That's the only weak spot. Fear was formerly distributed over a wide variety of possibilities, but now it's all
concentrated in one direction."
"Why?" Tearle stared at me questioningly.
"Because the germ is in us," I said. "We're immortal."
"Immortal?"
Sarakoff threw out his hands, and flung back his head. "Immortals!"
I crossed to my writing-table, and picked up a heavy volume.
"Here is the first edition of Buckwell Pink's System of Medicine. This book was produced at immense cost and
labour, and it is to be published next week. When that book is published no one will buy it."
"Why not?" demanded Tearle. "I wrote an article in it myself."
"So did I," was my reply. "But that won't make any difference. No member of the medical profession will be
interested in it."
"Not interested? I can't believe that. It contains all the recent work."
"The medical profession will not be interested in it for a very simple reason. The medical profession will have
cased to exist."

A look of amazement came to Tearle's face. I tapped the volume and continued.
"You are wrong in thinking it contains all the recent work. It does not. The last and greatest achievement of
medical science is not recorded in these pages. It is only recorded in ourselves. For that blue pigmentation in your
eyes and fingers is due to the Sarakoff-Harden bacillus which closes once and for all the chapter of medicine."

CHAPTER XVI
THE VISIT OF THE HOME SECRETARY

In a few hours the initial effects of stimulation had worn off. The acuity of hearing was no longer so
pronounced and the sense of refreshment, although still present, was not intense. We were already becoming
adjusted to the new condition. The feeling of inertia and irresponsibility became gradually replaced by a general
sense of calmness. To me, it seemed as if I had entered a world of new perspectives, a larger world in which space
and time were widened out immeasurably. I could scarcely recall the nature of those impulses that had once driven
me to and fro in endless activities, and in a constant state of anxiety. For now I had no anxiety.

It is difficult to describe fully the extraordinary sense of freedom that came from this change. For anxiety--the
great modern emotion--is something that besets a life on all sides so silently and so continuously that it escapes
direct detection. But it is there, tightening the muscles, crinkling the skin, quickening the heart and shortening the
breath. Though almost imperceptible, it lurks under the most agreeable surroundings, requiring only a word or a
look to bring it into the light. To be free from it--ah, that was an experience that no man could ever forget! It was
perhaps the nearest approach to that condition of bliss, which many expect in one of the Heavens, that had ever been
attained on earth. As long as no physical danger threatened, this bliss-state surrounded me. Its opposite, that
condition of violent, agonizing, uncontrollable fear that suddenly surged over one on the approach of bodily danger,
was something which passed as swiftly as it came, and left scarcely a trace behind it. But of that I shall have more to
say, for it produced the most extraordinary state of affairs and more than anything else threatened to disorganize life
completely.

I fancy Sarakoff was more awed by the bliss-state than I was. During the rest of the day he was very quiet and
sat gazing before him His boisterousness had vanished. Symington-Tearle had left us--a man deeply amazed and
totally incredulous. I noticed that Sarakoff scarcely smoked at all during that morning. He in the habit of consuming
two ounces of tobacco a day, which in my opinion was suicidal. He certainly lit his pipe several times, mechanically, but laid it aside almost immediately. At lunch--we had not moved out of the
house yet--we had very little appetite. As a matter of interest I will give exactly what we ate and drank. Sarakoff
took some soup and a piece of bread, and then some cheese. I began with some cold beef, and finding it unattractive,
pushed it away and ate some biscuits and butter. There was claret on the table. I wish here to call attention to a
passing impression that I experienced when sipping that claret. I had recently got in several dozen bottles of it and
on that day regretted it because it seemed to me to be extremely poor stuff. It tasted sour and harsh.

We did not talk much. It was not because my mind was devoid of ideas, but rather because I was feeling that I
had a prodigious, incalculable amount to think about. Perhaps it was the freedom from anxiety that made thinking easier, for there is little doubt that anxiety, however masked, deflects and disturbs the power of thought more than anything else. Indeed it seemed to me that I had never really thought clearly before. To begin a conversation with Sarakoff seemed utterly artificial. It would have been a useless interruption. I was entirely absorbed.

Sarakoff was similarly absorbed. When, therefore, the servant came in to announce that two gentlemen wished to see us, and were in the waiting-room, we were loth to move. I got up at length and went across the hall. I recollect that before entering the waiting-room I was entirely without curiosity. It was a matter of total indifference to me that two visitors were within. They had no business to interrupt me—that was my feeling. They were intruders and should have known better.

I entered the room. Standing by the fire was Lord Alberan. Beside him was a tall thin man, carefully dressed and something of a dandy, who looked at me sharply as I came across the room. I recognized his face, but failed to recall his name.

Lord Alberan, holding himself very stiffly, cleared his throat.

"Good day, Dr. Harden," he said, without offering his hand. "I have brought Sir Robert Smith to interview you. As you may know he is the Home Secretary." He cleared his throat again, and his face became rather red. "I have reported to the Home Secretary the information that I—er—that I acquired from you and your Russian companion concerning this epidemic that has swept over Birmingham and is now threatening London." He paused and stared at me. His eyes bulged. "Good heavens," he exclaimed, "you've got it yourself."

Sir Robert Smith took a step towards me and examined my face attentively.

"Yes," he said, "there's no doubt you've got it."

I indicated some chairs with a calm gesture.

"Won't you sit down?"

Lord Alberan refused, but Sir Robert lowered himself gracefully into an arm-chair and crossed his legs.

"Dr. Harden," he said, in smooth and pleasant tones, "I wish you to understand that I come here, at this unusual hour, solely in the spirit of one who desires to get all the information possible concerning the malady, called the Blue Disease, which is now sweeping over England. I understand from my friend Lord Alberan, that you know something about it."

"That is true."

"How much do you know?"

"I know all there is to be known."

"Ah!" Sir Robert leaned forward. Lord Alberan nodded violently and glared at me. There was a pause. "What you say is very interesting," said Sir Robert at length, keeping his eyes fixed upon me. "You understand, of course, that the Blue Disease is causing a lot of anxiety?"

"Anxiety?" I exclaimed. "Surely you are wrong. It has the opposite effect. It abolishes anxiety."

"You mean—-?" he queried politely.

"I mean that the germ, when once in the system, produces an atmosphere of extraordinary calm," I returned. "I am aware of that atmosphere at this moment. I have never felt so perfectly tranquil before."

He nodded, without moving his eyes.

"So I see. You struck me, as you came into the room, as a man who is at peace with himself." Lord Alberan snorted, and was about to speak, but Sir Robert held up his hand. "Tell me, Dr. Harden, did you actually contaminate the water of Birmingham?"

"My friend Sarakoff and I introduced the germ that we discovered into the Elan reservoirs."

"With what object?"

"To endow humanity with the gift of immortality."

"Ah!" he nodded gently. "The gift of immortality." He mused for a moment, and never once did his eyes leave my face. "That is interesting," he continued. "I recollect that at the International Congress at Moscow, a few years ago, there was much talk about longevity. Virchow, I fancy, and Nikola Tesla made some suggestive remarks. So you think you have discovered the secret?"

"I am sure."

"Of course you use the term immortality in a relative sense? You mean that the—er—germ that you discovered confers a long life on those it attacks?"

"I mean what I say. It confers immortality."

"Indeed!" His expression remained perfectly polite and interested, but his eyes turned for a brief moment in the direction of Lord Alberan. "So you are now immortal, Dr. Harden?"

"Yes."

"And will you, in such circumstances, go on practising medicine—indefinitely?"
"No. There will be no medicine to practise."

"Ah!" he nodded. "I see--the germ does away with disease. Quite so." He leaned back in the chair and pressed his finger tips together. "I suppose," he continued, "that you are aware that what you say is very difficult to believe?"

"Why?"

"Well, the artificial prolongation of life is, I believe, a possibility that we are all prepared to accept. By special methods we may live a few extra years, and everything goes to show that we are actually living longer than our ancestors. At least I believe so. But for a man of your position, Dr. Harden, to say that the epidemic is an epidemic of immortality is, in my opinion, an extravagant statement."

"You are entitled to any opinion you like," I replied tranquilly. "It is possible to live with totally erroneous opinions. For all I know you may think the earth is square. It makes no difference to me."

"What do you mean, sir?" exclaimed Lord Alberan. He had become exceedingly red during our conversation and the lower part of his face had begun to swell. "Be careful what you say," he continued violently. "You are in danger of being arrested, sir. Either that, or being locked in an asylum."

The Home Secretary raised a restraining hand.

"One moment, Lord Alberan," he said, "I have not quite finished. Dr. Harden, will you be so good as to ask your friend--his name is Sarakoff, I believe--to come in here?"

I rose without haste and fetched the Russian. He behaved in an extremely quiet manner, nodded to Alberan and bowed to the Home Secretary.

Sir Robert gave a brief outline of the conversation he had had with me, which Sarakoff listened to with an absolutely expressionless face.

"I see that you also suffer from the epidemic," said Sir Robert. "Are you, then, immortal?"

"I am an Immortal," said the Russian, in deep tones. "You will be immortal to-morrow."

"I quite understand that I will probably catch the Blue Disease," said Sir Robert, suavely. "At present there are cases reported all over London, and we are at a loss to know what to do."

"You can do nothing," I said.

"We had thought of forming isolation camps." He stared at us thoughtfully. There was a slightly puzzled look in his face. It was the first time I had noticed it. It must have been due to Sarakoff's profound calm. "How did you gentlemen find the germ?" he asked suddenly.

Sarakoff reflected.

"It would take perhaps a week to explain."

"You are wasting your time," muttered Alberan in his ear. "Arrest them."

The Home Secretary took no notice.

"It is curious that this epidemic seems to cut short other diseases," he said slowly. "That rather supports what you tell me."

His eyes rested searchingly on my face.

"You are foolish to refuse to believe us," I said. "We have told you the truth."

"It would be very strange if it were true." He walked to the window and stood for a moment looking on to the street. Then he turned with a movement of resolution. "I will not trespass on your time," he said. "Lord Alberan, we need not stay. I am satisfied with what these gentlemen have said." He bowed to us and went to the door. Lord Alberan, very fierce and upright, followed him. The Home Secretary paused and looked back. The puzzled looked had returned to his face.

"The matter is to be discussed in the House to-night," he said. "I think that it will be as well for you if I say nothing of what you have told me. People might be angry." We gazed at him unmoved. He took a sudden step towards us and held out his hands. "Come now, gentlemen, tell me the truth. You invented that story, didn't you?"

Neither of us spoke. He looked appealingly at me, and with a laugh left the room. He turned, however, in a moment, and stood looking at me. "There is a meeting at the Queen's Hall to-night," he said slowly. "It is a medical conference on the Blue Disease. No doubt you know of it. I am going to ask you a question." He paused and smiled at Sarakoff. "Will you gentlemen make a statement before those doctors to-night?"

"We intended to do so," said Sarakoff.

"I am delighted to hear it," said the Home Secretary. "It is a great relief to me. They will know how best to deal with you. Good day."

He left the room.

I heard the front door close and then brisk footsteps passing the window on the pavement outside.

"There's no doubt that they're both a little mad." Sir Robert's voice sounded for a moment, and then died away.
CHAPTER XVII
CLUTTERBUCK'S ODD BEHAVIOUR

Scarcely had the Home Secretary departed when my maid announced that a patient was waiting to see me in my study.

I left Sarakoff sitting tranquilly in the waiting-room and entered the study. A grave, precise, clean-shaven man was standing by the window. He turned as I entered. It was Mr. Clutterbuck.

"So you are Dr. Harden!" he exclaimed.

He stopped and looked confused.

"Yes," I said; "please sit down, Mr. Clutterbuck."

He did so, twisting his hat awkwardly and gazing at the floor.

"I owe you an apology," he said at length. "I came to consult you, little expecting to find that it was you after all—that you were Dr. Harden. I must apologize for my rudeness to you in the tea-shop, but what you said was so extraordinary ... you could not expect me to believe."

He glanced at me, and then looked away. There was a dull flush on his face.

"Please do not apologize. What did you wish to consult me about?"

"About my wife."

"Is she worse?"

"No." He dropped his hat, recovered it, and finally set it upon a corner of the table. "No, she is not worse. In fact, she is the reverse. She is better."

I waited, feeling only a mild interest in the cause of his agitation.

"She has got the Blue Disease," he continued, speaking with difficulty. "She got it yesterday and since then she has been much better. Her cough has ceased. She—er—she is wonderfully better." He began to drum with his fingers on his knee, and looked with a vacant gaze at the corner of the room. "Yes, she is certainly better. I was wondering if—-

There was a silence.

"Yes?"

He started and looked at me.

"Why, you've got it, too!" he exclaimed. "How extraordinary! I hadn't noticed it." He got to his feet and went to the window. "I suppose I shall get it next," he muttered.

"Certainly, you'll get it."

He nodded, and continued to stare out of the window. At length he spoke.

"My wife is a woman who has suffered a great deal, Dr. Harden. I have never had enough money to send her to health resorts, and she has always refused to avail herself of any institutional help. For the last year she has been confined to a room on the top floor of our house—a nice, pleasant room—and it has been an understood thing between Dr. Sykes and myself that her malady was to be given a convenient name. In fact, we have called it a weak heart. You understand, of course."

"Perfectly."

"I have always been led to expect that the end was inevitable," he continued, speaking with sudden rapidity. "Under such circumstances I made certain plans. I am a careful man, Dr. Harden, and I look ahead and lay my plans." He stopped abruptly and turned to face me. "Is there any truth in what you told me the other day?"

I nodded. A curiously haggard expression came over him. He stepped swiftly towards me and caught my arm.

"Does the germ cure disease?"

"Of course. Your wife is now immortal. You need not be alarmed, Mr. Clutterbuck. She is immortal. Before her lies a future absolutely free from suffering. She will rapidly regain her normal health and strength. Provided she avoids accidents, your wife will live for ever."

"My wife will live forever?" he repeated hoarsely. "Then what will happen to me?"

"You, too, will live for ever," I said calmly. "Please do not grasp my arm so violently."

He drew back. He was extremely pale, and there were beads of perspiration on his brow.

"Are you married?" he asked.

"No."

"Have you any idea what all this means to me if what you say is true?" he exclaimed. He drew his hand across his eyes. "I am mad to believe you for an instant. But she is better--there is no denying that. Good God, if it is true, what a tragedy you have made of human lives!"

He remained standing in the middle of the room, and I, not comprehending, gazed at him. Then, of a sudden, he picked up his hat, and muttering something, dashed out and vanished.

I heard the front door bang. Perfectly calm and undisturbed, I rejoined Sarakoff in the waiting-room. The
incident of Mr. Clutterbuck passed totally from my mind, and I began to reflect on certain problems arising out of
the visit of the Home Secretary.

CHAPTER XVIII
IMMORTAL LOVE

On the same afternoon Miss Annot paid me a visit. I was still sitting in the waiting-room, and Sarakoff was
with me. My mind had been deeply occupied with the question of the larger beliefs that we hold. For it had come to
me with peculiar force that law and order, and officials like the Home Secretary, are concerned only with the small
beliefs of humanity, with the burdensome business of material life. As long as a man dressed properly, walked
decently and paid correctly, he was accepted, in spite of the fact that he might firmly believe the world was square.
No one worried about those matters. We judge people ultimately by how they eat and drink and get up and sit down.
What they say is of little importance in the long run. If we examine a person professionally, we merely ask him what
day it is, where he is, what is his name and where he was born. We watch him to see if he washes, undresses and
dresses, and eats properly. We ask him to add two and two, and to divide six by three, and then we solemnly give
our verdict that he is either sane or insane.

The enormity of this revelation engrossed me with an almost painful activity of thought.
I gazed across at Sarakoff and wondered what appalling gulf divided our views on supreme things. What view
did he really take of women? Did he or did he not think that the planets and stars were inhabited? Did he believe in
the evolution of the soul like Mr. Thornduck?

A kind of horror possessed me as I stared at him and reflected that these questions had never entered my
consciousness until that moment. I had lived with him and dined with him and worked with him, and yet hitherto it
would have concerned me far more if I had seen him tuck his napkin under his collar or spit on the carpet.... What
laughable little folk we were! I, who had always seen man as the last and final expression of evolution, now saw him
as the stumbling, crawling, incredibly stupid, result of a tentative experiment--a first step up a ladder of infinitive
length.

Whilst I was immersed in the humiliation of these thoughts Miss Annot entered. She wore a dark violet coat
and skirt and a black hat. I noticed that her complexion, usually somewhat muddy, was perfectly clear, though of a
marble pallor. We greeted each other quietly and I introduced Sarakoff.

"So you are an Immortal, Alice," I said smiling. She gazed at me.

"Richard, I do not know what I am, but I know one thing; I am entirely changed. Some strange miracle has
been wrought in me. I came to ask you what it is."

"You see that both Professor Sarakoff and I have got the germ in our systems like you, Alice. Yes, it is a
miracle; we are Immortals."

I studied her face attentively, she had changed. It seemed to me that she was another woman, she moved in a
new way, her speech was unhurried, her gaze was direct and thoughtful. I recalled her former appearance when her
manner had been nervous and bashful, her eyes downcast, her movements hurried and anxious.

"I do not understand," she said. "Tell me all you know."

I did so, I suppose I must have talked for an hour on end. Throughout that time neither she nor Sarakoff stirred.
When I had finished there was a long silence.

"It is funny to think of our last meeting, Richard," she said at length. "Do you remember how my father
behaved? He is different now. He sits all day in his study--he eats very little. He seems to be in a dream."

"And you?" I asked.

"I am in a dream, too. I do not understand it. All the things I used to busy myself with seem unimportant."

"That is how we feel," said Sarakoff. He rose to his feet and spoke strongly. "Harden, as Miss Annot says,
everything has changed. I never foresaw this; I do not understand it myself."

He went slowly to the mantelpiece and leaned against it.

"When I created this germ, I saw in my mind an ideal picture of life. I saw a world freed from a dire spectre, a
world from which fear had been removed, the fear of death. I saw the great triumph of materialism and the final
smashing up of all superstition. A man would live in a state of absolute certainty. He would lay his plans for
pleasure and comfort and enjoyment with absolute precision, knowing--not hoping--but certainly knowing, that they
would come about. I saw cities and gardens built in triumph to cater for the gratification of every sense. I saw new
laws in operation, constructed by men who knew that they had mastered the secret of life and had nothing to fear. I
saw all those things about which we are so timid and vague--marriage and divorce, the education of children, luxury,
the working classes, religion and so on--absolutely settled in black and white. I saw what I thought to be the
millennium."

"And now?" asked Alice.

"Now I see nothing. I am in the dark. I do not understand what has happened to me."
"What we are in for now, no man can say," I remarked.

"It's the extraordinary restfulness that puzzles me," said Sarakoff. "Here I have been sitting for hours and I feel no inclination to do anything."

"The thing that is most extraordinary to me is the difficulty I have in realizing how I spent my time formerly," said Alice. "Of course, father is no bother now and meals have been cut down, but that does not account for all of it. It seems as if I had been living in a kind of nightmare in the past, from which I have suddenly escaped."

"What do you feel most inclined to do?" I asked.

"Nothing at present. I sit and think. It was difficult for me to make myself come here to-day." She smiled suddenly. "Richard, it seems strange to recall that we were engaged."

She spoke without any embarrassment and I answered her with equal ease.

"I hope you don't think our engagement is broken off, Alice. I think my feelings towards you are unchanged."

"Ah!" exclaimed Sarakoff. "That is interesting. Are you sure of that, Harden?"

"Not altogether," I answered tranquilly. "There is a lot to think out before I can be sure, but I know that I feel towards Alice a great sympathy."

"Sympathy!" the Russian exclaimed. "What are we coming to? Good heavens! Is sympathy to be our strongest emotion? What do you think, Miss Annot."

"Sympathy is exactly what I feel," she replied. "Richard and I would be very good companions. Isn't that more important than passion?"

"Is sympathy to be the bond between the sexes, then, and is all passion and romance to die?" he exclaimed scornfully. He seemed to be struggling with himself, as if he were trying to throw off some spell that held him. "Surely I seem to recollect that yesterday life contained some richer emotions than sympathy," he muttered. "What has come over us? Why doesn't my blood quicken when I think of Leonora?" He burst into a laugh. "Harden, this is comic. There is no other word for it. It is simply comic."

"It may be comic, Sarakoff, but to speak candidly, I prefer my state to-day to my state yesterday. Last night seems to me like a bad dream." I got to my feet. "There is one thing I must see about as soon as possible, and that is getting rid of this house. What an absurd place to live in this is! It is a comic house, if you like--like a tomb."

The room seemed suddenly absurd. It was very dark, the wallpaper was of a heavy-moulded variety, sombre in hue and covered with meaningless figuring. The ceiling was oppressive. It, too, was moulded in some fantastic manner. Several large faded oil-paintings hung on the wall. I do not know why they hung there, they were hideous and meaningless as well. The whole place was meaningless. It was the meaninglessness that seemed to leap out upon me wherever I turned my eyes. The fireplace astounded me. It was a mass of pillars and super-structures and carvings, increasing in complexity from within outwards, until it attained the appearance of an ornate temple in the centre of which burned a little coal. It was grotesque. On the topmost ledges of this monstrous absurdity stood two vases. They bulged like distended stomachs, covered on their outsides with yellow, green and black splotches of colour. I recollected that I paid ten pounds apiece for them. Under what perverted impulse had I done that? My memories became incredible. I moved deliberately to the mantelpiece and seized the vases. I opened the window and hurled them out on to the pavement. They fell with a crash, and their fragments littered the ground.

Alice expressed no surprise.

"It is rather comic," said the Russian, "but where are you going to live?"

"Alice and I will go and live by the sea. We have plenty to think about. I feel as if I could never stop thinking, as if I had to dig away a mountain of thought with a spade. Alice, we will go round to the house agent now."

When Alice and I left the house the remains of the vases littered the pavement at our feet. We walked down Harley Street. The house agent lived in Regent Street. It was now a clear, crisp afternoon with a pleasant tint of sunlight in the air. A newspaper boy passed, calling something unintelligible in an excited voice. I stopped him and bought a paper.

"What an inhuman noise to make," said Alice. "It seems to jar on every nerve in my body. Do ask him to stop."

"You're making too much noise," I said to the lad. "You must call softly. It is an outrage to scream like that."

He stared up at me, an impudent amazed face surmounting a tattered and dishevelled body, and spoke.

"You two do look a couple of guys, wiv' yer blue faices. If some of them doctors round 'ere catches yer, they'll pop yer into 'ospital."

He ran off, shrieking his unintelligible jargon.

"We must get to the sea," I said firmly. "This clamour of London is unbearable."

I opened the paper. Enormous headlines stared me in the face.

"Blue Disease sweeping over London. Ten thousand cases reported to-day. Europe alarmed. Question of the isolation of Great Britain under discussion. Debate in the Commons to-night. The Duke of Thud and the Earl of Blunder victims. The Royal Family leave London."
We stood together on the pavement and gazed at these statements in silence. A sense of wonder filled my mind. What a confusion! What an emotional, feverish, heated confusion! Why could they not take the matter calmly? What, in the name of goodness, was the reason of this panic? They knew that the Blue Disease had caused no fatalities in Birmingham, and yet so totally absent was the power of thought and deduction, that they actually printed those glaring headlines.

"The fools," I said. "The amazing, fatuous fools. They simply want to sell the paper. They have no other idea."

A strong nausea came over me. I crumpled up the paper and stood staring up and down the street. The newspaper boy was in the far distance, still shrieking. I saw Sir Barnaby Burtle, the obstetrician, standing by his scarlet front door, eagerly devouring the news. His jaw was slack and his eyes protruded.

The solemn houses of Harley Street only increased my nausea. The folly of it—the selfish, savage folly of life!

"Come, Richard," said Alice. "The sooner we get to the house agent the better. We could never live here."

"I'll put him on to the job of finding a bungalow on the South Coast at once," I said. "And then we'll go and live there."

"We must get married," she observed.

"Married?" I stopped and stared at her with a puzzled expression. "Don't you think the marriage ceremony is rather barbarous?"

She did not reply; we walked on immersed in our own thoughts. At times I detected in the passers-by a gleam of sparrow-egg blue.

My house agent was a large, confused individual who habitually wore a shining top hat on the back of his head and twisted a cigar in the corner of his mouth. He was very fat, with one of those creased faces that seem to fall into folds like a heavy crimson curtain. His brooding, congested eye fell upon me as we entered, and an expression of alarm became visible in its depths. He pushed his chair back and retreated to a corner of the room.

"Dr. Harden!" he exclaimed fearfully, "you oughtn't to come here like that, you really oughtn't."

"Don't be an ass, Franklyn," I said firmly. "You are bound to catch the germ sooner or later. It will impress you immensely."

"It's all over London," he whimpered. "It's too much; it will hit us hard. It's too much."

"Listen to me," I said. "I have come here to see you about business. Now sit down in your chair; I won't touch you. I want you to get me a bungalow by the sea with a garden as soon as possible. I am going to sell my house."

"Sell your house!" He became calmer. "That is very extraordinary, Dr. Harden."

"I am going out of London."

He was astonished.

"But your house—in Harley Street—so central..." he stammered. "I don't understand. Are you giving up your practice?"

"Of course."

"At your age, Dr. Harden?"

"What has age got to do with it? There is no such thing as age."

He stared. Then his eyes turned to Alice.

"No such thing as age?" he murmured helplessly. "But surely you are not going to sell; you have the best house in Harley Street. Its commanding position... in the centre of that famous locality...."

"Do you think that any really sane man would live in the centre of Harley Street," I asked calmly. "Is he likely to find any peace in that furnace of crude worldly ambitions? But all that is already a thing of the past. In a few weeks, Franklyn, Harley Street will be deserted."

"Deserted?" His eyes rolled.

"Deserted," I said sternly. "In its upper rooms there may remain a few Immortals, but the streets will be silent. The great business of sickness, which occupies the attention of a third of the world and furnishes the main topic of conversation in every home, will be gone. Sell my house, Franklyn, and find me a bungalow on the South Coast facing the sea."

I turned away and went towards the door, Alice followed me. The house agent sat in helpless amazement. He filled me with a sense of nausea. He seemed so gross, so mindless.

"A bungalow," he whispered.

"Yes. Let us have long, low, simple rooms and a garden where we may grow enough to live on. The age of material complexity and noise is at an end. We need peace."

Strolling along at a slow pace, we went down Oxford Street towards the Marble Arch. It was dusk. The newsboys were howling at every corner and everyone had a paper. Little groups of people stood on the pavements discussing the news. In the roadway the stream of traffic was incessant. The huge motor-buses thundered and swayed along, with their loads of pale humanity feverishly clinging to them. The public-houses were crowded. The
slight tension that the threat of the Blue Disease produced in people filled the bars with men and women, seeking the relaxation of alcohol. There was in the air that liveliness, that tendency to collect into small crowds, that is evident whenever the common safety of the great herd is threatened. In the Park a crowd surrounded the platform of an agitator. In a voice that of a delirious man, he implored the crowd to go down on its knees and repent ... the end of the world was at hand ... the Blue Disease was the pouring out of one of the vials of wrath ... repent!... repent!... His voice rang in our ears and drove us away. We crossed the damp grass. I stumbled over a sleeping man. There was something familiar in his appearance and I stooped down and turned him over. It was Mr. Herbert Wain. He seemed to be fast asleep.... We walked to King's Cross, and I put Alice without regret in the train for Cambridge.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MEETING AT THE QUEEN'S HALL

The same night a vast meeting of medical men had been summoned at the Queen's Hall, with the object of discussing the nature of the strange visitation, and the measures that should be adopted. Doctors came from every part of the country. The meeting began at eight o'clock, and Sir Jeremy Jones, the President of the Royal College of Physicians, opened the discussion with a paper in which the most obvious features of the disease were briefly tabulated.

The great Hall was packed. Sarakoff and I got seats in the front row of the gallery. Sir Jeremy Jones, a large bland man, with beautiful silver grey hair, wearing evening dress, and pince-nez, stood up on the platform amid a buzz of talk. The short outburst of clapping soon ceased and Sir Jeremy began.

The beginnings of the disease were outlined, the symptoms described, and then the physician laid down his notes, and seemed to look directly up at me.

"So far," he said, in suave and measured tones, "I have escaped the Blue Disease, but at any moment I may find myself a victim, and the fact does not disquiet me. For I am convinced that we are witnessing the sudden intrusion and the swift spread of an absolutely harmless organism—one that has been, perhaps, dormant for centuries in the soil, or has evolved to its present form in the deep waters of the Elan watershed by a process whose nature we can only dimly guess at. Some have suggested a meteoric origin, and it is true that some meteoric stones fell over Wales recently. But that is far-fetched to my mind, for how could a white-hot stone harbour living matter? Whatever its origin, it is, I am sure, a harmless thing, and though strange, and at first sight alarming, we need none of us alter our views of life or our way of living. The subject is now open for discussion, and I call on Professor Sarakoff, of Petrograd, the eminent bacteriologist, to give us the benefit of his views, as I believe he has a statement to make."

A burst of applause filled the Hall.

"Good," muttered Sarakoff in my ear. "I will certainly give them my views."

"Be careful," I said idly. Sir Jeremy was gazing round the Hall. Sarakoff stood up and there arose cries for silence. He made a striking figure with his giant stature, his black hair and beard and his blue-stained eyes. Sir Jeremy sat down, smiling blandly.

"Mr. President and Gentlemen," began the Professor, in a voice that carried to every part of the Hall. "I, as an Immortal, desire to make a few simple and decisive statements to you to-night regarding the nature of the Blue Disease, the germ of which was prepared by myself and my friend, Dr. Richard Harden. The germ—in future to be known as the Sarakoff-Harden bacillus—is ultra-microscopical. It grows in practically every medium with great ease. In the human body it finds an admirable host, and owing to the fact that it destroys all other organisms, it confers immortality on the person who is infected by it. We are therefore on the threshold of a new era."

After this brief statement Sarakoff calmly sat down, and absolute silence reigned. Sir Jeremy, still smiling blandly, stared up at him. Every face was turned in our direction. A murmur began, which quickly increased. A doctor behind me leaned over and touched my shoulder.

"Is he sane?" he asked in a whisper.

"Perfectly," I replied.

"But you don't believe him?"

"Of course I do."

"But it's ridiculous! Who is this Dr. Harden?"

"I am Dr. Harden."

The uproar in the Hall was now considerable. Sir Jeremy rose, and waved his hands in gestures of restraint. Finally he had recourse to a bell that stood on the table.

"Gentlemen," he said, when silence was restored. "We have just heard a remarkable statement from Professor Sarakoff and I think I am justified in asking for proofs."

I instantly got up. I was quite calm.

"I can prove that Sarakoff's statement is perfectly correct," I said. "I am Richard Harden. I discovered the method whereby the bacillus became a possibility. Every man in this Hall who has the Sarakoff-Harden bacillus in
his system is immortal. You, Mr. President, are not yet one of the Immortals. But I fancy in a day or two you will join us." I paused and smiled easily at the concourse below and around me. "It is really bad luck on the medical profession," I continued. "I'm afraid we'll all have to find some other occupation. Of course you've all noticed how the germ cuts short disease."

I sat down again. The smile on Sir Jeremy's face had weakened a little.

"Turn them out!" shouted an angry voice from the body of the Hall.

Sir Jeremy held up a protesting hand, and then took off his glasses and began to polish them. A buzz of talk arose. Men turned to one another and began to argue. The doctor behind me leaned forward again.

"Is this a joke?" he enquired rather loudly.

"No."

"But you two are speaking rubbish. What the devil do you mean by saying you're immortal?"

I turned and looked at him. My calmness enraged him. He was a shaggy, irritable, middle-aged practitioner.

"You've got the Blue Disease, but you're no more immortal than a blue monkey." He looked fiercely round at his neighbours. "What do you think?"

A babel of voices sounded in our ears.

Sir Jeremy Jones appeared perplexed. Someone stood up in the body of the Hall and Sir Jeremy caught his eye and seemed relieved. It was my friend Hammer, who had tended me after the accident that my black cat had brought about.

"Gentlemen," said Hammer, when silence had fallen. "Although the statements of Professor Sarakoff and Dr. Harden appear fantastical, I believe that they may be nearer the truth than we suppose." His manner, slow, impressive and calm, aroused general attention. Frowning slightly, he drew himself up and clasped the lapels of his coat. "This afternoon," he continued, "I was at the bedside of a sick child who was at the point of death. This child had been visited yesterday by a relative who, two hours after the visit, developed the Blue Disease. Now----" He paused and looked slowly about him. "Now the child was suffering from peritonitis, and there was no possible chance of recovery. Yet that child did recover and is now well."

The whole audience was staring at him. Hammer took a deep breath and grasped his coat more firmly.

"That child, I repeat, is now well. The recovery set in under my own eyes. I saw for myself the return of life to a body that was moribund. The return was swift. In one hour the transformation was complete, and it was in that hour that the child developed the outward signs of the Blue Disease."

He paused. A murmur ran round the hall and then once more came silence.

"I am of the opinion," said Hammer deliberately, "that the cause of the miracle--for it was a miracle--was the Blue Disease. Think, Gentlemen, of a child in the last stages of septic peritonitis, practically dead. Think again of the same child, one hour later, alive, free from pain, smiling, interested--and stained with the Blue Disease. What conclusion, as honest men, are we to draw from that?"

He sat down. At once a man near him got to his feet.

"The point of view hinted at by the last speaker is correct," he said. "I can corroborate it to a small extent. This morning I was confined to my bed with the beginnings of a bad influenzal cold. At midday I developed the Blue Disease, and now I am as well as I have ever been in the whole of my life. I attribute my cure to the Blue Disease."

Scarcey had he taken his seat again when a grave scholarly man arose in the gallery.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I come from Birmingham; and it is a city of miracles. The sick are being cured in thousands daily. The hospitals are emptying daily. I verily believe that the Blue Disease may prove to be all that Dr. Sarakoff and Dr. Harden claim it to be."

The effect of these speakers upon the meeting was remarkable. A thrill passed over the crowded Hall. Hammer rose again.

"Let us accept for a moment that this new infection confers immortality on humanity," he said, weighing each word carefully. "What are we, as medical men, going to do? Look into the future--a future free from disease, from death, possibly from pain. Are we to accept such a future passively, or are we, as doctors, to strive to eradicate this new germ as we strive to eradicate other germs?"

Sir Jeremy Jones, with an expression of dismay, raised his hand.

"Surely, surely," he exclaimed shrilly, "we are going too far. That the Blue Disease may modify the course of illness is conceivable, and seems to be supported by evidence. But to assume that it confers immortality----"

"Why should we doubt it?" returned Hammer warmly. "We have been told that it does by two responsible men of science, and so far their claim is justified. You, Mr. Chairman, have not seen the miracle that I have seen this afternoon. If the germ can bring a moribund child back to life in an hour, why should it not banish disease from the world?"

"But if it does banish disease from the world, that does not mean it confers immortality," objected Sir Jeremy.
"Do you mean to say that we are to regard natural death as a disease?"

He gazed round the hall helplessly. Several men arose to speak, but were unable to obtain a hearing, for excitement now ran high and every man was discussing the situation with his neighbour. For a moment, a strange dread had gripped the meeting, paralysing thought, but it passed, and while some remained perplexed the majority began to resent vehemently the suggestions of Hammer. I could hear those immediately behind me insisting that the view was sheer rubbish. It was preposterous. It was pure lunacy. With these phrases, constantly repeated, they threw off the startling effect of Hammer's speech, and fortified themselves in the conviction that the Blue Disease was merely a new malady, similar to other maladies, and that life would proceed as before.

I turned to them.
"You are deliberately deceiving yourselves," I said. "You have heard the evidence. You are simply making as much noise as possible in order to shut out the truth."

My words enraged them. A sudden clamour arose around us. Several men shook their fists and there were angry cries. One of them made a movement towards us. In an instant calmness left us. The scene around us seemed to leap up to our senses as something terrible and dangerous. Sarakoff and I scrambled to our feet, pushed our way frantically through the throng, reached the corridor and dashed down it. Fear of indescribable intensity had flamed in our souls, and in a moment we found ourselves running violently down Regent Street.

CHAPTER XX
THE WAY BACK

It had been a wet night. Pools of water lay on the glistening pavements, but the rain had ceased. We ran steadily until we came in sight of Piccadilly Circus, and there our fear left us suddenly. It was like the cutting off of a switch.

We stopped in the street, gasping for breath.
"This is really absurd," I observed; "we must learn to control ourselves."

"We can't control an emotion of that strength, Harden. It's overwhelming. It's all the emotion we had before concentrated into a single expression. No, it's going to be a nuisance."

"The worst of it is that we cannot foresee it. We get no warning. It springs out of the unknown like a tiger."

We walked slowly across the Circus. It was thronged with a night crowd, and seemed like some strange octagonal room, walled by moving coloured lights. Here lay a scene that remained eternally the same whatever the conditions of life--a scene that neither war, nor pestilence, nor famine could change. We stood by the fountain, immersed in our thoughts. "I used to enjoy this kind of thing," said Sarakoff at length.

"And now?"

"Now it is curiously meaningless--absolutely indecipherable."

We walked on and entered Coventry Street. Here Sarakoff suddenly pushed open a door and I followed him. We found ourselves in a brilliantly illuminated restaurant. A band was playing. We sat down at an unoccupied table.

"Harden, I wish to try an experiment. I want to see if, by an effort, we can get back to the old point of view."

He beckoned to the waiter and ordered champagne, cognac, oysters and caviare. Then he leaned back in his seat and smiled.

"Somehow I feel it won't work," I began.

He held up his hand.

"Wait. It is an experiment. You must give it a fair chance. Come, let us be merry."

I nodded.

"Let us eat, drink and be merry," I murmured.

I watched the flushed faces and sparkling eyes around us. So far we had attracted no attention. Our table was in a corner, behind a pillar. The waiter hurried up with a laden tray, and in a moment the table was covered with bottles and plates.

"Now," said Sarakoff, "we will begin with a glass of brandy. Let us try to recall the days of our youth--a little imagination, Harden, and then perhaps the spell will be broken. A toast--Leonora!"

"Leonora," I echoed.

We raised our glasses. I took a sip and set down my glass. Our eyes met.

"Is the brandy good?"

"It is of an admirable quality," said Sarakoff. He put his glass on the table and for some time we sat in silence.

"Excuse me," I said. "Don't you think the caviare is a trifle------?"

He made a gesture of determination.

"Harden, we will try champagne."

He filled two glasses.

"Let us drink off the whole glass," he said. "Really, Harden, we must try."

I managed to take two gulps. The stuff was nasty. It seemed like weak methylated spirits.
"Continue," said Sarakoff firmly; "let us drink ourselves into the glorious past, whither the wizard of alcohol transports all men."

I took two more gulps. Sarakoff did the same. It was something in the nature of a battle against an invisible resistance. I gripped the table hard with my free hand, and took another gulp.

"Sarakoff," I gasped. "I can't take any more. If you want to get alcohol into my system you must inject it under my skin. I can't do it this way."

He put down his glass. It was half full. There were beads of perspiration on his brow.

"I'll finish that glass somehow," he observed. He passed his hand across his forehead. "This is extraordinary. It's just like taking poison, Harden, and yet it is an excellent brand of wine."

"Do get these oysters taken away," I said. "They serve no purpose lying here. They only take up room."

"Wait till I finish my glass."

With infinite trouble he drank the rest of the champagne. The effort tired him. He sat, breathing quickly and staring before him.

"That's a pretty woman," he observed. "I did not notice her before."

I followed the direction of his gaze. A young woman, dressed in emerald green, sat at a table against the opposite wall. She was talking very excitedly, making many gestures and seemed to me a little intoxicated.

Sarakoff poured out some more champagne.

"I am getting back," he muttered. He looked like a man engaged in some terrific struggle with himself. His breath was short and thick, his eyes were reddened. Perspiration covered his face and hands. He finished the second glass.

"Yes, she is pretty," he said, "I like that white skin against the brilliant green. She's got grace, too. Have you noticed white-skinned women always are graceful, and have little ears, Harden?"

He laughed suddenly, with his old boisterousness and clapped me on the shoulder.

"This is the way out!" he shouted, and pointed to the silver tub that contained the champagne bottle.

His voice sounded loudly above the music.

"The way out!" he repeated. He got to his feet. His eyes were congested. The sweat streamed down his cheeks. "Here," he called in his deep powerful voice, "here, all you who are afraid--here is the way out." He waved his arms. People stopped drinking and talking to turn and stare at him. "Back to the animals!" he shouted. "Back to the fur and hair and flesh! I was up on the mountain top, but I've found the way back. Here it is--here is the magic you need, if you're tired of the frozen heights!"

He swayed as he spoke. Strangely interested, I stared up at him.

"He's delirious," called out the emerald young woman. "He's got that horrid disease."

The manager and a couple of waiters came up. "It's coming," shouted Sarakoff; "I saw it sweeping over the world. See, the world is white, like snow. They have robbed it of colour." The manager grasped his arm firmly.

"Come with me," he said. "You are ill. I will put you in a taxi."

"You don't understand," said Sarakoff. "You are in it still. Don't you see I'm a traveller?"

"He is mad," whispered a waiter in my ear.

"A traveller," shouted the Russian. "But I've come back. Greeting, brothers. It was a rough journey, but now I hear and see you."

"If you do not leave the establishment at once I will get a policeman," said the manager with a hiss.

Sarakoff threw out his hands.

"Make ready!" he cried. "The great uprooting!" He began to laugh unsteadily. "The end of disease and the end of desire--there's no difference. You never knew that, brothers. I've come back to tell you--thousands and thousands of miles--into the great dimension of hell and heaven. It was a mistake and I'm going back. Look! She's fading--further and further----" He pointed a shaking hand across the room and suddenly collapsed, half supported by the manager.

"Dead drunk," remarked a neighbour.

I turned.

"No. Live drunk," I said. "The champagne has brought him back to the world of desire."

The speaker, a clean-shaven young man, stared insolently.

"You have no business to come into a public place with that disease," he said with a sneer.

"You are right. I have no business here. My business is to warn the world that the end of desire is at hand." I signalled to a waiter and together we managed to get Sarakoff into a taxi-cab.

As we drove home, all that lay behind Sarakoff's broken confused words revealed itself with increasing distinctness to me. Sarakoff spoke again.
"Harden," he muttered thickly, "there was a flaw--in the dream----"
"Yes," I said. "I was sure there would be a flaw. I hadn't noticed it before----"
"We're cut off," he whispered. "Cut off."

CHAPTER XXI

JASON

Next morning the headlines of the newspapers blazed out the news of the meeting at the Queen's Hall, and the world read the words of Sarakoff.

Strange to say, most of the papers seemed inclined to view the situation seriously.

"If," said one in a leading article, "it really means that immortality is coming to humanity--and there is, at least, much evidence from Birmingham that supports the view that the germ cures all sickness--then we are indeed face to face with a strange problem. For how will immortality affect us as a community? As a community, we live together on the tacit assumption that the old will die and the young will take their place. All our laws and customs are based on this idea. We can scarcely think of any institution that is not established upon the certainty of death. What, then, if death ceases? Our food supply----"

I was interrupted, while reading, by my servant who announced that a gentleman wished to see me on urgent business. I laid aside the paper and waited for him to enter.

My early visitor was a tall, heavily-built man, with strong eyes. He was carefully dressed. He looked at me attentively, nodded, and sat down.

"My name is Jason--Edward Jason. You have no doubt heard of me."
"Certainly," I said. "You are the proprietor of this paper that I have just been reading."
He nodded.
"And of sixty other daily papers, Dr. Harden," he said in a soft voice. "I control much of the opinion in the country, and I intend to control it all before I die."

"A curious intention. But why should you die? You will get the germ in time. I calculate that in a month at the outside the whole of London and the best part of the country will be infected."

While I spoke he stared hard at me. He nodded again, glanced at his boots, pinched his lips, and then stared again.

"A year ago I made a tour of all the big men in your profession, both here, in America, and on the continent, Dr. Harden. I had a very definite reason for doing this. The reason was that--well, it does not matter now. I wanted a diagnosis and a forecast of the future. I consulted forty medical men--all with big names. Twenty-one gave me practically identical opinions. The remaining nineteen were in disagreement. Of that nineteen six gave me a long life."

"What did the twenty-one give you?"
"Five years at the outside."
I looked at him critically.
"Yes, I should have given the same--a year ago."
He coloured a little, and his gaze fell; he shifted himself in his chair. Then he looked up suddenly, with a strong glow in his eyes.
"And now?"
"Now I give you--immortality." I spoke quite calmly, with no intention of any dramatic effect. The colour faded from his cheeks, and the glow in his eyes increased.
"If I get the Blue Disease, do you swear that it will cure me?"
"Of course it will cure you."

He got to his feet. He seemed to be in the grip of some powerful emotion, and I could see that he was determined to control himself. He walked down the room and stood for some time near the window.

"A gipsy once told me I would die when I was fifty-two. Will you believe me when I say that that prophecy has weighed upon me more than any medical opinion?" He turned and came up the room and stood before me. "Did you ever read German psychology and philosophy?"

"To a certain extent--in translations."
"Well, Dr. Harden, I stepped out of the pages of some of those books, I think. You've heard of the theory of the Will to Power? The men who based human life on that instinct were right!" He clenched his hands and closed his eyes. "This last year has been hell to me. I've been haunted every hour by the thought of death--just so much longer--so many thousand days--and then Nothing!" He opened his eyes and sat down before me. "Are you ambitious, Dr. Harden?"

"I was--very ambitious."
"Do you know what it is to have a dream of power, luring you on day and night? Do you know what is to see
the dream becoming reality, bit by bit--and then to be given a time limit, when the dream is only half worked out?"

"I have had my dream," I said. "It is now realized."

"The germ?"

I nodded. He leaned forward.

"Then you are satisfied?"

"I have no desires now."

He did not appear to understand.

"I don't believe yet in your theory of immortality," he said slowly. "But I do believe that the germ cures sickness. I have had private reports from Birmingham, and to-morrow I'm going to publish them as evidence. You see, Harden, I've decided to back you. To-morrow I'm going to make Gods of you and your Russian associate. I'm going to call you the greatest benefactors the race has known. I'm going to lift you up to the skies."

He looked at me earnestly.

"Doesn't that stir you?" he asked.

"No, I told you that I have no desires."

He laughed.

"You're dazed. You must have worked incredibly hard. Wait till you see your name surrounded by the phrases I will devise you. I can make men out of nothing." His eyes shone into mine. "I once heard a man say that the trail of the serpent lay across my papers. That man is in an asylum now. I can break men, too, you see. Now I want to ask you something."

I watched him with ease, totally uninfluenced by his magnetism--calm and aloof as a man watching a mechanical doll.

"Can you limit the germ?" he asked softly.

I shook my head.

"Can you take any steps to stop it or keep it--within control?"

I shook my head again. He stared for a minute at me.

"I believe you," he said at last. "It's a pity. Think what we could have done--just a few of us!" He sat for some time drumming his fingers on his knees and frowning slightly. Then he stood up.

"Never mind," he exclaimed. "I'm convinced it will cure me. That is the main thing. I'll have plenty of time to realize my dream now, Harden, thanks to you. You don't know what that means--ah, you don't know!"

"By the way," I said, "I see you are suggesting that food may become a problem in the future. I think we'll be all right."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, if there's no desire, there's no appetite."

"I don't understand," he said. "It seems clear that if disease is mastered by the germ, then the death-rate will drop, and there will be more mouths to fill. If everyone lives for their threescore and ten, the food question will be serious."

"Oh, they'll live longer than that. They'll live for ever, Mr. Jason."

He laughed tolerantly.

"In any case there will be a food problem," he said in a quiet friendly voice. "There will be more births, and more children--for none will die--and more old people."

"There won't be more births," I said.

He swung round on his heel.

"Why not?" he asked sharply.

"Because there will be no desire, Mr. Jason. You can't have births without desires, don't you see?"

At that moment Sarakoff entered the room. I introduced him to the great newspaper proprietor. Jason made some complimentary remarks, which Sarakoff received with cool gravity.

I could see that Jason was very puzzled. He had seated himself again, and was watching the Russian closely.

"The effects of last night have vanished," said Sarakoff to me. "My head is clear again and I have no intention of ever repeating the experiment."

"You got back, to some extent."

"Yes, partly. It was tremendously painful. I felt like a man in a nightmare."

I turned to Jason and explained what had happened at the restaurant. He listened intently.

"You see," I concluded, "the germ kills desire. Sarakoff and I live on a level of consciousness that is undisturbed by any craving. We live in a wonderful state of peace, which is only broken by the appearance of physical danger--against which, of course, the germ is not proof."

Jason was silent.
"Do you mean to tell me," he said at length, in a very deliberate voice, "that the effect of the germ is to destroy ambition?"

"Worldly ambition, certainly," I replied. "But I believe that, in time, ambitions of a subtler nature will reveal themselves in us, as Immortals."

Jason smiled very broadly.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you are wonderful men. You have discovered something that benefits humanity enormously. But take my advice--leave your other theories alone. Stick to the facts--that your germ cures sickness. Drop the talk about immortality and desire. It's too fantastic, even for me. In the meantime I shall spread abroad the news that the end of sickness is at hand, and that humanity is on the threshold of a new era. For that I believe with all my heart."

"One moment," said Sarakoff. "If you believe that this germ does away with disease, what is going to cause men to die?"

"Old age."

"But that is a disease itself."

"Wear and tear isn't a disease. That's what kills most of us."

"Yes, but wear and tear comes from desire, Mr. Jason," I said. "And the germ knocks that out. So what is left, save immortality?"

When Jason left us, I could see that he was impressed by the possibility of life being, at least, greatly prolonged. And this was the line he took in his newspapers next day.

CHAPTER XXII
THE FIRST MURDERS

The effect of Jason's newspapers on public opinion was remarkable. Humanity ever contains within it the need for mystery, and the strange and incredible, if voiced by authority, stir it to its depths. The facts about the healing of sickness and the cure of disease in Birmingham were printed in heavy type and read by millions. Nothing was said about immortality save what Sarakoff and I had stated at the Queen's Hall meeting. But instinctively the multitude leaped to the conclusion that if the end of disease was at hand, then the end of death--at least, the postponement of death--was to be expected.

Jason, pale and masterful, visited us in the afternoon, and told us of the spread of the tidings in England. "They've swallowed it," he exclaimed; "it's stirred them as nothing else has done in the last hundred years. I visited the East End to-day. The streets are full of people. Crowds everywhere. It might lead to anything."

"Is the infection spreading swiftly?"

"It's spreading. But there are plenty of people, like myself, who haven't got it yet. I should say that a quarter of London is blue." He looked at me with a sudden anxiety. "You're sure I'll get it?"

"Quite sure. Everyone is bound to get it. There's no possible immunity."

He sat heavily in the chair, staring at the carpet.

"Harden, I didn't quite like the look of those crowds in the East End. Anything big like this stirs up the people. It excites them and then the incalculable may happen. I've been thinking about the effect upon the uneducated mind. I've spread over the country the vision of humanity free from disease, and that's roused something in them--something dangerous--that I didn't foresee. Disease, Harden, whatever you doctors think of it, puts the fear of God into humanity. It's these sudden releases--releases from ancient fears--that are so dangerous. Are you sure you can't stop the germ, or direct it along certain channels?"

"I have already told you that's impossible."

"You might as well try and stop the light of day," said Sarakoff from a sofa, where he was lying apparently asleep. "Let the people think what they like now. Wait till they get it themselves. There are rules in the game, Jason, that you have no conception of, and that I have only realized since I became immortal. Yes--rules in the game, whether you play it in the cellar or the attic, or in the valley, or on the mountain top."

"Your friend is very Russian," said Jason equably. "I have always heard they are dreamers and visionaries. Personally, I am a practical man, and as such I foresee trouble. If the masses of the people have no illness, and enjoy perfect health, we shall be faced by a difficult problem. They'll get out of hand. Depressed states of health are valuable assets in keeping the social organization together. All this demands careful thought. I am visiting the Prime Minister this evening and shall give him my views."

At that moment a newspaper boy passed the window with an afternoon edition and Jason went out to get a copy. He returned with a smile of satisfaction, carrying the paper open before him.

"Three murders in London," he announced. "One in Plaistow, one in East Ham and one in Pimlico. I told you there was unrest abroad." He laid the paper on the table and studied it "In every case it was an aged person--two old women, and one old man. Now what does that mean?"
A gang at work.

He shook his head.

"No. In one case the murderer has been caught. It was a case of patricide—a hideous crime. Curiously enough
the victim had the Blue Disease. The end must have been ghastly, as it states here that the expression on the old
man's face was terrible."

He sat beside the table, drumming his fingers on it and staring at the wall before him. I was not particularly
interested in the news, but I was interested in Jason. Character had formerly appealed little to me, but now I found
an absorbing problem in it.

"Harden, do you think that son killed his father because he had the Blue Disease?"

I was struck by the remark. For some reason the picture of Alice's father came into my mind. Jason sprang to
his feet.

"Yes, that's it," he exclaimed. "That's what lay behind those restless crowds. I knew there was something—a
riddle to read, and now I've got the answer. The crowd doesn't know what's rousing them. But I do. It's fear and
resentment, Harden. It's fear and resentment against the old." He brought his fist down on the table. "The germ's
going to lead to war! It's going to lead to the worst war humanity has ever experienced—the war of the young against
the old. Not the ancient strife or struggle between young and old, but open bloodshed, my friends. That's what your
germ is going to do."

I smiled and shook my head.

"Wait," said Sarakoff from the sofa; "wait a little. Why are you in such a hurry to jump to conclusions?"

"Because it's my business to jump to conclusions just six hours before anyone else does," said Jason. "I
calculate that my mind, for the last twenty years, has been six hours ahead of time. I live in a state of chronic
anticipation, Dr. Sarakoff. Just let me use your telephone for a moment."

He returned a quarter of an hour later. His expression was calm, but his eyes were hard. "I was right," he said.
"Those two old women had the Blue Disease, and a girl, a daughter, is suspect in one case. Can't you imagine the
situation? Girl lives with her aged mother—can't get free—mother has what money there is—not allowed to marry—
girl unconsciously counts on mother's death—probably got a secret love-affair—is expecting the moment of release—and
then, along comes the Blue Disease and one of my newspapers telling her what it means. The old lady recovers
her health—the future shuts down like a rat trap and what does the poor girl do? Kills her mother—and probably goes
mad. That, gentlemen, is my theory of the case."

He strode up and down the room.

"You may think I'm taking a low view," he cried. "But there are hundreds of thousands of similar cases in
England. God help the old if the young forget their religion!"

For some reason I was unmoved by the outcry. It was no doubt owing to the peculiar emotionless state that the
germ induced in people. Jason was roused. He paced to and fro in silence, with his brows contracted. At length he
stopped before me.

"Do you see any way out?"

"There will be no war between the young and the old," I replied. "In another week everyone will get the germ
and that will be the end of war in every form."

He drew a chair and sat down before me.

"You don't understand," he said earnestly. "Perhaps you had a happy childhood. I didn't. I know how some sons
and daughters feel because I suffered in that way. People are strangely blind to suffering unless they have suffered
themselves. When I was a young man, my father put me in his office and gave me a clerk's wages. He kept me there
for six years at eighteen shillings a week. Whenever I made a suggestion concerning the business he was careful to
ridicule it. Whenever I tried to break away and start on my own, he prevented it. There were a thousand other things-
ways in which he fettered me. My only sister he kept at home to do the housework. She forbade her to marry. She
and I never had enough money to do anything, to go anywhere, or to buy anything. Now, to be quite frank, I longed
for him to die so that I could get free. To me he was an ogre, a great merciless tyrant, a giant with a club. Well, he
died. When he was dead I felt what a man dying of thirst in the desert must feel when he suddenly comes to a spring
of water. I recovered, and became what I am. My sister never recovered. She had been suppressed beyond all the
limits of elasticity. As far as her body is concerned, it is alive. Her soul is dead."

He paused and looked at me meditatively.

"If your blue germ had come along then, Harden, I might—- Who knows? I have often wondered why our
pulpit religion ignores the crimes of parents to their children. I'm not conventionally religious, but I seem to
remember that Christ indirectly said something pretty strong on the subject. But the pulpit folk show a wonderful
facility for ignoring the awkward things Christ said. In about three years' time I'm going to turn my guns on the
Church. They've sneered at me too much."
"There will be a new Church by that time," murmured Sarakoff. "And no guns."
Jason eyed the prostrate figure of the Russian.
"I refer to my newspapers. That's going to be my final triumph. Why do you smile?"
"Because you said a moment ago that it was your business to be six hours ahead of everyone else. You're countless centuries behind Harden and me. We have taken a leap into the future. If you want to know what humanity will be, look at us closely. You'll get some hints that should be valuable. I admit that our bodies are old-fashioned in their size and shape, but not our emotions."
The telephone bell rang in the hall and Jason jumped up.
"I think that's for me."
He went out. I remained sitting calmly in my chair. An absolute serenity surrounded me. All that Jason did or said was like looking at an interesting play. I was perfectly content to sit and think--think of Jason, of what his motives were, of the reason why a man is blind where his desires are at work, of the new life, of the new organizations that would be necessary. I was like a glutton before a table piled high with delicacies and with plenty of time to spare. Sarakoff seemed to be in the same condition for he lay with his eyes half shut, motionless and absorbed.

Jason entered the room suddenly. He carried his hat and stick.
"Two more murders reported from Greenwich, and ten from Birmingham. It's becoming serious, Harden! I'm off to Downing Street. Watch the morning editions!"

CHAPTER XXIII
AT DOWNING STREET
That night, at eight o'clock, I was summoned to Downing Street. I left Sarakoff lying on the sofa, apparently asleep. I drove the first part of the way in a taxi, but at the corner of Orchard Street the cab very nearly collided with another vehicle, and in a moment I was a helpless creature of fear. So I walked the rest of the way, much to the astonishment of the driver, who thought I was a lunatic. It was a fine crisp evening and the streets were unusually full. Late editions of the paper were still being cried, and under the lamps were groups of people, talking excitedly.

From what I could gather from snatches of conversation that I overheard, it seemed that many thought the millennium was at hand. I mused on this, wondering if beneath the busy exterior of life there lurked in people's hearts a secret imperishable conviction. And, after all, was it not a millennium--the final triumph of science--the conquest of the irrational by the rational?

There was a good deal of drunkenness, and crowds of men and women, linked arm and arm, went by, singing senseless songs. In Piccadilly Circus the scene was unusually animated. Here, beyond doubt, the Jason press had produced a powerful impression. The restaurants and bars blazed with light. Crowds streamed in and out and a spirit of hilarious excitement pervaded everyone. Irresponsibility--that was the universal attitude; and I became deeply occupied in thinking how the germ should have brought about such a temper in the multitude. Only occasionally did I catch the blue stain in the eyes of the throng about me.

I reached Downing Street and was shown straight into a large, rather bare room. By the fireplace sat Jason, and beside him, on the hearthrug, stood the Premier. Jason introduced me and I was greeted with quiet courtesy.

"I intend to make a statement in the House to-night and would like to put a few questions to you," said the Premier in a slow clear voice. "The Home Secretary has been considering whether you and Dr. Sarakoff should be arrested. I see no use in that. What you have done cannot be undone."

"That is true."

"In matters like this," he continued, "it is always a question of taking sides. Either we must oppose you and the germ, or we must side with you, and extol the virtues of the new discovery. A neutral attitude would only rouse irritation. I have therefore looked into the evidence connected with the effects claimed for the germ, and have received reports on the rate of its spread. It would seem that it is of benefit to man, so far as can be judged at present, and that its course cannot be stayed."

"Medical men have no sense of proportion," murmured Jason. "Science makes them so helpless."

"I see no kind of helplessness in rescuing humanity from disease," I answered calmly. "Please tell me what you want to know."

They both looked at me attentively. The Premier took out a pair of pince-nez and began to clean the lenses, still watching me.
"France is unwilling to let the germ into her territory. Can measures be taken to stop its access to the Continent?"

"No. It will get there inevitably. It has probably got there long ago. It is air borne and water borne and probably sea borne as well. The whole world will be infected sooner or later. There is no immunity possible."

The Premier put on his pince-nez and warmed his hands at the fire.

"Then what will the result of the germ be upon mankind?" he asked at length.

"It will begin a new era. What has made reform so difficult up to now?"

"People do not see eye to eye on all questions, Dr. Harden. That is the main reason."

"And why do they not see eye to eye?"

"Because their desires are not the same."

"Very good. Now imagine a humanity without desires, as you and Jason understand desire. What would be the result?"

"It is impossible to conceive. The wheels of the world would cease turning. We should be like sheep without a shepherd." He surveyed me quietly for some time. "Then you think the germ will kill desire?"

"I know it. I am a living example. I have no desires. I am like a man without a body; I am immortal."

Jason laughed.

"You are above temptation?" he asked.

"Absolutely. Neither money, power nor woman has any influence on me. They are meaningless."

"You have, perhaps, reached Nirvana?" the Premier enquired.

"Yes. That is why I am immortal. I have reached Nirvana."

"By a trick."

"If you like--by a trick."

"Then I cannot think you will stay there for long," said the Premier. "I shall look forward to my attack of the Blue Disease with interest. It will be amusing to note one's sensations."

It was clear to me that he was defending himself against my greater knowledge, but it was a matter of no importance to me. I was faintly oppressed by the dreary immensity of the room. I had become sensitive to atmosphere, and the feeling of that room was not harmonious.

The Premier stood in deep thought.

"If the germ prolongs life, it will lead to complications," he remarked. "The question of being too old has attracted public attention for some time now, which shows the way the wind is blowing. Oldness has become, in a small degree, a problem. The world is younger than it used to be--more impatient, more anxious to live a free life, to escape from any form of bondage. And so people have begun to ask what we are to do with our old men."

He paused and looked at Jason.

"My friend Jason thinks these murders are caused indirectly by the germ."

"It is possible."

"It seems fantastic. But there may be something in it." The Premier raised his eyes and studied the ceiling. "There is certainly some excitement abroad. We are dealing with an unprecedented situation. I therefore propose to say to-night that if, in the course of time, we find that life is prolonged and disease done away with, new laws will have to be considered."

"Not only new laws," I said. "We shall have to reconstruct the whole future of life. But there is no hurry. There is plenty of time. There is eternity before us."

"What do you eat?" demanded the Premier suddenly.

"A little bread or biscuit."

He clasped his hands behind his back and surveyed me for quite a minute.

"I don't believe you're a quack," he observed. "But when you walked into the room, I was doubtful."

"Why?"

"Because you wouldn't look at me squarely."

"Why should I look at you squarely? I looked at you and saw you. I have no desire to make any impression on you, or to dominate you in any way. It was sufficient just to see you. As Immortals, we do not waste our time looking at one another squarely. An Immortal cannot act."

The Premier smiled to himself and took out his watch.

"I am obliged to you for the instance," he said. "Good-night."

I rose and walked towards the door. On my way I stopped before a vast dingy oil-painting.

"Why do you all deceive yourselves that you admire things like that? Throw it away. When you become an Immortal you won't live here."

The Premier and Jason stood together on the hearth-rug. They watched me intently as I went out and closed the
door behind me. A servant met me on the landing and escorted me downstairs. I observed that he was an Immortal.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I am a spectator," he said in a calm voice. "And you?"

"I, too, am a spectator."

CHAPTER XXIV

NIGHT OF AN IMMORTAL

I passed a most remarkable night. On reaching home I went to bed as usual. My mind was busy, but what busied it was not the events of the day.

I lay in the darkness in a state of absolute contentment. My eyes were closed. My body was motionless, and felt warm and comfortable. I was quite aware of the position of my limbs in space and I could hear the sound of passing vehicles outside. I was not asleep and yet at the same time I was not awake. I knew I was not properly awake because, when I tried to move, there seemed to be a resistance to the impulse, which prevented it from reaching the muscles. As I have already said, I could feel. The sensation of my body was there, though probably diminished, but the power of movement was checked, though only slightly. And all the time I lay in that state, my mind was perfectly lucid and continually active. I thought about many things and the power of thought was very great, in that I could keep my attention fixed hour after hour on the same train of thought, go backwards and forwards along it, change and modify its gradations, just as if I were dealing with some material and plastic formation. Since that time I have become acquainted with a doctrine that teaches that thoughts are in the nature of things—that a definite thought is a formation in some tenuous medium of matter, just as a cathedral is a structure in gross matter. This is certainly the kind of impression I gained then.

It was now in the light of contrast that I could reflect on the rusty and clumsy way in which I had previously done my thinking, and I remembered with a faint amusement that there had been a time when I considered that I had a very clear and logical mind. Logical! What did we, as mere mortals full of personal desire, know of logic? The reflection seemed infinitely humorous. My thoughts had about them a new quality of stability. They formed themselves into clear images, which had a remarkable permanence. Their power and influence was greatly increased. If, for example, I thought out a bungalow situated on the cliff, I built up, piece by piece in my mind, the complete picture; and once built up it remained there so that I could see it as a whole, and almost, so to speak, walk round it and view it from different angles. I could lay aside this thought-creation just as I might lay aside a model in clay, and later on bring it back into my mind, as fresh and clear as ever. The enjoyment of thinking under such conditions is impossible to describe. It was like the joy of a man, blind from childhood, suddenly receiving his sight.

As ordinary mortals, we are all familiar with the apparently real scenes that occur in dreams. In our dreams we see buildings and walk round them. We see flights of steps and climb them. We apparently touch and taste food. We meet friends and strangers and converse with them. At times we seem to gaze over landscapes covered with woods and meadows.

It seemed to me that the magic of dreams had in some way become attached to thought. For as Immortals we did not dream as mortals do. In place of dreaming, we created immense thought-forms, working as it were on a new plane of matter whose resources were inexhaustible.

That night I built my ideal bungalow and when I had finished it I constructed my ideal garden. And then I made a sea and a coast-line, and when it was finished it was so real to me that I actually seemed to go into its rooms, sit on the verandah, breathe in its sea-airs and listen to the surf below its cliff. I remember that one of its rooms did not please me entirely, and that I seemed to pull it down—in thought—and reconstruct it according to my wish. This took time, for brick by brick I thought the new room into existence. One law that governed that state was easy to grasp, for whatever you did not think out clearly assumed a blurred unsatisfactory form. It became clear to me as early as that first night of immortality that the more familiar a man was with matter on the earth and its ways and possibilities, the more easily could he make his constructions on that plan of thought.

The whole of that night I lay in this state of creative joy and I know that my body remained motionless. It seemed that only a film divided me from the use of my limbs, but that film was definite. At eight o'clock on that morning, I became aware of a vague feeling of strain. It was a very slight sensation, but its effect was to make the thoughts that occupied my consciousness to become less definite. I had to make an effort to keep them distinct. The strain slowly became greater. It had begun with a sense of distance, but it seemed to get nearer, and I experienced a feeling that I can only compare to as that which a man has when he is losing his balance and about to fall.

The strain ended suddenly. I found myself moving my limbs. I opened my eyes and looked round. The graphic, visible quality of my thoughts had now vanished. I was awake.

I have given the above account of the night of an Immortal, because it has seemed to me right that some record should be left of the effect of the germ on the mind. I would explain the inherent power of thought as being due to the freedom from the ordinary desires of mortals, which waste and dissipate the energies of the mind ... but of that I
I got out of bed and began to examine my clothes. They were strewn about the floor and on chairs. The colour of them seemed peculiar to my senses. My frock coat, of heavy black material, with curious braiding and buttons, fascinated me. I counted the number of separate things that made up my complete attire. They were twenty-four in number. I discovered that in addition to these articles of actual wearing material I was in the habit of carrying on my person about sixty other articles. For some reason I found these calculations very interesting. I had a kind of counting mania that morning. I counted all the things I used in dressing myself. I counted the number of stripes on my trousers and on my wall-paper; I counted the number of rooms in my house, the articles of furniture that they contained, and the number of electric lamps. I went into the kitchen and counted everything I could see, to the astonishment of my servants. I observed that my cook showed a faint blue stain in her eyes, but that the other servants showed no signs as yet of the Blue Disease. I went into my study and counted the books; I opened one of them. It was the British Pharmacopoeia. I began mechanically to count the number of drugs it contained. I was still counting them when the breakfast gong sounded. I went across the hall and counted on my way the number of sticks and hats and coats that were there. I finished up by counting the number of things on the breakfast table. Then I picked up the newspaper. There were, by the way, one hundred and four distinct things on my breakfast table.

The paper was full of the records of crime and of our names. The account of the Prime Minister's statement in the House was given in full. Our names were printed in large letters, and apparently our qualifications had been looked up, for they were mentioned, together with a little biographical sketch. In a perfectly calm and observant spirit I read the closely-printed column. My eye paused for some time at an account of my personal appearance--"a small, insignificant-looking man, with straight blue-black hair, like a Japanese doll, and an untidy moustache, speaking very deliberately and with a manner of extreme self-assurance."

Extreme self-assurance! I reflected that there might, after all, be some truth in what the reporter said. On the night that I had spoken at the Queen's Hall meeting I had been quite self-possessed. I pursued the narrative and smiled slightly at a description of the Russian--"a loosely-built, bearded giant, unkempt in appearance, and with huge square hands and pale Mongolian eyes which roll like those of a maniac." That was certainly unfair, unless the reporter had seen him at the restaurant when Sarakoff drank the champagne. I was about to continue, when a red brick suddenly landed neatly on my breakfast table, and raised the number of articles on that table to one hundred and five.

There was a tinkle of falling glass; I looked up and saw that the window was shattered. The muslin curtain in front of it had been torn down by the passage of the brick, and the street without was visible from where I sat. A considerable crowd had gathered on the pavement. They saw me and a loud cry went up. The front door bell was ringing and there was a sound of heavy blows that echoed through the house.

My housemaid came running into the room. She uttered a shriek as she saw the faces beyond the window and ran out again. I heard a door at the back of the house slam suddenly.

A couple of men, decently enough dressed, were getting over the area rails with the intent of climbing in at the window. I jumped up and went swiftly upstairs. So far I was calm. I entered Sarakoff's bedroom. It was in darkness. The Russian was lying motionless on the bed. I shook him by the shoulder. It seemed impossible to rouse him, and yet in outward appearance he seemed only lightly asleep. I redoubled my efforts and at length he opened his eyes, and his whole body, which had felt under my hands as limp and flaccid as a pillow, suddenly seemed to tighten up and become resilient.

"Get up," I said. "They're trying to break into the house. We may be in danger. We can escape by the back door through the mews."

The blows on the front door were clearly audible.

"I've been listening to it for some time," he said. "But I seemed to have lost the knack of waking up properly."

"We have no time to waste," I said firmly.

We went quickly downstairs. Sarakoff had flung a blue dressing-gown over his pyjamas and thrust his feet into a pair of slippers. On reaching the hall there was a loud crack and a roar of voices. In an instant the agonizing fear swept over us. We dashed to the back of the house, through the servants' quarters and out into the mews. Without pausing for an instant we ran down the cobbled alley and emerged upon Devonshire Street. We turned to the right, dashed across Portland Place and reached Great Portland Street. We ran steadily, wholly mastered by the great fear of physical injury, and oblivious to the people around us. We passed the Underground Station. Our flight down the Euston Road was extraordinary. Sarakoff was in front, his dressing-gown flying, and his pink pyjamas making a vivid area of colour in the drab street. I followed a few yards in the rear, hatless, with my breath coming in gasps.
It was Sarakoff who first saw the taxi-cab. He veered suddenly into the road and held out his arms. The cab slowed down and in a moment we were inside it.

"Go on," shouted Sarakoff, "Drive on. Don't stop."

The driver was a man of spirit and needed no further directions. The cab jerked forward and we sped towards St. Pancras Station.

"Follow the tram lines up to Hampstead," I called out, and he nodded. We lay gasping in the back of the cab, cannoning helplessly as it swayed round corners. By the time we had reached Hampstead our fear had left us.

The cab drew up on the Spaniard's Walk and we alighted. It was a bleak and misty morning. The road seemed deserted. A thin column of steam rose from the radiator of the taxi, and there was a smell of over-heated oil.

"Sharp work that," said the driver, getting out and beating his arms across his chest. His eyes moved over us with frank curiosity. Sarakoff shivered and drew his dressing-gown closely round him.

CHAPTER XXVI
ON THE SPANIARD'S WALK

I paid the man half-a-sovereign. There was a seat near by and Sarakoff deposited himself upon it. I joined him. On those heights the morning air struck chill. London, misty-blue, lay before us. The taxi-man took out his pipe and began to fill it.

"Lucky me comin' along like that," he observed. "If it hadn't been because of my missus I wouldn't have been out so early." He blew a puff of smoke and continued: "This Blue Disease seems to confuse folk. My missus was took with it last night." He paused to examine us at his leisure. "When did you get it?"

"We became immortal the day before yesterday," said Sarakoff.

The taxi-man took his pipe out of his mouth and stared.

"You ain't them two doctors what's in the paper this morning, by any chance?" he asked. "Them as is supposed to 'ave invented this Blue Disease?"

We nodded. He emitted a low whistle and gazed thoughtfully at us. At length he spoke I noticed his tone had changed.

"As I was saying, my missus was took with it in the night. I had a job waking 'er up, and when she opened her eyes I nearly had a fit. We'd had a bit of a tiff overnight, but she got up as quiet as a lamb and never said a word agin me, which surprised me. When I 'ad dressed myself I went into the kitchen to get a bit o' breakfast, and she was setting in a chair starin' at nothing. The kettle wasn't boiling, and there wasn't nothing ready, so I asked 'er quite polite, what she was doing. 'I'm thinking,' she says, and continues sitting in the chair. After a bit of reasoning with her, I lost my temper and picked up a leg of a chair, what we had broke the evening previous when we was 'aving a argument. She jump up and bolted out of the house, just as she was, with her 'air in curl-papers, and that's the last I saw of her. I waited an hour and then took the old cab out of the garage, and I was going to look for my breakfast when I met you two gents." He took his pipe out of his mouth and wiped his lips. "Now I put it all down to this 'ere Blue Disease. It's sent my missus off 'er head."

"There's no reason why you should think your wife mad simply because she ran away when you tried to strike her," I said. "It's surely a proof of her sanity."

He shook his head.

"That ain't correct," he said, with conviction. "She always liked a scrap. She's a powerful young woman, and her language is extraordinary fine when she's roused, and she knows it. I can't understand it."

He looked up suddenly.

"So it was you two who made this disease was it?"

"Yes."

"Fancy that!" he said. "Fancy a couple of doctors inventing a disease. It does sound a shame, don't it?"

"Wait till you get it," said Sarakoff.

"It seems to me you've been and done something nasty," he went on. " Ain't there enough diseases without you two going and makin' a new one? It's a fair sickener to think of all the diseases there are--measles and softenin' of the brain, and 'eavin' stummicks and what not. What made you do it? That's what I want to know." He was getting angry. He pointed the stem of his pipe at us accusingly. His small eyes shone. "It's fair sickening," he muttered. "I've never took to doctors, nor parsons--never in my life."

He spat expressively.

"And my wife, too, clean barmy," he continued. "Who 'ave I got to thank for that? You two gents. Doctors, you call yourselves. I arsk you, what is doctors? They never does me any good. I never seed anyone they'd done any good. And yet they keeps on and no one says nothing. It's fair sickening."

There was a sound of footsteps behind me. I turned and saw a policeman climbing slowly up the bank towards the road. Like all policemen he appeared not to notice us until he was abreast of our seat. Then he stopped and eyed
each of us in turn. His boots were muddy.

"These gents," said the taxi-man, "ave been and done something nasty."

The phrase seemed attractive to him and he repeated it. The policeman, a tall muscular man, surveyed us in silence. Sarakoff, his hair and beard dishevelled, was leaning back in a corner of the seat, with his legs crossed. His dressing-gown was tucked closely round him, and below it, his pink pyjamas fluttered in the thin breeze. His expression was calm.

The taxi-man continued--

"I picked these gents up in the Euston Road. They was in a hurry. I thought they'd done something ordinary, same as what you or me might do, but it seems I was wrong. They've been and done something nasty. They've gone and invented this 'ere Blue Disease."

The policeman raised his helmet a little and the taxi-man uttered an exclamation.

"Why, you've got it yourself," he said, and stared. The policeman's eyes were stained a vivid blue.

"An immortal policeman!" murmured Sarakoff dreamily.

The discovery seemed to discomfit the taxi-man. The tide of indignation in him was deflected, and he shifted his feet. The policeman, with a deliberation that was magnificent advanced to the seat and sat down beside me.

"Good-morning," I said.

"Good-morning," he replied in a deep calm voice. He removed his helmet from his head and allowed the wind to stir his hair. The taxi-man moved a step nearer us.

"You ought to arrest them," he said. "Here's my wife got it, and you, and who's to say when it will end? They're doctors, too. I allus had my own suspicions of doctors, and 'ere they are, just as I supposed, inventing diseases to keep themselves going. That's what you ought to do ... arrest them. I'll drive you all down to the police-station." The police-man replaced his helmet, crossed his long blue legs, and leaned back in the corner of the seat. Side by side on the seat Sarakoff, the policeman, and I gazed tranquilly at the figure of the taxi-man, at the taxi-cab, and at the misty panorama of London that lay beyond the Vale of Health. The expression of anger returned to the taxi-man's face.

"And 'ere am I, standing and telling you to do your duty, and all the time I haven't had my breakfast," he said bitterly. "If you was to cop them two gents, your name would be in all the evenin' papers." He paused, and frowned, conscious that he was making little impression on the upholder of law and order. "Why 'aven't I 'ad my breakfast? All because of these two blokes. I tell you, you ought to cop them."

"When I was a boy," said the policeman, "I used to collect stamps."

"Did yer," exclaimed the taxi-man sarcastically. "You do interest me, reely you do."

"Yes, I used to collect stamps." The policeman settled himself more comfortably. "And afore that I was in the 'abit of collecting bits o' string."

"You surprise me," said the taxi-man. "And what did you collect afore you collected bits of string?"

"So far as I recollect, I didn't collect nothing. I was trying to remember while I was walking across the Heath." He turned to us. "Did you collect anything?"

"Yes," I said. "I used to collect beetles."

"Beetles?" The policeman nodded thoughtfully. "I never had an eye for beetles. But, as I said, I collected stamps. I remember I would walk for miles to get a new stamp, and of an evening I would sit and count the stamps in my album over and over again till my head was fair giddy." He paused and stroked his clean-shaven chin thoughtfully. "I recollect as if it was yesterday how giddy my head used to get."

The taxi-man seemed about to say something, but he changed his mind.

"Why did you collect beetles?" the policeman asked me.

"I was interested in them."

"But that ain't a suitable answer," he replied. "It ain't suitable. That's what I've been seeing for the first time this morning. The point is--why was you interested in beetles, and why was I interested in bits o' string and stamps?"

"Yes, he's quite right," said Sarakoff; "that certainly is the point."

"To say that we are interested in a thing is no suitable explanation," continued the policeman. "After I'd done collecting stamps-----"

"Why don't you arrest these two blokes?" shouted the taxi-man suddenly. "Why can't you do yer duty, you blue fathead?"

"I'm coming to that," said the policeman imperturbably. "As I was saying, after I collected stamps, I collected knives--any sort of old rusty knife--and then I joined the force and began to collect men, I collected all sorts o' men--tall and short, fat and thin. Now why did I do that?"

"It seems to me," observed the taxi-man, suddenly calm, "that somebody will be collecting you soon, and there won't be no need to arsk the reason why."

"That's where you and me don't agree," said the policeman. "I came to the conclusion this morning that we
don't ask the reason why enough--not by 'alf. Now if somebody did as you say, and started collectin' policemen, what would be the reason?"

"Reason?" shouted the taxi-man. "Don't ask me for a reason."

He turned to his taxi-cab and jerked the starting handle violently. The clatter of the engine arose. He climbed into his seat, and pulled at his gears savagely. In a few moments he had turned his cab, after wrenching in fury at the steering-wheel, and was jolting down the road in the morning brightness in search of breakfast.

CHAPTER XXVII
LEONORA'S VOICE

"My theory," said the policeman, "is that collectin'--and by that I mean all sorts of collection, including that of money--comes from a craving to 'ave something what other people 'aven't got. It comes from a kind o' pride which is foolish. Take a man like Morgan, for instance. Now he spent his life collecting dollars, and he never once stopped to ask 'imself why he was doin' it. I 'eard a friend of mine, a socialist he was, saying as 'ow no one had wasted his life more than Morgan. At the time it struck me as a silly kind of thing to say. But now I seem to see it in a different light." He meditated for some minutes. "It's the reason why--that's what we 'aven't thought of near enough."

I was about to reply when a motor-car stopped before us. It was a large green limousine. It drew up suddenly, with a scraping of tyres, and a woman got out of it. I recognized her at once. It was Leonora. She was wearing a motoring-coat of russet-brown material, and her hat was tied with a veil.

"Alexis!" she exclaimed.

Sarakoff roused himself. He stood up and bowed.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Leonora," he said, "I am so glad to see you. We are just taking the air, and discussing a few matters of general interest." He patted her on the shoulder. "I congratulate you, Leonora. You are an Immortal. It suits you very well."

She was certainly one of the Immortals. The stain in her eyes was wonderfully vivid, but it did not produce a displeasing effect, as I had fancied it would. Indeed, her eyes had lost their hard restless look, and in place of it was an expression of bewilderment.

"What has happened to me?" she exclaimed. "Alexis, what is this that you have done to me?"

"What I told you about at the Pyramid Restaurant. You have got the germ in you and now you are immortal. Sit down, Leonora. I find it warmer when I am sitting. My friend and I had to leave Harley Street somewhat hurriedly, and I had not time to dress."

She sat down and loosened her veil.

"Last night a dreadful thing happened," she said. "And yet, although it was dreadful, I do not feel upset about it. I have been trying to feel upset--as I should--but I can't. Let me tell you about it. I lay down yesterday afternoon in my room after tea to rest. I always do that when I can. I think I fell asleep for a moment. Then I felt a curious light feeling, as if I had suddenly been for a long holiday, and I got up. Alexis, when I saw myself in the glass I was horrified. I had the Blue Disease."

"Of course," said Sarakoff. "You were bound to get it. You knew that."

"I didn't know what to do. I wasn't very upset, only I felt something dreadful had happened. Well, I went to the Opera as usual and everyone was very sympathetic, but I said I was all right. But when my call came I suddenly knew--quite calmly, but certainly--that I could not sing properly. I went on the stage and began, but it was just as if I were singing for the first time in my life. They had to ring the curtain down. I apologized. I was quite calm and smiling. But there the fact remained--I had lost my voice. I had failed in public."

"Extraordinary," muttered Sarakoff. "Are you sure it was not just nervousness?"

"No, I'm certain of that. I felt absolutely self-possessed; far more so that I usually do, and that is saying a lot. No, my voice has gone. The Blue Disease has destroyed it. And yet I somehow don't feel any resentment. I don't understand. Richard, tell me what has happened."

I shook my head.

"I don't know," I said. "I can't explain. The germ is doing things that I never foresaw."

"I ought to be furious with you," she said.

"Try to be--if you can," smiled Sarakoff. "That's one of the strange things. I can't be furious. I have only two emotions--perfect calmness, or violent, horrible fear."

"Fear?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, fear of the worst kind conceivable."

"I understand the perfect calmness," she said, "but the fear--no."

"You will understand in time."

The policeman listened to our conversation with grave attention. Leonora was sitting between Sarakoff and me, and did not seem to find the presence of the visitor surprising. The green limousine stood in the road before us, the
chauffeur sitting at the wheel looking steadily in front of him. The Heath seemed remarkably empty. The mist over London was lifting under the influence of the sun.

I was revolving in my mind a theory as to why Leonora had lost her voice. I already knew that the germ produced odd changes in the realm of likes and dislikes. I remembered Sarakoff's words that the germ was killing desire. My thoughts were clear, easy and lucid, and the problem afforded by Leonora's singular experience gave me a sense of quiet enjoyment. If the germ really did do away with desire, why should it at the same time do away with Leonora's wonderful voice? I recalled with marvellous facility everything I knew about her. My memory supplied me with every detail at the dinner of the Pyramid Restaurant. The words of Sarakoff, which had at the time seemed coarse, came back to me. He had called her a vain ambitious cold-hearted woman, who thought that her voice and her beauty could not be beaten.

My reflections were interrupted by the policeman.
"The lady," he remarked, "has lost her voice sudden-like. Now I lost my 'abit of arresting people sudden-like too. I lost it this morning. Any other time I should have taken the gentleman in the dressing-gown in charge for being improperly dressed. But this morning it don't come natural to me. If he wants to wear a dressing-gown on the Spaniard's Walk, he presumably 'as his own reasons. It don't concern me."
"It seems to me that the germ takes ambition out of us," said Sarakoff.
"Ambition?" said the policeman. "No, that ain't right. I've got ambition still--only it's a different kind of ambition."

"I have no ambition now," said Leonora at length. "Alexis is right. This malady has taken the ambition out of me. I may be Immortal, but if I am, then I am an Immortal without ambition. I seem to be lost, to be suddenly diffused into space or time, to be a kind of vapour. Something has dissolved in me--something hard, bright, alert. I do not know why I am here. The car came round as usual to take me for my morning run. I got in--why I don't know."

Sarakoff was studying her attentively.
"It is very strange," he said. "You used to arouse a feeling of strength and determination in me, Leonora. You used to stimulate me intensely. This morning I only feel one thing about you."
"What is that?"
"I feel that I have cheated you."
"Cheated her?" exclaimed the policeman. "How do you come to that conclusion?"
"I've destroyed the one thing that was herself--I've destroyed desire in her. I've left her a mind devoid of all values tacked on to a body that no longer interests her. For what was Leonora, who filled the hearts of men with madness, but an incarnation of desire?"

CHAPTER XXVIII
THE KILLING OF DESIRE

We drove in Leonora's car through London. The streets were crowded. I do not think that much routine work was done that day. People formed little crowds on the pavements, and at Oxford Circus someone was speaking to a large concourse from the seat of a motor lorry. Leonora seemed extraordinarily apathetic. She leaned back in the car and seemed uninterested in the passing scene. Sarakoff, wrapped up in a fur rug, stared dreamily in front of him. As far as I can recall them, my feelings during that swift tour of London were vague. The buildings, the people, the familiar signs in the streets, the shop windows, all seemed to have lost in some degree the quality of reality. I was detached from them; and whenever I made an effort to rouse myself, the ugliness and meaninglessness of everything I saw seemed strangely emphasized.

When we reached Harley Street we found my house little damaged, save for a broken panel in the green front door and a few panes of glass smashed in the lower windows. The house was empty. The servants had vanished. Leonora said she wished to go home and she drove off in the car. Sarakoff did not even wave farewell to her, but went straight up to his room and lay down on the bed. I went into the study and sat in my chair by the fireplace. I was roused by the opening of the door, and looking up I saw a face that I recognized, but for the moment I could not fit a name to it. My visitor came in calmly, and sat down opposite me.

"My name is Thornduck," he said. "I came to consult you about my health a few days ago."
"I remember," I said.
"Your front door was open so I walked in."
I nodded. His eyes, stained with blue, rested on me.
"I have been thinking," he said. "It struck me that there was something you forgot to tell me the other day."
I nodded again.
"You began, if you remember, by asking me if I believed in miracles. That set me thinking, and as I saw your name in the paper, connected with the Blue Disease, I knew you were a miracle-monger. How did you do it?"
"I don't know. It was all due to my black cat. Tripped over it, got concussion and regained my senses with the idea that led up to the germ."

He smiled.
"A black cat," he mused. "I wonder if it's all black magic?"
"That's what Hammer suggested. I don't know what kind of magic it is."
"Of course it is magic," said Thornduck.
"Magic?"
"Of course. Have you even thought what kind of magic it is?"
"No."
"A big magic, such as you have worked, is just bringing the distant future into the present with a rush."
"Sarakoff had some such idea," I murmured. "He spoke of anticipating our evolution by centuries at one stroke."
"Exactly. That's magic. The question remains--is it black magic?" He crossed his thin legs and leaned back in the chair. "I got the Blue Disease the day before yesterday and since then I've thought more than I have ever done in all my life. When I read in the paper this morning that you said the Blue Disease conferred immortality on people I was not surprised. I had come to the same conclusion in a roundabout way. But I want to ask you one question. Did you know beforehand that it killed desire?"
"No. Neither Sarakoff nor I foresaw that."
"Well, if you had let me into your confidence before I could have told you that right away in the general principle contained in the saying that you can't eat your cake and have it. It's just another aspect of the law of the conservation of energy, isn't it?"
"I always had a doubt----"

"Naturally. It's intuitional. The laws of the universe are just intuitions put into words. You've carried out an enormous spiritual experiment to prove what all religions have always asserted however obscurely. All religion teaches that you can't eat your cake and have it. That's the essence of religion, and you, formerly a cut-and-dried scientist, have gone and proved it to the whole world for eternity. Rather odd, isn't it?"

I watched his face with interest. It was thin and the complexion was transparent. His eyes, wonderfully wide and brilliantly stained by the germ, produced in me a new sensation. It was akin to enthusiasm, but in it was something of love, such as I had never experienced for any man. I became uplifted. My whole being began to vibrate to some strangely delicate and exquisite influence, and I knew that Thornduck was the medium through which these impulses reached me. It was not his words but the atmosphere round him that raised me temporarily to this degree of receptivity.

"It is odd," I said.
He continued to look at me.
"You have a message for me?" I observed at last.
"Why, yes, I have," he replied. "You have done wrong, Harden. You have worked black magic, and it will fail out of sheer necessity."
"Tell me what I have done."
"You have artificially produced a condition of life many ages before humanity is ready to receive it. The body of desire is being worked up by endless labour into something more delicate and sensitive--into a transmutation that we can only dimly understand. At present the whole plot of life is based on the principle of desire and in this way people are kept busy, constantly spurred on to thought and activity by essentially selfish motives. It is only in abstract thought that the selfless ideal has a real place as yet, but the very fact that it is there shows what lies at the top of the ladder that humanity is so painfully climbing. As long as desire is the plot of life, death is necessary, for its terrible shadow sharpens desire and makes the prizes more alluring and the struggle more desperate. And so man goes on, ceaselessly active and striving, for without activity and striving there is no perfecting of the instrument. You can't have upward progress in conditions of stagnation. All that strange incredible side of life, called the Devil, is the inner plot of life that makes the wheels go round and evolution possible. It is vitally necessary to keep the vast machinery running at the present level of evolution. Desire is the furnace in the engine-house. The wheels go round and the fabric is slowly and intricately spun and only pessimists and bigots fail to see evidence of any purpose in it all. Now what has your Blue Disease done? It has taken the whole plot out of life at its present stage of development at one fell swoop. It has killed Desire--put out the furnace before the pattern in the fabric is nearly complete."
"But I never could see that, Thornduck. How could I foresee that?"
"If you had had a grain of vision you would have known that you couldn't give humanity the gift of immortality without some compensatory loss. The law of compensation is as sure as the law of gravity--you ought to know that."
"I had dim feelings--I knew Sarakoff was wrong, with his dream of physical bliss--but how could I foresee that
desire would go?"

"As a mere scientist, test-tube in hand, you couldn't. But you're better than that. You've got a glimmering of moral imagination in you."

He fell into a reverie.

"You are keeping something back. Tell me plainly what you mean," I asked.

"Don't you see that if the germ lasts any length of time," he said, "the machinery will run down and--stop?"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE REVOLT OF THE YOUNG

Amid all the strife and clamour of the next few days one thing stands out now in my mind with sinister radiance. It is that peculiar form of lawlessness which broke out and had as its object the destruction of the old.

There is no doubt that the idea of immortality got hold of people and carried them away completely. The daily miracles that were occurring of the renewal of health and vigour, the cure of disease and the passing of those infirmities that are associated with advancing years, impressed the popular imagination deeply. As a result there grew up a widespread discontent and bitterness. The young--those who were as yet free from the germ--conceived in their hearts that an immense injustice had been done to them.

It must be remembered that life at that time had taken on a strange and abnormal aspect. Its horizons had been suddenly altered by the germ. Although breadth had been given to it from the point of years, a curious contraction had appeared at the same time. It was a contraction that owed its existence to the sense of being shut in eternally by those in higher positions, whom death no longer would remove at convenient intervals. The student felt it as he looked at his professor. The clerk felt it as he looked at his manager. The subaltern felt it as he looked at his colonel. The daughter felt it when she looked at her mother, and the son when he looked at his father. The germ had given simultaneously a tremendous blow to freedom, and a tremendous impetus to freedom.

Thus, perhaps for the first time in history, there swiftly began an accumulation and concentration of those forces of discontent which, in normal times, only manifest themselves here and there in the relationships between old and young men, and are regarded with good-humoured patience. A kind of war broke out all over the country. This war was terrible in its nature. All the secret weariness and unspoken bitterness of the younger generation found a sudden outlet. Goaded to madness by the prospect of a future of continual repression, in which the old would exercise an undiminished authority, the younger men and women plunged into a form of excess over which a veil must be drawn.... There is only one thing which can be recorded in their favour. Chloroform and drowning appear to have been the methods most often used, and they are perhaps merciful ways of death. The great London clubs became sepulchres. All people who had received the highest distinctions and honours, whose names were household words, were removed with ruthless determination. Scarcely a single well-known man or woman of the older generation, whose name was honoured in science, literature, art, business or politics, was spared. All aged and wealthy people perished. A clean sweep was made, and made with a decision and unanimity that was incredible.

It is painful now to recall the terrible nature of that civil war. It lasted only a short time, but it opened my eyes to the inner plan upon which mortal man is based. For I am compelled to admit that this widespread murder, that suddenly flashed into being, was founded upon impulses that lie deep in man's heart. They were those giant impulses that lie behind growth, and the effect of the germ was merely to throw them suddenly into the broad light of day, unchained, grim and implacable.

Fortunately, the germ spread steadily and quickly, killing as it did so all hate and desire.

Jason, still free from the germ, flung himself into the general uproar with extraordinary vigour. It was clear that he thought the great opportunity had come which would eventually bring him to the height of his power. To check the growing lawlessness and murder he advocated a new adjustment of property. Big meetings were held in the public spaces of London, and some wild ideas were formulated.

In the meantime the medical profession, as far as the men yet free from the germ were concerned, continued its work in a dull, mechanical way. Each day the number of patients fell lower, as the Blue Disease slowly spread. Hammer, himself an Immortal, came to see me once, but only to speak of the necessity for the immediate simplification of houses. It was odd to observe how, once a man became infected, his former interests and anxieties fell away from him like an old garment. In Harley Street an attitude of stubborn disbelief continued amongst those still mortal. There is something magnificent in that adamantine spirit which refuses to recognize the new, even though it moves with ever-increasing distinctness before the very eyes of the deniers. I was not surprised. I was familiar with medical men.

Meanwhile the Royal Family became infected by the germ, and passed out of the public eye. The Prime Minister became a victim and vanished. For once a man had the germ in his system, as far as externals were concerned, he almost ceased to exist.
The infection of Jason occurred in my presence. He had come in to explain to me a proposed line of campaign as regards the marriage laws.

"This germ of yours has given people the courage to think!" he exclaimed. "It is extraordinary how timid people were in thinking. It has launched them out, and now is the time to bring in new proposals."

"In all your calculations, you omit to recollect the effects of the germ," I said. "Surely you have seen by now that it changes human nature totally?"

He stared at me uncomprehendingly. He was one of those men, so common in public life, who have no power of understanding what they themselves have not experienced. He continued with undiminished enthusiasm.

"We must have marriage contracts for definite periods. With the increased state of health, and the full span of life confronting every man, we must face the problem squarely. Now what stands in our way?"

He got up and went to the window. It was a dull foggy day, and there was frost on the ground. He stared outside for some moments.

"What, I repeat, stands in our way?"
"Well?"

"The Church, and a mass of superstitions that we have inherited from the Old Testament. That's what stands in our way. We still attach more value to the Old Testament than to the New. The Scotch, for example, like the Jews.... Yes, of course.... What was I saying?"

He left the window and sat down once more before me, moving rather listlessly.

"Yes, Harden. Of course. That's what it is, isn't it? Do you remember--diddle--yes it was diddle, diddle----"

He paused and frowned.

"Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle," he muttered, "Yes--hey, diddle, diddle, diddle--that's what it is, isn't it?"

"Of course," I said. "It's all really that."
"Just diddle, diddle, diddle?"
"Yes--if you like."
"That is substituting diddle for riddle," he said earnestly. He frowned again and passed his hand across his eyes.
"Yes," I said calmly. "It's going a step up."

I suppose about half an hour passed before either of us spoke again after this extraordinary termination to our conversation. In absolute silence we sat facing one another and during that time I saw the blue stain growing clearer and clearer in Jason's eyes. At last he rose.

"It's very odd," he said. "Tell me, were you like this?"

"How do you feel?"
"As if I had been drunk and suddenly had been made sober. I will leave you. I want to think. I will go down to the country."

"And your papers?"
"We must have a new Press," he said, and left the room.

That same day the great railway accident occurred just outside London that led to the death of sixty people, many of them Immortals. Its effect on public imagination was profound. All dangerous enterprises became invested with a terrible radiance. Men asked themselves if, in face of a future of health, it was worth risking life in rashness of any description, and gradually traffic came to a standstill. Long before the germ had infected the whole populace all activities fraught with danger had ceased. The coal mines were abandoned. The railways were silent. The streets of London became empty of traffic.

Blue-stained people began to throng the streets of London in vast masses, moving to and fro without aim or purpose, perfectly orderly, vacant, lost--like Sarakoff's butterflies....

Thornduck came to see me one day when the reign of the germ was practically absolute in London.

"They are wandering into the country in thousands," he remarked. "They have lost all sense of home and possession. They are vague, trying to form an ideal socialistic community. What a mess your germ is making of life! They're not ready for it. The question is whether they will rouse themselves to consider the food question."

"We need scarcely any food," I replied. "I've had nothing to eat to-day."

"Nor I. But since we're still linked up to physical bodies we must require some nourishment."

"I have eaten two biscuits and a little cheese in the last twenty-four hours. Surely you don't think that food is to be a serious problem under such circumstances?"

"It might be. You must remember that initiative is now destroyed in the vast majority of people. They may permit themselves to die of inanition. Can you say you have an appetite now?"

I reflected for some time, striving to recall the feeling of hunger that belonged to the days of desire.

"No. I have no appetite."
"Think carefully. In place of appetite have you no tendencies?"
"I feel a kind of lethargy," I said at last. "I felt it yesterday and to-day it is stronger."
"As if you wished to sleep?"
"Not exactly. But it is akin to that. I have some difficulty in keeping my attention on things. There is a kind of pull within me away from--away from reality."
He nodded.
"I went in to see your Russian friend. He's upstairs. He is not exactly asleep. He is more like a man partially under the influence of a drug."
"I will go and see him," I said.
Sarakoff was lying on the bed with his eyes shut. He was breathing quietly. His eyelids quivered, as if they might open at any moment, but my entrance did not rouse him. His limbs were relaxed. I spoke to him and tried to wake him, without result. Then I remembered how I had stumbled across the body of Herbert Wain in the Park some days ago. He had seemed to be in a strange kind of sleep. I sat down on the bed and stared at the motionless figure of the Russian. There was something strangely pathetic in his pose. His rough hair and black beard, his keen aquiline face seemed weirdly out of keeping with his helpless state. Here lay the man whose brain had once teemed with ambitious desires, relaxed and limp like a baby, while the nails of his hands, turquoise blue, bore silent witness to his great experiment on humanity. Had it failed? Where was all that marvellous vision of physical happiness that had haunted him? The streets of London were filled with people, no longer working, no longer crying or weeping, but moving aimlessly, like people in a dream. Were they happy? I moved to the window and drew down the blind.
"This may be the end," I thought. "The germ will be sweeping through France now. It may be the end of all things."
I rejoined Thornduck in the study.
"Sarakoff is in a kind of trance," I observed. "What do you make of it?"
"Isn't it natural?" he asked. "What kind of a man was he? What motives did he work on? Just think what the killing of desire means. All those things that depended on worldly ambition, self-gratification, physical pleasure, conceit, lust, hatred, passion, egotism, selfishness, vanity, avarice, sensuality and so on, are undermined and rendered paralysed by the germ. What remains? Why, in most people, practically nothing remains."
"Even so," I said, "I don't see why Sarakoff should go into a trance."
"He's gone into a trance simply because there's not enough left in him to constitute an individuality. The germ has taken the inside clean out of him. He's just an immortal shell now."
"Then do you think----?"
I stared at him wonderingly.
"I think that the germ will send most of the world to sleep."
He got up and walked to the window. The clear noonday light fell on his thin sensitive face and accentuated the pallor of his skin.
"All those who are bound on the wheel of desire will fall asleep," he murmured. A smile flickered on his lips and he turned and looked at me.
"Harden," he said, "it's really very funny. It's infinitely humorous, isn't it?"
"I see nothing humorous in anything," I replied. "I've lost all sense of humour."
He raised his eyebrows.
"Of humour?" he queried. "Surely not. Humour is surely immortal."
CHAPTER XXX
THE GREAT SLEEP
On that day the animals in London fell asleep with few exceptions. The exceptions were, I believe, all dogs. I do not pretend to explain, how it came about that dogs remained awake longer than other animals. The reason may be that dogs have some quality in them which is superior even to the qualities found in man, for there is a sweetness in the nature of dogs that is rare in men and women.
Many horses were overcome in the streets and lay down where they were. No attempt was made to remove them. They were left, stretched out on their sides, apparently unconscious.
And many thousands of men and women fell asleep. In some cases men were overcome by the sleep before their dogs, which has always seemed strange to me. It was Thornduck who told me this, for he remained awake during this period that the germ reigned supreme. He tells me that I fell asleep the next evening in my chair in the study and that he carried me upstairs to my room. I had just returned from visiting Leonora, whom I had found unconscious. He made a tour of London next morning. In the City there was a profound stillness.
In the West End matters were much the same. In Cavendish Square he entered many houses and found silence and sleep within. Everywhere doors and windows were wide open, giving access to any who might desire it. He
visited the Houses of Parliament only to find a few comatose blue-stained men lying about on the benches. For the
sleep had overtaken people by stealth. One day, passing by the Zoo, he had climbed the fence and made an
inspection of the inmates. With the exception of an elephant that was nodding drowsily, the animals lay motionless
in their cages, deep in the trance that the germ induced.

From time to time he met a man or woman awake like himself and stopped to talk. Those who still retained
sufficient individuality to continue existence were the strangest mixture of folk, for they were of every class, many
of them being little better than beggars. They were people in whom the desire of life played a minor part. They were
those people who are commonly regarded as being failures, people who live and die unknown to the world. They
were those people who devote themselves to an obscure existence, shun the rewards of successful careers, and are
ridiculed by all prosperous individuals. It seems that Thornduck was instrumental in calling a meeting of these
people at St. Paul's. There were about two thousand of them in all, but many in the outlying suburbs remained
ignorant of the meeting, and Thornduck considers that in the London district alone there must have been some
thousands who did not attend. At the meeting, which must have been the strangest in all history, the question of the
future was discussed. Many believed that the effect of the germ on those in the great sleep would ultimately lead to a
cessation of life owing to starvation. Thornduck held that the germ would pass, arguing on principles that were so
unscientific that I refrain from giving them. Eventually it appears that a decision was reached to leave London on a
certain date and migrate southwards in search of a region where a colony might be founded under laws and customs
suitable for Immortals. Thornduck says that there was one thing that struck him very forcibly at the meeting at St.
Paul's. All the people gathered there had about them a certain sweetness and strength, which, although it was very
noticeable, escaped his powers of analysis.

He attempted on several occasions to get into telegraphic communication with the Continent, but failed. In his
wanderings he entered many homes, always being careful to lay out at full length any of the unconscious inmates
who were asleep on chairs, for he feared that they might come to harm, and that their limbs might become stiffened
into unnatural postures.

All the time he had a firm conviction that the phase of sleep was temporary. He himself had moments in which
a slight drowsiness overtook him, but he never lost the enhanced power of thought that I had experienced in the
early stages of the Blue Disease. So absolute was his conviction that a general awakening would come about that he
began to busy his mind with the question as to what he could do, in conjunction with the other Immortals who were
still awake, to benefit humanity when it should emerge from the trance. This question was discussed continually.
Many thought that they should burn all records, financial, political, governmental and private, so that some
opportunity of starting afresh might be given to mankind, enslaved to the past and fettered by law and custom. But
the danger of chaos resulting from such a step deterred him. He confessed that the more he thought on the subject
the more clearly he saw that under the circumstances belonging to its stage of evolution, the organization of the
world was suited to the race that inhabited it. All change, he saw, had to come from within, and that to alter external
conditions suddenly and artificially might do incredible harm. We were constructed to develop against resistance,
and to remove such resistances before they had been overcome naturally was to tamper with the inner laws of life.
And so, after long discussion, they did nothing....

It is curious to reflect that they, earnest men devoted to progress, having at their mercy the machinery of
existence, walked through the midst of sleeping London and did nothing. But then none of them were fanatics, for
Thornduck stated that the fanatics fell early to sleep, thus proving that the motives behind their fanaticism were
egotistical, and a source of satisfaction to themselves. He made a point of visiting the homes of some of them.
Philanthropists, too, succumbed early.

On the seventh day after the great sleep had overtaken London the effects of the germ began to wane. Those
who had fallen asleep latest were the earliest to open their eyes. The blue stain rapidly vanished from eyes, skin and
nails.... I regained my waking sense on the evening of the seventh day and found myself in a small country cottage
whither Thornduck had borne me in a motor-car, fearing lest awakened London might seek some revenge on the
discoverers of the germ. Sarakoff lay on a couch beside me, still fast asleep.

The first clear idea that came to me concerned Alice Annot. I determined to go to her at once. Then I
remembered with vexation that I had wantonly smashed two vases worth ten pounds apiece.

I struggled to my feet. My hands were thin and wasted. I was ravenous with hunger. I felt giddy.
"What's the time?" I called confusedly. "It must be very late. Wake up!"
And I stooped down and began to shake Sarakoff violently.

THE END
If it's too impossibly difficult to track down and recapture an escaped criminal... there's a worse thing one might do....

JULY 18, 1949 A.D.

The fugitive lay face down in the fetid undergrowth, drawing in spasmodic lungfuls of air through cracked and swollen lips. Long before, his blue workshirt had been ripped to ribbons and his exposed chest showed a spiderwork of scratches, where branches and brambles had sought to restrain him in his frenzied flight. Across his back from shoulder to shoulder ran a deeper cut around which the caked blood attested to the needle-sharp viciousness of a thorn bush a mile to the north. With each tortured breath he winced, as drops of sweat ran down, following the spiderwork network and burning like acid. Incessantly he rubbed his bruised torso with mud-caked palms to dislodge the gnats and mosquitoes that clung to him, gorging shamelessly.

To the east he could see the lights of Fort Mudge where the railroad cut through on its way to Jacksonville. He had planned to ride the freight into Jacksonville but by now they were stopping every train and searching along every foot of the railroad right of way. In the distance he heard the eerie keen of a train whistle, and visualized the scene as it was flagged down and searched from engine to caboose.

Directly before him loomed the forbidding northern boundary of the Okefenokee Swamp. Unconsciously he strained his ears, then shuddered at the night noises that issued from the noisome wilderness. A frenzied threshing, then a splash, then... silence. What drama of life and death was being played out in that strange other-world of perpetual shadows?

In sudden panic he jerked erect and cupped his palm round his ear. Far off; muted by distance, but still unmistakable; he heard the baying of bloodhounds. Then this was the end. A sob broke from his throat. What was he, an animal; to be hunted down as a sport? Tears of self-pity welled to his eyes as he thought back to a party and a girl and laughter and cleanliness and the scent of magnolias, like a heady wine. But that was so long ago--so long ago--and now... He looked down at his sweating, lacerated body; his blistered calloused palms; the black broken nails; the cheap workshoes with hemp laces; the shapeless gray cotton trousers, now wet to the knees.

He pulled back his shoulders and resolutely faced west toward the river, but stopped short in horror as he heard the sudden cacophony of barks, yelps and howls of a pack of bloodhounds that senses the beginning of the end. He turned in panic. They couldn't be over half a mile away. In a panic of indecision he turned first east then west, then facing due south he hesitated a moment to take one last look at the clear open skies, and with a muffled prayer plunged into the brooding depths of the Okefenokee.

* * * * *

JUNE 13, 427th Year GALACTIC ERA

The building still hummed and vibrated with the dying echoes of the alarm siren as the biophysicist hurried down the corridor, and without breaking stride, pushed open the door to the Director's office.

The Director shuffled the papers before him and sighed heavily. His chair creaked protestingly as he shifted his bulk and looked up.

"Well?"

"He got away clean," said the biophysicist.

"Any fix on the direction?"

"None at all, sir. And he's got at least a two hours' start. That takes in a pretty big area of space."

"Hm-m-m! Well there's just a bare chance. That experimental cruiser is the fastest thing in space and it's equipped with the latest ethero-radar. If we get started right away, we just might--"

"That's just it," interrupted the biophysicist. "That's the ship he got away in."

The Director jumped angrily to his feet. "How did that happen? How can I explain to the board?"

"I'm sorry, sir. He was just too--"

"You're sorry?" He slumped back in his chair and drummed the desk top with his fingernails, worrying his lower lip with his teeth. He exhaled loudly and leaned forward. "Well, only one thing to do. You know the orders."

The biophysicist squirmed uncomfortably. "Couldn't we send a squadron of ships out to search and--"

"And what?" asked the Director, sarcastically. "You don't think I'd risk a billion credits worth of equipment on a wild-goose chase like that, do you? We could use up a year's appropriation of fuel and manpower and still be
unable to adequately search a sector one-tenth that size. If he just sat still, a thousand ships couldn't find him in a
thousand years, searching at finite speeds. Add to that the fact that the target is moving at ultra-light speed and the
odds against locating him is multiplied by a billion."

"I know, but he can't stay in space. He'll have to land somewhere, sometime."
"True enough--but where and when?"
"Couldn't we alert all the nearby planets?"
"You know better than that. He could be halfway across the galaxy before an ethero-gram reached the nearest
planet."
"Suppose we sent scout ships to the nearer planets and asked them to inform their neighbors in the same way.
We'd soon have an expanding circle that he couldn't slip through."

The Director smiled wryly. "Maybe. But who's going to pay for all this. By the time the circle was a thousand
light-years in diameter there would be ten thousand ships and a million clerks working on recapturing one escaped
prisoner. Another thing; I don't know offhand what he's been sentenced for, but I'll wager there are ten thousand
planets on which his crime would not be a crime. Do you think we could ever extradite him from such a planet? And
even if by some incredible stroke of fortune one of our agents happened to land on the right planet, in which city
would he begin his search. Or suppose our quarry lands only on uninhabited planets? We can't very well alert the
whole galaxy in the search for just one man."

"I know, but--"
"But what?" interrupted the Director. "Any other suggestions?"
"N ... no--"
"All right, he asked for it. You have the pattern, I presume. Feed it to Fido!"
"Yes, sir, but well ... I just don't--"
"Do you think I like it?" asked the Director, fiercely.

In the silence that followed, they looked at each other, guiltily.
"There's nothing else we can do," said the Director. "The orders are explicit. No one escapes from Hades!"
"I know," replied the biophysicist. "I'm not blaming you. Only I wish someone else had my job."
"Well," said the Director, heavily. "You might as well get started." He nodded his head in dismissal.
As the biophysicist went out the door, the Director looked down once more at the pile of papers before him. He
pulled the top sheet closer, and rubber-stamped across its face--CASE CLOSED.

"Yes," he mused aloud. "Closed for us, but--" He hesitated a moment, and then sighing once more, signed his
name in the space provided.

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AUGUST 6, 430th Year GALACTIC ERA

Tee Ormond sat morosely at the spaceport bar, and alternately wiped his forehead with a soggy handkerchief,
and sipped at his frosted rainbow, careful not to disturb the varicolored layers of liquid in the tall narrow glass.
Every now and then he nervously ran his fingers through his straight black hair, which lay damply plastered to his
head. His jacket was faded and worn, and above the left pocket was emblazoned the meteor insignia of the
spaceman. A dark patch on his back showed where the perspiration had seeped through. He blinked and rubbed the
corner of his eye as a drop of perspiration ran down and settled there.

A casual look would have classified him as a very average looking pilot such as could be found at the bar of
any spaceport; i.e. if space pilots can ever be classified as average. Spacemen are the last true adventurers in an age
where the debilitating culture of a highly mechanized civilization has pushed to the very borders of the galaxy.
While most men are fearful and indecisive outside their narrow specialties the spacemen must at all times be ready
to deal with the unexpected and the unusual. The expression--"Steady as a spaceman's nerves"--had a very real
origin.

A closer look at Tee would have revealed the error of a quick classification. He gripped his drink too tightly,
and his eyes darted restlessly from side to side, as though searching, searching; yet dreading to find the object of
their search. His expressive face contorted in a nervous tic each time his eyes swept by the clock hanging behind the
bar. He glanced dispiritedly out the window at the perpetually cloudy sky and idly watched a rivulet of water race
down the dirty pane. He loosened his collar and futilely mopped at his neck with the soggy handkerchief, then
irritably flung it to the floor.

"Hey, Jo," he yelled to the bartender. "What's the matter with the air-conditioning? I'm burning up."
"Take it easy," soothed the bartender, consulting a thermometer on the wall behind him, "it's eighty-five in
here. That's as low as the law allows. Can't have too much difference in the temperature or all my customers'd pass
out when they go outside. Why don't you go into town? They keep it comfortable under the dome."
"Don't this planet ever cool off?" asked Tee.
The bartender chuckled. "I see you don't know too much about Thymis. Sometimes it drops to ninety at night, but not too often. You ought to be here sometime when the clouds part for a minute. If you're caught outside then, it's third-degree burns for sure."

He glanced down at the nearly empty glass. "How about another rainbow? If you get enough of them in you, you won't notice the heat--you won't notice anything." He laughed uproariously at the hoary joke.

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Tee looked at him disgustedly and without answering bent to his drink once more. He felt someone jostle his elbow and turned sideways to allow the newcomer access to the bar. After a moment he wiped his forehead on his sleeve. The bartender placed another rainbow before him.

"Hey, I didn't order that," he cried.

The bartender nodded toward the next stool. "On him."

Tee turned and saw a barrel-chested red-haired giant holding up a drink in the immemorial bar toast. He raised his own glass gingerly, but his trembling hand caused the layers to mix and he stared ruefully at the resultant clayey-looking mess.

The redhead laughed. "Mix another one, Jo."

"But--" Tee's face got red.

"I came in here to talk to you anyway," said the giant. "You own the Starduster, don't you?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Like to get her out of hock?"

"Who says she's in hock?"

"Look," said the redhead. "Let's not kid each other. Everybody around this port knows you blew in from Lemmyt last month and can't raise the money to pay the port charges, much less the refueling fee. And it's no secret that you're anxious to leave our fair planet." He winked conspiringly at Tee.

"So?"

The redhead glanced at the bartender who was busy at the other end of the bar. He leaned closer and whispered.

"I know where the Elen of Troy is."

"The Elen of Troy?"

"Oh, that's right, you wouldn't know about her. Eight months ago she crashed on an uninhabited planet somewhere in this sector. So far they've been unable to find her." He leaned closer. "She was carrying four million in Penryx crystals."

"What's that to me?"

The redhead looked around briefly to make sure no one was in hearing distance, then whispered softly, without moving his lips. "I told you, they can't find her, but I know where she is."

"You know? But how--"

"Look," said the giant, frowning, "I didn't ask you why you're so anxious to leave."

"Well?"

"I'll clear your ship and we can pick up the crystals for the salvage fee. A million each, and all nice and legal. We can leave by the end of the week and be back in probably six months."

"Six months!" Tee stood up. "Sorry!"

The redhead grabbed his arm in a hamlike palm. "A million each in six months; what's wrong with that?"

Tee jerked out of his grasp. "I ... I just can't do it."

"Look," cried the redhead exasperatedly, "I'm offering you a full partnership on a two million credit salvage deal and you want to back out because it'll take six months. On top of that you're broke and stranded and your hangar bill gets bigger every day. If you don't take me up on this deal, you'll still be sitting here six months from now wondering how to get your ship out of hock--if you don't get caught first. What do you say? What've you got to lose?"

What did he have to lose? Tee gripped the edge of the bar till his knuckles showed white. "No! I just can't do it. Why don't you get someone else?"

"The slow tubs around this port would take years for the trip. I can see the Starduster has class."

"Fastest thing in the galaxy," said Tee, proudly. Then earnestly, "I'm sorry, you'll just have to find some other ship."

"Think it over," said the redhead. "I'll wait. When you change your mind look me up. Name's Yule Larson." He
slapped Tee heavily on the back and swaggered toward the door. He turned and looked back. "Better go along with me. After six months they can auction off your ship to pay for the port charges, you know." The door swung shut behind him.

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Tee sat down again and bent his head, nursing his drink. His eyes darted nervously around the room and came to rest on the clock. A shudder ran through him and he lowered his eyes quickly. As he sipped his drink his eyes returned to the clock continually, as though drawn there against their will. As he watched, the minute hand jerked downward and an involuntary gasp escaped his lips.

The bartender turned quickly. "Anything wrong?"

"N ... no, nothing." As he spoke, the minute hand moved again and Tee started nervously, upsetting his drink. He sat for a moment watching the bartender mop up the spreading liquid, then abruptly got up and tossed a half-credit piece on the bar. He hurried outside, steeling himself to keep from running. He paused just outside the door.

Stand still, he told himself. Mustn't run! Mustn't run! No use anyway. If I only knew when. If I just could stop and rest. If I had the time ... Time! Time! That's what I need. Light-years of time ... But when? When? If only I could be sure. He looked up slowly at the murky canopy of clouds. If I only knew when! He looked indecisively up and down the field, then squaring his shoulders resolutely, set out for the administration building.

At this hour the office was deserted except for a wispy-haired little man who sat at a desk fussing with some papers. He looked up questioningly as Tee came in.

"Is my ship re-charged and provisioned?" asked Tee.

"Uh, what's the name please?"

"Tee Ormond. I own the Starduster."

The clerk pulled a card from a file on the desk and studied it. "Ah, yes, the Starduster."

"I'd like to pay my bill and clear the Starduster for immediate departure."

"Uh, very good, Mr. Ormond." He consulted the card again. "That'll be fourteen hundred and eleven credits."

He beamed. "We included a case of Ruykeser's Concentrate, compliments of the management." He handed a circular to Tee. "This is a list of our ports and facilities on other planets. Our accommodations are the finest, and we carry a complete line of parts." He smiled professionally.

"What about my key?" asked Tee, pulling out his wallet.

"Uh, let's see, number thirty-seven." The clerk started for a numbered board hanging on the wall. He never got there.

Tee whipped a stun-gun from inside his jacket and waved it at the clerk's back. It caught him in mid-stride, and unbalanced, he crashed heavily to the floor. Tee glanced briefly down as he stepped over the paralyzed form, avoiding the accusing eyes, and snatched the magnetic key off the hook. He forced himself to walk calmly across the field toward the hangar that housed the Starduster.

A uniformed guard stopped him at the hangar door. "May I see your clearance, sir?" he asked, politely.

Tee hesitated for a moment. "Oh, I'm just going to get something out of my ship," he said, smoothly. "The clerk said it was roj."

"The clerk said? But he can't--" The guard tensed. "Mind if I check, sir? Orders, you know." He bent his head slightly as he pressed a knob on his wrist radio. As his eyes turned downward, Tee swung the stun-gun in an arc that ended on the back of the guard's head. As he leaped into the Starduster he was sorry for a moment that he hadn't had time to recharge the gun, and hoped he hadn't struck too hard.

* * * * *

OCTOBER 11, 433rd Year GALACTIC ERA

Tee stepped out of the hangar and surveyed the twin suns. The pale binaries sat stolidly on the horizon, forty degrees apart. Their mingled light washed down dimly on the single continent of the planet, Aurora.

He started, as a man walked around the corner of the hangar. The man looked at Tee searchingly for a moment, then asked, "Anything troubling you, Tee?"

"Why ... why, no, Mr. Jenner. You just startled me, that's all."

"Well, how's everything coming?"

"Right on schedule. We'll be ready for the final test by the end of the week."

"By the way," asked Jenner, speculatively, "how come you ordered the ship stocked and provisioned, for the test?"

"Why ... why I think she should be tested under exactly the same conditions as she'll encounter in actual use."

"We could have done it a lot cheaper by just using ballast," said Jenner. "After this, I want to personally see any voucher for over a hundred credits before it's cleared."

"Yes, sir, but I just didn't want to bother you with details."
"An expenditure of over two thousand credits isn't just detail; but let it pass. It's already done. Anyway, on the drawing board she's the fastest thing in the galaxy." He smiled. "If she lives up to expectations, she'll make your ship look like an old freighter. We've got four million sunk in her so far, so she'd better check out roj."

He put his hand on Tee's shoulder. "You're not worried about testing her, are you? You've been jumpy lately."

"Oh, no, nothing like that, Mr. Jenner. I'm just...well, I've been up all night watching them install the gyroscopes. Think I'll get some sleep." He yawned.

Jenner cupped his chin in his palm and stood staring after the retreating figure. As Tee turned and looked back nervously, Jenner entered the hangar office. He spoke softly into the visiphone and in a moment the screen lit up.

"Is this the prison administrator?" asked Jenner.

"What can I do for you?"

"My name is Jenner; Consolidated Spacecraft."

"Yes?"

"Suppose an escaped prisoner from Hades landed on Aurora?"

"No one escapes from Hades Prison."

"Well, just suppose one did?"

"I never receive information about escapees."

"But you're the administrator here.""

"My job, as the title implies, is purely administrative. I merely arrange transportation for our annual shipment of prisoners to Hades, and see that the records are kept straight."

"But whom would they contact in the event of an escape?"

The administrator pursed his lips in impatience. "Hades has six billion prisoners at any given time. If one did manage to escape, they couldn't very well alert a million planets."

"You mean you wouldn't do anything?"

"As I said before, my job is purely administrative. Out of my jurisdiction entirely. Each planet has its own police force and handles its internal crime in its own way. What's legal on Aurora might very well be illegal on ten thousand other planets, and vice versa."

"I see. Thank you." Jenner cut the connection slowly. He flicked the switch open again, hesitated, and then closed it.

* * * * *

He walked out to where his gyrocar was parked, and in a few minutes set it down on the roof of Tee's hotel. Tee was just entering the lobby as Jenner came in and they went up to his room together.

"I'll come right to the point, Tee," he said, as soon as the door had closed. "I just talked to the local prison administrator for Hades. He looked closely at Tee.

"What's that got to do with me?" asked Tee, belligerently.

"Wait until I finish," said Jenner, curtly. "I hired you to test-hop our new ship because you were the best pilot available. I'm not interested in your past, but most of the company's resources are sunk in that ship. If something goes wrong because the test pilot is disturbed or nervous, the company will be bankrupt. I'm not saying you're an escaped prisoner, but if you were, you'd have nothing to worry about."

"What do you mean?"

"The administrator told me he has no jurisdiction over escaped prisoners, so you see, if you had escaped, you'd have nothing to fear here. You're out of their jurisdiction."

Tee began to laugh wildly. "Out of their jurisdiction! Out of their jurisdiction! So that's the way they put it. Out of their jurisdiction!"

"Stop it!" said Jenner, sharply. "Do you want to tell me now?"

Tee drew in a gasping breath and sobered. "What would I have to tell you? So I'm the nervous type. So you hired me to test-hop your new ship. So I'll test-hop it. That's all we agreed on. What more do you want?"

Jenner sighed. "Roj, Tee, if that's the way you want it, but I wish--"

The visiphone buzzed, and when Tee flipped the switch, the worried face of the chief mechanic sprang into focus. "Oh, there you are, Mr. Jenner. Glad I caught you before you left. We've run into trouble."

"Well, out with it," barked Jenner. "What is it?"

The mechanic cleared his throat nervously. "We were testing the main gyroscope when it threw a blade."

"How bad is it?" asked Jenner.

"Pretty bad, I'm afraid. It tore up the subetherscope unit so bad we'll have to replace it. We can't get any on Aurora either. We'll have to send to Lennix, and that'll take close to a month."

"Roj! Knock off until I get there," barked Jenner. He slammed over the switch, viciously. "Of all the rotten luck!"
"Can't you get some plant here on Aurora to hand tool one for you?" asked Tee.
"No, that's just it," replied Jenner. "It's a special alloy. The owners of the process wouldn't give us any details on the manufacture. Anyway, even if we knew how, we couldn't duplicate it without their special machine tools."
"Does that mean--"
"I'm afraid so. The ship won't be ready for a month, now."
"A month! I can't wait a month."
"You can't wait a month? We've got four million tied up in that ship and you tell me you can't wait a month."
"Look, Mr. Jenner, I'll test it without the unit."
"That's impossible. The ship would vibrate into a billion pieces as soon as it went into subspace. No! We'll just have to wait."
"I can't wait," cried Tee. "You'll have to get another pilot."
"Just a minute! You can't walk out on your contract. If it's a matter of credits--"
Tee shook his head. "That's not it at all. I just can't stay that long."
Jenner looked at him angrily. "Well, your contract isn't up till the end of the week anyway. We'll see what we can do about a replacement then."

After Jenner had left, Tee sat smoking in the darkness. He placed his elbow on the couch arm and cupped his chin in his palm. Then restlessly, he snuffed out his cigarette and rubbed his hands together. They felt moist and clammy. He jerked nervously as a click sounded out in the hall. Only a door opening across the way. He bit the fleshy part of his middle finger and then began to worry his ring with his teeth. He lit another cigarette and dropped it into the disposal almost immediately.

He got up and began to pace the room. Six steps forward. Turn. Six steps back. Turn. Six steps forward--or was it five this time? The walls seemed to be closing in, constricting. His head felt light and his tongue and palate grew dry. He tried to swallow, and a feeling of nausea came over him. His throat grew tight and he felt as though he were choking. Rubbing his forehead with the back of his hand it came away wet with perspiration. He rushed to the window and struggled futilely with it, forgetting it was sealed shut in the air-conditioned hotel. He flung himself at the door, wrenching it open and took the elevator three steps at a time falling to his knees at the ground floor. A surface cab was sitting outside just beyond the entrance. He flung himself in, breathing heavily and fumbling to drop a coin in the slot, pulled the control lever all the way over.

Twenty minutes later, the Starduster hovered for a moment over Aurora, then shimmered and vanished as it went into subspace.

OCTOBER 2, 435th Year GALACTIC ERA
The Starduster materialized just outside the atmosphere of the planet Elysia, and fluttered erratically downward, like a wounded bird. A hundred feet from the surface, the ship hesitated, shuddered throughout her length, then dropped like a plummet, crashing heavily into a grove of trees.

For Tee there was a long period of blessed darkness, of peace, of non-remembering, then his mind clawed upward toward consciousness. The fear and uncertainty were with him again--nagging, nibbling, gnawing at his reason.

He fought to close his mind and drift back down into the darkness of peace and forgetting, but contrarily the past marched in review before his consciousness: The twin worlds of Thole revolving about each other as he fled down the shallow ravine before the creeping wall of lava, while the ancient mountain grunted and belched, and coughed up its insides. The terrible pull of the uncharted black star as it tugged at the feeble Starduster. The enervating heat and humidity of perpetually cloudy Thymis. Pyramids of gleaming penryx crystals piled high as mountains, and Yule Larson towering above the landscape, draining gargantuan rainbows at a single gulp; striding like Paul Bunyan across the land in mile-long strides and kicking over the pyramids of crystals, laughing uproariously at the sport. And Jenner, grinning idiotically, pointing a thick finger at him and repeating over and over: "Out of their jurisdiction! Nothing to fear! Nothing to fear! Nothing to fear! Nothing to fear! Noth--"

"Stop it! Stop it!" cried Tee, and a brilliant burst of light like a thousand sky-rockets seemed to go off in his head. He shrieked like an animal in agony, then fell back sobbing, bathed in perspiration.

Something cool touched his forehead and he pulled away violently, then as his head cleared he opened his eyes slowly. A blur of shadows and light shimmering indistinctly, then suddenly like the picture on a visiphone the blurs coalesced and formed a clear image, and everything was normal again, the fear still hovering close, but pushed back for the time being.

A girl stood before him smiling rather uncertainly. The sweetness and cleanness of that smile after his recent ordeal washed over his tortured mind like a cooling astringent, and he smiled gratefully up at her. She put a cool
palm on his forehead and as she started to withdraw it he clutched it in an emaciated fist and mumbled indistinctly through cracked dry lips.

She smiled down at him and smoothed back his damp hair. She pulled up a chair beside the bed and continued to stroke his hair until his eyes closed in sleep.

He awoke ravenous and thirsty, but lay quietly for a time, luxuriating in the feel of the clean soft sheets. He was in a simply but tastefully decorated room. Three of the walls were made of transparent glass and the warm golden rays of a type G sun bathed the room. Outside he could see green rolling meadowland, broken here and there by sylvan groves. A brilliantly colored bird swooped down and preened itself for a moment, then raised its head and flooded the silence with melody. Faintly from a grove of trees came an answering treble. The songbird cocked its head to the side, listening, then swooped upward on wings of flashing color. A small squirrellike creature bounded nervously up to the transparent wall and sat on its haunches, surveying the room with bright beady eyes. As Tee's ears attuned themselves he was suddenly aware of chirpings, trebles, clearpitched whistles, and from somewhere in the depths of the grove, a deep-pitched ga-rooph, ga-roomph.

* * * * *

A chubby little man with a round face and alert twinkling eyes entered the room. He seemed to radiate happiness and contentment. "Well, I see the patient's finally come around," he said, cheerfully.

"What happened?" asked Tee. "Your ship crashed just beyond that grove." Tee clutched at him. "The ship! How bad is it?"

"I think you were in worse shape than your ship. You must have had it under control almost to the end, though how you stayed conscious with space fever is beyond me."

"Space fever? So that's it. I remember getting sick and light-headed and just before I passed out I flipped out of subspace and the automatic finder, of course, took the ship to the nearest planet. I must have landed by reflex action. I sure don't remember anything about it."

"Well," the man laughed, "I have seen better landings, but not when the pilot had a temperature of one-o-five. Anyway, you're safe now. Welcome to Elysia."

There it was again. Safe! Safe! Tee raised up, then fell back weakly.

"Is anything wrong?" asked the little man, alarmed.

"N ... nothing, I just ... nothing!"

The man was looking at him questioningly.

"Elysia," mused Tee. "I seem to remember an old old myth brought from the original Earth." He waved toward the sylvan setting, outside.

The little man smiled. "Yes, the old settlers named our planet well." He caught himself. "Oh, I'm sorry; I'm Dr. Chensi. This is my home."

Tee smiled. "Well at least you'll have to admit I showed good judgment crashing next to a doctor's house." Then more seriously, "Thanks, doc, thanks for everything."

"My degrees aren't in medicine," replied Dr. Chensi. "I'm afraid I had little to do with your recovery. My daughter's the one who nursed you. Oh, here she is now." He raised his voice. "Come in, Lara."

Since Dr. Chensi was using the only chair she sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Here," said the doctor, teasingly, "what kind of nurse are you, mussing up your patient's bed?"

She pouted prettily. "He's my patient." Then looking down at Tee with a smile, "You'll be up and around in no time now."

"Time!" cried Tee, raising up. "What's the date? I've got to know!"

"You've been delirious for two weeks," answered the doctor. "Another two weeks of convalescence and you ought to be as good as new."

"But two weeks, I can't--"

"Can't leave before then anyway," replied the doctor calmly. "I knew you'd want your ship repaired so I had it hauled to the port. Won't be ready for two more weeks. So you might as well relax."

Tee bit his lip, and clenched his fists to keep from trembling. It was a moment before he could trust himself to speak without a quaver in his voice. "Nothing else I can do, I guess. Thanks, anyway. And by the way, there's enough credits in the ship's safe to pay for the repairs, I'm sure."

"I think we should start the patient walking tomorrow," said Lara, in a mock-professional voice. She punched the ends of Tee's pillow. "Now you'd better get some sleep. You're still very weak, you know."

* * * * *

The days that followed were like an idyll for Tee. With Lara he wandered through the parklike wooded groves. They sat near shaded pools and ate wild berries while she told him stories of the founding of Elysia. They held
hands and ran exuberantly across the grassy meadows, and waded like children in the clear brooks.

A thousand times, a word, an endearing term, sprang to his lips, and each time the fear clamped his tongue in a vise of steel. A thousand times he wanted to touch her, feel the silkiness of her hair, the warmth of her lips, but each time the fear and uncertainty stood between them like twin specters of doom, pointing and saying, "Fool! Why torture yourself?"

In the daytime when Lara was with him it wasn't so bad, but at night the fear and uncertainty crowded to the fore and blanked out everything else. It was then he prayed for the courage to kill himself, and despised the weakness that made him draw back from the thought. If only he could stop thinking. Make his mind a blank. But that was death, and death was what he feared. How long ago was it when he'd first realized that hope was an illusion, a false god that smiled and lied, and held out vain promises only to prolong the torture?

Then one day the word came that his ship was repaired. As though the word were a catalyst the terrible fear overwhelmed him, drowning out every other thought, and he knew he had to leave. When he had no means of leaving the planet he could partially close off his dread and wait resignedly. But now that the ship was ready, every moment he remained was an agony.

He led Lara to their favorite spot by a quiet pool. She looked radiant, and smiled to herself, as though at a secret. He steeled himself and finally blurted out, "Lara, I'm leaving tomorrow." He hesitated and bit his lip. "And ... thanks for everything."

"Thanks?" She choked on the words.
"I'm sorry--" he trailed off, lamely.
"But ... but I thought--" She looked down.

He reached out and gently touched her cheek. "Can't you see I want to stay?" he pleaded.
"Then why? Why?" She was crying now.
"I ... I just can't. It's no good." He stood up.

She reached out and caught his hand. "Then take me with you. I've heard you at night pacing in your room. I don't know what it is that drives you on and on, but if space is what you want, let me go with you. I can help you, darling. You'll see. And some day when you grow tired of space, we can come back to Elysia."

She was babbling now.

He pulled roughly away. "No! It's no good. I'm--If only I could stay." He brushed her hair softly with his palm and as she reached out toward him he turned and walked swiftly toward the house, pitying and hating himself by turn, while Lara sat forlornly by the pool looking after him.

He began to sweat before he reached the house and his knees began to tremble so, he had to stop for a moment, to keep his balance. Determinedly he started forward again and continued on past the house to the highway that wound by half a kilometer away. There he hailed a passing ground car and rode to the spaceport, where a few judiciously distributed credits facilitated his immediate clearance. Before the ship had even left the atmosphere he rammed in the subspace control.

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MAY 4, 437th Year GALACTIC ERA

Tantalus lay far out on a spiral arm, well away from the main stream of traffic that flowed through the galaxy. It was a fair planet boasting an equable climate, at least in the tropic zone. But as yet the population was small, consisting mostly of administrative officials who served their allotted time and thankfully returned to their home planets closer to the center of population.

Tee entered the towering building and after consulting a wall directory stepped into the antigrav chute and was whisked high up into the heart of the building. He stepped out before a plain door and as he advanced the center panel fluoresced briefly with the printed legend--GALACTIC PRISON AUTHORITY, Ary Mefford, Administrator for Tantalus.

He hesitated for a moment, then squaring his shoulders stepped forward, and as he crossed the beam the door swung open before him. The gray-haired man sitting at the desk studying a paper, looked up and smiled politely. He indicated a chair with a nod then bent his head again. After a moment he shoved the paper aside and looked questioningly at Tee.

"I want to give myself up," blurted Tee.
"I'm the administrator for Hades," said the man calmly. "I think you want the local authorities."
"You don't understand. I escaped from Hades."
"No one escapes from Hades," replied the administrator.
"I escaped!" insisted Tee. "Ten years ago. You can check. I'm tired of running. I want to go back."
"This is most unusual," said the administrator in a disturbed voice. "Ten years ago you say?"
"Yes! Yes! And I'm ready to go back, before it's too late. Can't you understand?"

The administrator shook his head pityingly. "It's already too late. I'm sorry." He bent his head guiltily and began to fumble with the papers on his desk.

Tee started to say something, but the administrator raised his head and said slowly, "It was too late the day you left Hades. Nothing I can do." He looked down again. Tee turned and slowly walked out the door. The administrator didn't look up.

As Tee walked aimlessly down the deserted corridor, his footsteps echoed hollowly like a dirge. A line from an old poem sprang to his mind: "We are the dead, row on row we lie--" He was the dead, but still he chased the chimera of hope, yet knowing in his heart it was hopeless.

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JUNE 11, 437th Year GALACTIC ERA

The Starduster, pocked and pitted from innumerable collisions with dust particles, sped out and out. The close-packed suns of the central hub lay far behind. Here at the rim of the galaxy the stars lay scattered, separated by vast distances. A gaunt hollow-eyed figure sat in the observation bubble staring half-hopefully, half-despairingly at the unimaginable depths beyond the rim.

* * * * *

JUNE 12, 437th Year GALACTIC ERA

On and on past the thinning stars raced the patient electronic bloodhound; invisible, irreversible, indestructible; slowly, but inexorably accelerating. It flashed by the planet Damocles at multiples of the speed of light, and sensing the proximity of the prey on which it was homed, spurted into the intergalactic depths after the receding ship, intent on meshing with and thereby distorting the encephalograph pattern of its target. It was quite mindless, and the final pattern its meshing would create would be something quite strange, and not very human.

THE END

Contents

VALLEY of the CROEN

By LEE TARBELL

There was a mysterious golden statue that always pointed one way—and it led to sudden death in the valley where flying disks landed.

They say cross-eyed men are bad luck. He stood there, in my doorway, eyeing me up and down with those in-focused black eyes.

His face was hideous even if the eyes had been normal. He was slashed with a wide cicatrice of livid scar tissue from one cheekbone across his nose and down to the button of his jaw on the other side.

He was big, and he looked like bad news to me. I inadvertently moved the door as if to close it, then he spoke:

"You Keele, the mining man?"

I nodded, wondering at the mild voice from the huge battered figure.

"I'm pretty busy, could you give me some idea..." I hedged. It doesn't do to seem too anxious or eager in any business deal. Too, the sight of his burly figure, even without the nightmare face, was not exactly reassuring. That bulge under the native quilted coat, I knew was nothing but a gun too big for even his bulges to conceal completely.

But a man needed a gun, here. Especially if he had something valuable, such as the whereabouts of gold.

He grinned, and the white, even teeth, and the wrinkles around his eyes took away the sense of impending catastrophe brought by those crossed eyes. I stepped back then, and he walked in. I sat down at my desk. He sat down across from me, and fumbled in one pocket. He lay on the desk an object in wrappings of dirty rags. These he peeled off slowly, his eyes seeming to dart here and there, never looking where they should. As he peeled, he talked:

"I just landed off a ship from Fusan, up-coast. Y’ ever been in Fusan?"
I shook my head, watching his fingers work at the knots of the strings around his mysterious object.

"Korea is a funny place. As long as people have been living here, you'd think it would be settled. But it isn't! There're immense forests, great mountains, where no man has gone, places no one enters. They're so dumb they don't even have compasses; they get lost! Think my compass is magic, wonder how I know where to go next, and not get lost. Superstitious, scared to go into the great, dark, damp forests. Scared of the mountains no one has ever climbed. That kind of country is a prospector's meat!"

I nodded. He had the wrappings off, and I leaned forward, a little breathless at the beauty of the thing in his hand. A curiously wrought little statuette about eight inches high, of gold. It was set with real emeralds, for eyes. About the neck and waist of the exquisite female figure were inset jewels, simulating girdle and necklace. A little golden woman goddess! It was very finely wrought, and what surprised me, it was not oriental, not any style of art I could place. Yet it was alien and ancient. I reached for it. He let me take it in my hands, and as I touched it, an electric tingle of surprise, a thrill of utter delight, ran up my arm, as if the image contained a strong little soul intent upon enslaving me with admiration.

"Potent little female, isn't she?"

His crossed eyes were on mine with that queer stare of the cross-eyed. I could make nothing of the facial expressions of this man. He would have been disturbing to play poker against. I would have said he was afraid of that little figure! Afraid, yet very much attached to it. I set it down and he wrapped it up again.

"Strange thing! Tell me about it."

"You know we split Korea with Russia, after the war. I thought I'd take a look around. I have done quite a bit of that. It wasn't hard. Up near the Russian line I found something."

He stopped, looked at me. Whether, he was trying to gauge my credulity or my depth, I don't know.

"You're young. You're not yet thirty, Keele; you've got time left to enjoy a fortune such as I'm letting you in on. And I saw such women among these unknown people as no man would believe. I spent a lot of time spying on them."

I figured he was lying about the women to get me to help him finance the trip. But just the same, the hint of unknown and unspoiled beauty of some hidden, weirdly alien tribe of people aroused my curiosity--the old lure of the Savage Princess from kid days, I guess. I hadn't had a real vacation in years--and what would I enjoy more than a jaunt through untouched forests? Toward what didn't matter as long as the hunting was good. And it sounded good!

"Unknown people, virgin forest, beautiful women and plenty of gold. Sounds too good to be true!"

He squinted at me, bared his fine teeth. He leaned forward, almost whispered trying to impress me:

"The people who made that statue are still there. It isn't ancient--they still make them!"

Now I knew he was lying, but still I was hooked. I had to know! For that statue was an infinite evidence of a refinement of art culture rare on earth! If such a race still remained untouched by white man's modern rot--I could pick up a fortune in art objects. I wasn't too dumb to know what they'd bring in New York. I nodded, and he went on.

"I found a cache of valuable gold, jewels, and other things. Things I can't understand. I could be better educated, Mr. Keele. That's why I've come to you. I want some help." I leaned back. If he found gold, he should have the wherewithal to get in there and back without my help. So he was lying. I determined to find out why, and just what the lie was.

"Go ahead," was all I said. Give a liar enough rope and he'll trip himself.

But he didn't! He didn't ask for money! He only wanted me for advice, for the names of experienced men of the kind he needed, to help him go back there. Men willing to fight if needed. Or else he was too clever. At the end he had me. I was committed to supervising and accompanying that expedition. Or was it the wise emerald eyes of the little golden Goddess that trapped me? I didn't know, then.

Finally I got it out of him. He hadn't brought back the gold. He had to cross bandit territory, and he didn't have to tell me why he didn't carry his fortune with only his own rifle to guard it.

I picked two well-known men who were available just then. Hank Polter had led more than one hunting party through country I wouldn't have picked--and come out safe. He knew what a gun was for, and when to use it. And that's the most important part of handling a gun, knowing when you have to shoot, and then doing it first. The man that shoots before he has to is going to get you into more trouble than he can get you out of.

Lean and tough, he knew the ropes. Around thirty, just under six feet, not bad looking, he was making the most of Seoul's wide-open hot spots. Nearly broke, he jumped at our offer.

Seoul is the capital of Korea, in case you don't know. Everyone did pretty much as they pleased, for there were few restrictions from the so-recently installed government. There are a number of gold mines around Seoul, which was why I was there. Like the cross-eyed Jake Barto, I knew that something would turn up worth owning where governments have changed three times in as many years.
Frans Nolti, the other hunter we hired, was more of a fortune hunter, by appearance, than one who knew his way in the jungles of the world. Handsome in his Italian way, he was suave, apparently well educated, very quick in his movements. He gave the impression of extreme cleverness, of intellect held in reserve behind a facade of worldliness, of light clever talk.

Both of them knew their Orient, far better than I. Which was one reason I wanted them.

Barto had at first wanted a large party, at least a score of "white" men of the western school, able to fight and smart enough to know how. But I had talked him out of it.

"You see, Jake, with two like these, we can travel fast. If there's treachery, if they aren't satisfied with the cut we're offering, why it's two against two--you and I have an even chance. With a larger party, we might pick up some scoundrels who will try to murder us and make off with the treasure. Providing we get the treasure!"

Jake eyed me, in that maddeningly unreadable cross-eyed expression of cold ferocity which the scars gave his ugly face. We had agreed on one-third each, the other two to split the other third between them. I was footing the bills, Jake was nearly broke. He had found the stuff, and tried to hold out for half, me a quarter, the other two to split a quarter. I said nothing doing.

"No, Jake, this first trip, it's got to be this way. If it's like you say it is, there'll be more. What we can carry won't be all the value. There'll be more to be gotten out of that ruin than the stuff you found. You'll have the money to do it, after this, and it's your find. We'll be out, after this one trip."

We sailed up the east coast of Korea from Fusan to the village of Leshin. By native cart from there to the ancient half-ruined city of Musan. That's close to the Manchurian border. There we hired eight diminutive Korean ponies and four men to "go along" as Barto put it, for they didn't want to go, and didn't appear like men of much use for anything but guides. And Barto knew the way. But I didn't want to be wandering around without any native interpreters, without contact of any kind possible with the people we might encounter. None of them had been more than a few miles into the wilderness. They were sad looking men when we started northward. But Koreans manage to look pretty sad much of the time. With their history, that's easy to understand.

Something about the burly, ugly Barto's behavior began to worry me. He didn't know where he was going. He had told a lie, but just what the lie was I couldn't figure out. I watched him covertly. Whenever we came to the end of a march, instead of sighting his landmarks, making sure of his bearings--he would go off by himself. Next day, he would know exactly where he wanted to go--but sometimes the "way" would be across an impassable gorge, a rapids, or straight into a cliff.

One night, the fourth day and well into the wilderness, we were moving up a broad valley through a forest of larch. I sighted a deer, and called a halt while I stalked it. I got it, and came back ahead of the rest, who were cutting up the deer. I moved quietly in the woods--it's a good habit. I came upon Barto, and he was oblivious of me. He had the little golden girl in his hands, talking to it.

"Now, tell me the way, girl, tell me the way." Then he held the girl loosely in his hand, as I watched, it gave me an eerie feeling to see the little figure turn, its outstretched hand pointing northward like a compass. Was Jake Barto a madman? Or did the little figure act as a compass? If so, why did Barto have to rely on the pointing figure's hand for directions? If he didn't get that figure from the place we were heading, where did he get it? How did he know there was anything of value in the place we were headed for?

These questions tormented me, for I could not ask them without revealing to Jake that I knew he was lying. And that meant a showdown. I might have to kill him. Still, I had to get the truth out of him, or let a madman lead us on and on into an untracked wilderness, if that is what he was.

For several days we did not see a sign of life, after that deer.

The forest became denser at every mile, with more and more swamps and surface water. Time after time our ponies mired and had to be lifted out of the mud. Lush ferns and rank grass made walking dangerous. The trees were interlaced with draping festoons of gray "Spanish moss," forming a canopy overhead which let through only a gloomy half-light. No sounds broke the stillness except the half-awed calls of the men. No birds, not even a squirrel. Then it began to rain.

That drizzle continued for a week! The men became frightened at the gloomy stillness and exhausted by the strenuous work of keeping the ponies moving.

Then in the night my four Koreans deserted. They didn't take any ponies, just what grub they could pack. We all felt better off without them, but I often wonder if they ever found their way out of that morass.

The next day there came a break. We sighted a majestic mountain about two days' march ahead. It looked like a gloomy cloud that had settled to earth for a moment's rest. But no cloud ever managed to look so rocky, so windswept, or so welcome. And no patch of blue sky ever looked so good as that sky above the mountain, swept clean of the rain curtain by the updraft.

Jake seemed to recognize that mountain, gave an audible sigh of relief when we sighted it. My suspicions
We went hunting that day. It was the first dry camp in a long time, the first signs of game; we needed a rest. As usual, Barto stayed at camp to guard the ponies and camp equipment.

We were on the trail of a bear when we saw a strange object in the sky. It looked like a doughnut or a saucer, and it settled to the earth on the far side of the great white mountain at whose foot we had made camp. It seemed only an hour's walk to a point where we could overlook the landing place of the strange object, and Hank and Frans pushed ahead, curious and a little frightened. I had read in the American newspapers the accounts of "disk ships" and knew they would not be able to get close to it, and I wanted to watch Hank. I let them get out of sight, then turned back to camp. Quietly, I was nearing our camp, when the scream of a woman in pain came to me!

It was the answer to all my apprehensions about the ugly Barto, a sudden materialization of the vague distrust I had felt all along! I broke into a run, crashing through the young, white birches and larches, to the clearing.

A chuckle reached me, a gloating heavy laugh of triumph.

Barto had the girl prone, one arm bent near to breaking, her knees caught beneath his weight. I caught him by the shoulders, heaved backward, sent him sprawling across the young grass. He sat up, glared for an instant, then went for his gun. Before it came out of the holster, my foot caught him beside the jaw. He was too big for any other method I might have chosen to be effective. The kick stretched him unconscious; my heel had struck the button.

I turned, to see the girl disappearing among the brush. She had darted away instantly she was free. That she would bring her people down on us I had no doubt. I did doubt their ability to hurt us. Unless she belonged to a band of Manchurian bandits hanging out here in the wilderness, they would not have arms. In the case she was of the bandits, we might be wiped out in our sleep.

I bent over Jake, hoping I had not broken his neck. He looked as though he would be out for some time. I picked up his heavy .45, shoved it in my belt. I wished Hank and Frans would return soon. The four of us might be able to handle her people.

I turned--and she stood there, looking at me!

* * *

That such as she existed among the usually ugly Koreans and Manchurians was impossible! I gasped a little in unbelief. Her clothing was like nothing on this earth.

Soft green leather was clasped low on her hips with a narrow gold band, set with jewels. It was a skirt, I suppose, but it hung with a diagonal hem-line running from hip to knee, it was beaded in an intricate pattern, not Oriental, somehow reminding me of American Indian bead work.

On her feet leather sandals, laced like the ancient Greek sandal nearly to the knee. In her hand a bow of horn, small and powerful. Around her shoulders a short leather cape similarly beaded and fringed. Around her brows a jeweled circlet set like a diadem, and it crowned a young queen, proud and knowing very well her beauty and its power.

Her features were neither Caucasian nor Oriental, certainly not the heavy-boned native stock. I couldn't pin them down to any race. Her nose was straight, the nostrils neither wide nor narrow, but strong and firm. Her eyes were too wide-set and heavy-lidded to be Aryan, but they were not tilted; they were level. Her hair was not black, but chestnut and curled or naturally very wavy. Her glance was tawny and aflame with anger and excitement, furious upon the prostrate Barto. They were very light-colored eyes, and they caught the sun in a blaze that made them seem yellow.

Striking, she was a figure not of any ordinary kind. Her every aspect told that she came of a culture unknown to me. She was evidently not ignorant, but of a different way of life.

Looking into her eyes, appraising her interest in myself that had brought her back, drinking in the immense appeal of her strangeness and her evident gentility--the evidences of a past of cultivated living as strange as her attire--I forgot the unconscious man at my feet.

Her skin was whiter than my own! Her arms were bruised purple where Barto had clutched her. Then she spoke, in halting Korean:

"Is he dead?"
"No," I answered.
"Then he will live to meet a far worse fate! I know why you are here, stranger, and I warn you! You are on a fool's errand! The Golden Goddess is death for such as you!"
I was bewildered.
"What Golden Goddess?"
"The Golden Goddess whose symbol led him here. He does not know what it is. He stole it by murdering one of our own messengers for it. He did not know at all; he only heard the tales that some relate about her. They are false tales."
"Did he tell you how he got it?"
"He was boasting to me, trying to get me to tell what I knew about her dwelling-place. I would not, that is why he hurt me."
"Why did you come back, whatever-your-name?"
"My name is Nokomee, and I came back to tell you something you need to know. Leave these others, and you will live! Stay with them, you will be slain with them. We do not allow such as he to come among us, golden girl or no."
"I cannot leave my comrades because of danger. What kind of man do you think me?"
"I do not care! I can only tell you. This is a secret place, where we remain hidden from the men of earth. I know what happens to those who stray upon our secrets! Go, and think no more to pry into treasure tales of this mountain land. It is not for such as you. Go, before it is too late. I cannot hold back the death from you."

I laughed. I thought of the Koreans who had deserted, of their talk about the fires at night, of demons and haunted mountains ahead.

"We came a long way on the track of Barto's tale of treasure from which he brought the golden girl. It will take more than words to frighten us away."
"Do not laugh! I try to save you from something even worse than death that can come to you. I want to return to you the favor that you did me. If you do not listen to me, how can I help you?" Her voice took on a plaintive, charming note; she smiled a half-smile of complete witchery.

A high, keening cry came suddenly from the slopes above us, and she raised on her toes as if to spring away.
"They come, my friends! I must leave you. I can only tell you to stay close by your fire at night. I cannot say what fate will strike you. I cannot help you. Go back, friend who would live, go back!"

She turned and sprang lightly up the slope toward the sound of the cry, half human, half beast-like, that she had called "her friends." It had sounded to me like the cry of a wolf, or a cat-man, anything but human. But people can make odd sounds, and imitate beasts. Still it had been an eerie sound that gave me a foreboding, added to her warning words. What kind of people were these, who wore leather and jewels and used bows that might have come off an Assyrian wall painting?

Came a tumult above, the high clear blast of some horn, a dozen eerie cries hardly human--a rush and a pounding in the earth as though a party had ridden off on heavy, full-size horses. No Manchurian pony ever made such a sound on soft ground!

Polter and Noldi came back about an hour later. I had dragged the big Barto into a tent and made him comfortable. He was snoring peacefully. Polter squatted down beside me, folding his long form like a jackknife.
"That thing was a ship, Keele," he said. There was a husky excitement, repressed but still obvious about him. I grunted.

"It landed among some big timber on the south end of the mountain. We got pretty close, enough to see the sides of the thing. Men busy around it, we couldn't get too close, afraid they'd see us."
I started, a pulse of unreasoning fear, of terrific interest, ran through me. I asked in a voice I couldn't keep calm, "What kind of men, Hank? I saw reports of such ships in the papers, no one got close enough to see that much. Newspapers called them illusions!"
"They're not our kind of men; they are something very different. I don't know just how to tell you, besides I couldn't be sure. But they seem to be a people---" He stopped. "I'd rather you'd see it yourself. You wouldn't believe me."

Noldi came out of the tent where Barto was still snoring. He came over and squatted across the fire, eyeing me strangely.
"What happened to the big jerk, Carl?" he asked, a little tremor of anger in his voice.
"I've got to tell you fellows we're in trouble," I began. I did not believe that the girl's people would ignore Jake's attack upon her.

Hank looked at the slender man from New York's East Side. "What's the matter with Barto?"
"S'got a bruise on his jaw the size of a goose-egg. Like a mule kicked him. Scratched up quite a bit. I just wondered. He's unconscious, too; I couldn't wake him up."
"We may be in for it," I went on. "When I got back to camp, Hank had a girl. He'd thrown her down, was struggling with her. I had to put him asleep to stop it. Didn't want trouble with her people."

Noldi glanced at the torn place in the soft sod where the scuffle had taken place. I had unconsciously nodded toward it. He got up, walked over, picked something out of the grass.
"Some girl, wearing this kind of stuff!"

He handed the glittering bauble to Polter. It was a necklace of emeralds, with a pendant of gold in which was set a big blue stone that I couldn't recognize, maybe a diamond, maybe something else. It looked almighty valuable,
each stone was as big as a man's thumbnail. It had snapped, lain there unnoticed by either of us.

Noldi looked at me a little venomously.

"Looks as if you were a little premature, letting her go. We should have found out where she gets this kind of sparkle first!"

"Seemed the safest thing to do. We are only four, how could we handle her friends?"

"Bah, they wouldn't have known where she was. We could have kept her till we were good and ready to let her go."

I stood up, took out my pipe and filled it.

"What about this ship you saw, and the people around it. That's important, not this girl and her jewelry."

"We couldn't see much except that it was a ship and that it landed in the trees where it couldn't be seen from the sky. It's pretty big, and there are men moving around it. That's all."

"That's plenty! If we run into them, there is no knowing what they'll do. That ship was never built on this planet."

Noldi didn't smile or laugh. He just looked at me. Serious, puzzled, and a little scared.

"You think it's a space ship, eh, Keele?"

I nodded.

"What else could it be?"

"What's it doin' out here in no man's land?" Polter asked. "You'd think strangers like that would land near a city, try to make some kind of official contact."

"If you were landing on a strange world, would you land near a city?" I asked.

Polter laughed.

"I guess you hit it. They don't know whether they'd be welcome or not. Scared, eh?"

"Just careful, I'd say. We don't know anything about them. But ships like that have been reported off and on for hundreds of years. Don't be surprised if you never see a trace of it again, and if no one else but me ever believes you when you mention it. I don't think we'll have to worry about the flying saucer."

"What the hell do they want, then?" Noldi didn't know what I meant, exactly.

"Nobody knows, Frans. Nobody ever saw them as close as you just did today."

* * *

Watching Jake Barto next morning, I saw that the little image in his hand pointed right across the center of that cloud-topping mountain. That meant we had to go around it, for we were not equipped for such climbing, nor would there have been any sense in it. Jake figured on circling to the left, and I was glad, for I for one wanted no parts of that disk ship that Polter and Noldi had seen in the other direction. Jake ignored me. He was unpredictable!

It was a long mountain, and we traveled along one side, toward the north, figuring on crossing to the east wherever a pass appeared. After a time a faint trail showed, and we followed it. It drew us higher, until we were moving perilously along a ledge of rock, with precipitous walls above and a sharp drop below. Higher and higher, above the tree-line now, the path went on, and there were signs of travel along it that worried me.

Polter was in the lead, and as we rounded a shoulder of rock, gave a cry of wonder. We hurried after, to see the trail breaking over a low crest of the mountain, and leading now downward. This shoulder of rock outthrust here marked the place where the trail we were following crossed the ridge of the mountain crest at its lowest point. But it also marked something else, which was what had caused Polter's cry.

A line of dust across the trail and along the near-bare rocks stirred and lifted and fell fitfully, as if the air was barred passage by some invisible wall, and there were the skeletons of birds that had flung themselves against the invisible wall and died, falling there. There was the skeleton of a goat half across the trail; and at one side, what had once been a man! All these dead--and the bones could be seen here and there along the far line of the dust--had gone so far and no farther. Polter had stopped fearfully ten feet from the clearly marked line--and I for one had no desire to add my skeleton to the others.

For a few minutes none of us had anything to say, then reason reasserted itself, and I pressed past Polter, knowing that the thing was an illusion born of coincidence and wind currents. Some baffling current of wind around the mountain formed here a wall of air cleavage, and the skeletons were merely coincidence. I pushed up to the strange line of lifting and falling dust, a little roll showing the magic of invisible force, and pressed on, as if to cross.

Behind me a cry gave me pause. I turned, looking for that cry's source, for it seemed to me the cry was the girl I had rescued from Barto. That saved me, for the little horse behind me pressed on across the strange line--and faltered, gave a horse-scream of terror, fell dead before me.

We stopped, terror of the unknown in our breasts, wondering--afraid to put the wonder into words. We did not look at each other or discuss the thing, we just accepted it, and stared dumbly at it like animals. I tossed a rock across the body of the now quite motionless pack animal, the rock reached the wall beneath which my animal lay
dead--slowed, curved sharply to the ground, did not roll, but lay as if imprisoned in invisible jelly!

There was a wall of invisible and deadly force there, and there was no known explanation for it!

I growled at Barto, all the suspicion and distrust that had been building up in me toward him in my voice.

"What does your golden girl tell you now, Jake?"

Jake surprised me. He walked ahead toward that frightening manifestation of the unknown, holding the little statuette before him like a sword, his ugly face rapt in some listening beyond me. As the little statue crossed the line, he sang out:

"Listen, Goddess of the Golden forces, listen and heed! We come from afar to pay our worship, to give to you our devotion, and we are met with this wall of death! Is that the way you greet your friends?"

Jake waved the statuette in a circular motion, then crossed the circle twice with the waving gold. He stood there, his crossed eyes darting here and there along the line of force, and after a long minute, after a time that seemed filled with a distant chuckling, like thunder too far off to be heard clearly--the lift and fall of the dust on the baffled wind stopped, the strict line of the wind's stoppage began to disappear, the line of demarcation was gone!

Jake reached out an arm, feeling cautiously for the invisible wall, and after a minute, his face lightened from its habitual gloom, he stepped across the line, and did not stagger and fall as had the horse. The wall was gone! Jake turned, said calmly:

"Come on, our friends have decided to let us in."

My mind in a whirl at the unexpected display of knowledge beyond me, of forces beyond the power of any rifle bullet to overcome, of strange hidden things here--I stepped across the line, keeping close to the tracks left by Jake's big feet. Polter and Noldi followed and the horses plodded after. We trudged on, but not the same. We were afraid, and we were conscious of a vast ignorance, of a fear that we did not belong here, that the only wise thing for us to do was to turn back and give up this Jake Barto and his cross eyes and his mumbo jumbo statue to his own doom.

At least that's the way I felt, but something stronger than curiosity drew me on. I wanted to know why I was so drawn when reason kept demanding I give up this quest. I wanted to know why a golden statue pointed always to one point on the horizon, and why that wall of force had obeyed Jake's injunction to go away. Or was I unable to think, really? Was I shocked out of my ability to reason and act on my reason's dictates?

Ahead, as the trail dipped low, a vast panorama of valley and hill and hollow, of eerie rocky spires, lay outspread. Here and there were cultivated fields, and figures at work on the fields. In the distance shone a stream. It flowed meandering into a wide lake. There were two villages, not clear in the haze. At the distant lake, some kind of larger structure lifted tall towers, shining with prismatic glitter, a city of strange appearance.

We had crossed a barrier, and we had entered a land of the living--but it was unclear before us. The drifting mountain mists, the sun-glitter and the haze of noon kept the scene from striking through to our brains with its true significance. For there was an eerie difference about the scene; it was not a land below us such as any of us had ever seen. I felt that and yet I could not think clearly about it. We moved along like zombies, not thinking--just accepting the unusual and the unknown as casually as if we were travelers who could not be astounded. But inside, my mind was busily turning the significance and the meaning of this wall of force. I had heard of such walls before--upon Shasta in California, and in Tibet, and in ancient times in Ireland, and there were other instances of a similar wall in the past, and in the present in other places. But what it could really mean, that was what I did not know.

After crossing that invisible barrier, things began to happen in a sequence, of a strangeness and with a rapidity such that I was unable to analyze or to rationalize. From there on I was like a man on a tightrope, hounded by invisible tormentors trying to shake me off. I had not time to wonder whether it was true that spirits existed. What I did think was that some of these Korean primitives had a Devil Doctor who surpassed all others in trickiness, and was amusing himself at our expense. But I did not think it, I clung to the idea to save my reason from tottering over the brink.

The first thing after the wall that could not exist but did--after we had passed on over the ridge and half way down the mountain side--was a gully along the mountain side, up which Barto turned. I assumed he was still following the pointing of the magnetic statuette, but I was vaguely conscious that none of us were really conscious--were under a kind of spell in which our actions and our thoughts were predetermined--inevitable! I knew it, but I could not shake it off, nor put my finger on any reason why I should shake it off and call a halt to the strange, wordless, silent following of Jake and his eerie talisman.

The faint trail led along the bottom of the gully, and after twenty minutes of downward progress, led into a dark overhang of rock, the sky hardly visible where the rocks almost met overhead. Down the semi-cavern we went; still silent, zombie-like; and I felt ever more strongly the compulsion that made us so move and so unable to do otherwise.

Jake was striding rapidly now, his dark ugly face aflame with weird eagerness, my own heart pounding with alarm at the strangeness and the irrationality of the whole proceeding. He held the statuette out stiffly, it seemed
fairly to leap in his hands, as if tugging with an ecstatic longing to reach the dark place ahead. The rocks closed
completely overhead; the dimness changed to stygian darkness. I got out my flashlight, sent the beam ahead. But
Jake was pressing on through the darkness, directly in the center of the trail.

Quite suddenly the cavern turned, opened ahead, wider and wider--and before us lay a room of jeweled
splendor, the temple of some forgotten--or was it forgotten?--cult of worship.

The golden statue in the center of the big round chamber drew our eyes from the splendor of the peculiarly
decorated walls, from the strange crystal pillar on the tall dais at the far wall, from the weird assemblages of crystals
and metals that had an eerie resemblance to machines--to a science entirely unknown to modern men. All these
details of that chamber I remember now, looking back, but then--my attention and that of the others was entirely
drawn to the beauty of the tall, golden woman who stood in frozen metallic wonder at the center of the forgotten
crypt.

Jake, his ugly face in a transport, had fallen to his knees, was crawling forward to the statue abjectly, mouthing
phrases of worship and self-abnegation. Close on his heels came Polter and Noldi, eyes rapt, movements
mechanical. I stopped, some last remnant of sense remaining in my head, and by a strong effort of will held my
limbs motionless.

As Jake reached the statue, the little golden replica of the life-sized woman of gold seemed to leap out of his
reaching hands, and clung against the metallic waist of the golden woman as a lodestone to the mother lode.

Even as Barto's hands touched the statue, he slumped, lay there outstretched, his fingertips touching the metal
hem of the golden skirt; and whether he was unconscious from unsupportable ecstasy or for what mad reason, I did
not know, but I did not want to know.

Undeterred by Jake's condition, the two men following in his steps also reached out hands to touch the golden
metal--and fell flat on their faces beside Jake Barto, unconscious, or dead!

I stood, numb and with a terrific compulsion running through my nerves, which I resisted with all my will. I
drew my eyes from the strangely pleasant magnetic lure of the metal woman with an effort and examined that
strange chamber.

The walls were covered with a crystalline glittering substance, like molten glass sprayed on and allowed to
harden. Behind this glasseous protective surface, paintings and carvings spread a fantasy of strange form and color,
but the light was too dim to make much of it, except that it was alien to my experience, and exceedingly well done,
speaking of a culture second to none.

Beyond the central form of the strange golden statue, was the dais which I had noticed at once, and now my
eyes picked out the fact that on it was also a glasseous protective sheath about a form--another statue, I thought.

Thoughtfully I prowled along the rim of the room, examining the wall frescoes foot by foot, seeing on them a
strange depiction of semi-human forms, of crab-men and crab-women, of snake-men and snake-women, of men
half-goat and half-man, of creatures hardly human with great jaws that looked like rock-cutters, with hands like
moles on short powerful arms, fish people with finned legs and arms, their hands engaged in catching great fish and
placing them in nets, a nightmare of weird half-human shapes that gradually brought to me a message that I could
not accept.

If that rock painting was telling a true story and not some allegorical fantasy--these people who had built this
place had been a race who knew the secrets of life so intimately they could manipulate the unborn child into shapes
intended to give it powers and physical attributes fitting it for amphibious life, for the underground boring life of a
mole, for the tending of flocks in the goat-legged men--the whole gamut of these monstrous diversions from the
normal human seemed to me designed--purposely--to build a race which, like ants, has a shape fitted to its trade.

I threw off the illusion of a deformed past race the wall art gave me, and passed on to examine the crystalline
pillar on the dais. I stood a long time, before the dais, drinking in the beauty of the form locked within the prisoning
glass.

No human, no earth woman--she was different from anything I had ever even imagined.

Female, vaguely human in form she was, with an unearthly beauty; but four-armed, with a forehead that went
up and up and ended in a single tall horn, as on the fabled unicorn.

Her eyes were closed, if she had eyes beneath the heavy purple-veined lids, so like the petals of some night-
flower, pungent with perfume.

Naked the figure was, except for a belt of what looked iron chain around the waist, black and corroded with
time, holding her with a great bolt and link to the side of that crystalline prison.

Her hair, black as night, was pressed tight to the skull by the pressure of the crystal, which must have been
poured about her in a molten or liquid state.

As I stood there agaze at the strangeness and wonder of her, a voice at my shoulder made me whirl in surprise.
A soft, silky familiar voice:
"Do you find the dead Goddess so fascinating, stranger from the world of men?"

It was the girl of the forest, no longer in hunting garb, but dressed in Turkish trousers, vest and slippers with upturned toes. Jewels glittered about her waist and neck and arms, her wrists jangled with heavy bangles, in her ears two great pendants swayed—her eyelids were darkened and her lips reddened. She was a ravishing houri of the harem, and I gasped a little at the change.

"Have you put on such clothes for my benefit?" I asked, for I really thought perhaps she had.

She frowned and stamped her foot in sudden anger.

"I come here to save you from what has happened to your friends, and you insult me. Don't you want to live? Do you want to become what they are going to become?" She pointed to the bodies of Jake and Noldi and Polter.

I turned where she pointed, to see a thing that very nearly made me scream out in revulsion.

I shuddered, shrank back; for several creatures were bending over the three, lifting them, bearing them away. It was the strange, revolting difference from men in them that caused my fear. Once they may have been men, their far-off ancestors, perhaps—or in some other more recent way their bodies had been transformed, made over into creatures not human, not beast, not ghoul. What they were was not thinkable or acceptable by me. I turned my face away, shuddering.

They were men such as the wall-paintings pictured, something that had been made from the main stock of mankind, changed unthinkingly into a creature who bore his tools of his trade in his own bone and flesh. Mole-men, men with short heavy arms and wide-clawed hands, made for digging through hard earth. They bore my friends away on their hairy-naked shoulders, and I stood too shocked to say a word. Three mole-men, accompanied by three tall, pale-white figures, figures inexpressibly alien—even through the heavy white robes—that moved with an odd hopping step that no human limb could manage, turned their paper-white, long, expressionless faces toward me for an instant, then were gone, on the trail of the mole-man. Beneath those robes must have been a body as attenuated as a skeleton, as different as an insect's from man's. Within those odd egg-shaped heads must have been a mind as alien to mine as an ant's mind.

"Why do your people take my companions?" I managed, when I had regained my composure.

"They are not your people; they are of the enemies of the Dead Goddess." The girl gestured to the figure in the crystal pillar. "My people have no time for them, but neither have we power over them. They go their way, and we go ours. Once, long ago, it was different, but time has made us a people divided."

"What will become of the three men?"

"They will become workmen of one kind or another. Everyone works, in their life-way. But it is not our way! They guard our land from such intruders; we let them. It is an ancient pact we have with them."

"Why did they not seize me, I am an intruder as much as the others?"

"Because I signed to them to let you stay. You did not see, whatever-your-name-is...."

"Call me Carlin Keele, Carl for short. What is your name, and what is your race, and why are you so different from people as I know them?"

"My name is Nokomee, as I told you before. You are still confused from the magic that led you here. I have saved you once, and now we are even; my debt to you is paid. You will never see your friends again, and if you do, you will be sorry that you saw them, for they will have become beasts of burden. Now go, before it is too late. This is not your kind of country."

Something in her eyes, something in the sharp peremptory tone she used, told me the truth.

"You don't really want me to go, Nokomee. I don't want to go. Many things make me want to stay--your beauty is not the least attraction. I could learn so much that my people do not know, that yours seem to know."

"I would not want my beauty to lead you to your death." Nokomee did not smile, she only looked at me, and I saw there a deep loneliness, a tender need for companionship and sympathy that had never been filled in her life. She looked at me, and her lower lip trembled a little, her eyes suddenly averted from mine.

"Nokomee, there is so much we would have to tell each other, you of your life, and I of the great country of which you have never heard. Would you not like to see the great cities of my country?"

She shook her head, turned on me with sudden fierce words:

"When you came and struck down that hideous cross-eyed man, my heart went out to you in gratitude. Go, while my heart remains soft, it is not so often that the heart of a Zerv is soft toward any outlander. Go, I cannot protect you from this place."

"I will stay," I said.

"Stubborn fool!" She stamped her foot prettily, imperiously, vexed at my refusal to go out of that weird place the way I had entered. "Stay then, but do not expect me to keep off the slaves of the Goddess. This place can be most evil to those who do not know what it is, nor why it is secret."

She turned, walked behind the great dais of the crystal sarcophagus, and I followed just in time to see her
disappear behind a hanging curtain of leather. I hastened after, my hand on my gun, for I had no wish to be left alone
where I had seen my three companions stricken down with no enemy in sight.

Behind the curtain a passage led, along the passage were several doors. She sped past these lightly, almost
running. I followed, she must have heard me, but she did not look back. The doors along the passage were curtained.
Through the gaps of the curtain I could see they were empty of life. The curtains were rotted as if long unused, dirty
and blotched with mould staining the leather.

Though she had spoken to me in Korean, and I had answered in the same tongue, I knew she was no native, for
she spoke it differently, perhaps no better than myself. I was no judge; what she used may have been a dialect
different from that I had heard previously.

I followed as she emerged from the long tunnel into the blaze of sunlight. She stood for a moment letting her
eyes adjust to the glare. I stumbled to her side, half-blinded, stood looking down at the scene which seemed to
engross her.

Gradually it came clear, like a television screen coming into perfect tune--the immense inner valley that the
mountain of cloud-like snow enclosed. In the center of the encircled valley a lake shimmered blue as the sky, and
about that lake was a city.

My eyes refused, at first, to accept what they were seeing. My mind rebelled, but after a minute of staring and
making sure--I gasped.

Alien to this earth it was, but beautiful! Towers, and round-based dwellings braced together in one single unit
of structural strength, a designed whole such as our architects dream of and never achieve. Walled with white
marble, the city was a fortress, but a lovely fortress. Yet there was a coldness, an angularity, that told me these
Zervs, as Nokomee had called her race, lacked true sympathy for life forms, lacked emotion as we know it in art.
Yet it was beautiful, if repulsive because so alien, so pure in design, so lacking in the sympathetic understanding of
man's nature. This was a city no earthman could ever call home. It lacked something. There were no dogs, no
strolling women or running children, it lay silent and waiting--for what?

Nokomee waved a hand.

"Titanis, our first earth colony. But it is no longer ours. The Schrees have taken it from us. That is why it is
silent."

I did not understand. There were plodding lines of people, disciplined, carrying burdens, no bigger than ants at
this distance. There was an ominous horror about the quiet beauty of the place. It was somehow like a beautiful
woman lying just slain. Yet I could see no wounds of war, no reason for the feeling that I had, like the sudden
shrinking one might have at sight of the stump of a man's arm just amputated.

I looked into Nokomee's face, and there were tears in her eyes. My heart sank. I felt a vast sympathy for her
sorrow, though I could not understand.

"We planned so much with our new freedom here in your wilderness. Then came the raiders, to freeze our
Queen in her sleep, to drive us into your forests, to make of us that remained mindless slaves and maimed horrors. I
cannot bear it, stranger. I cannot...."

She turned and wept, her head on my chest. I patted her head, feeling entirely incompetent to console her for
what injuries I could not imagine.

"What raiders, Nokomee? Tell me. Perhaps there is a way I can help. Who knows?"

"We are so few now, who were so many and so strong--and every day fewer. There is no hope. Do not try to
wake it in me. It would be madness."

"Tell me. Perhaps that alone would help you."

"How can I tell you the long history of my home world, the immortal wisdom of our Queen, the strange science
her immortal family gave her, of how we fought to protect her from our own tyrants and at last fled into space with
her? How can I tell you of what she is? How could you understand the ages of struggle on our own world that
reduced her kind to but a dozen, and left our kind, the mortals, at the mercy of the Schrees? You ask, but it is
impossible for you to believe things you do not know about."

"Perhaps if I told you of my people and their life, you would understand that I could understand what you think
is impossible for me. I am not ignorant as the others of earth people you have met. And my nation is numerous, the
greatest of this earth."

"Our ways are too strange to you. But I will try. You need not try to tell me of your people; we examined your
earth carefully before we chose this valley for our retreat. Here we built and raised the force wall to keep out
inquiring interlopers like yourself who might bring the powers of your nation in ignorant war against us. But from
our home world the Schrees were sent on our trail, and they found us. They were too many. Our only hope was in
safe hiding, and they found us out. We did not know they could find us, or we would never have built. We thought
pursuit had long been abandoned, but they are driven by single-minded hate, not by logic. It has been a lifetime of
wandering they have followed us. It has been all my lifetime, making this home here, thinking ourselves safe—and then they came and destroyed all our work."

As she talked, she had quieted. We had resumed walking along the ledge of the mountainside. Suddenly from ahead a man leaped out, his strange weapon trained on my breast. I stood, not daring to move, while Nokomee shouted a string of shrill alien syllables at him. He thrust the weapon back in his belt, and fell in behind us as we passed. I could not help staring at him, and at the thing he had pointed at me.

It was a tapering tube about a foot long, triggered on the thumb side with a projecting stud, with a hand-grip shaped with finger grooves. I knew it was a weapon with a long history of development behind it by the simplicity of the lines, the entire efficiency of its appearance. The small end was a half-inch, perhaps, in bore, the big end perhaps three inches or less. He handled it as though it weighed but a trifle. I did not ask what it was.

The man himself was no taller than Nokomee, though much more solidly built, with thick, slightly bowed legs and heavy black brows on bulging bone structure, his eyes deep-set beneath. His ears, like Nokomee's, were high and too small to be natural. His teeth were larger than normal on earth, and the incisors smaller and more pointed, the canines heavier and longer. There was a point to his chin, heavy-angled and thick-boned as it was, it was not an earthman's chin. His neck was long, more supple and active, he kept moving his head in an unnatural watchfulness like a wild animal's. I wondered what other differences, small in themselves, but adding up to complete strangeness of aspect, I would find in time.

"That is Holaf," murmured Nokomee in Korean to me. "He is a chief among us now, since the fall of our strength. He is good, but young and always too impetuous. He needs long experience, and it looks as if he would get it, now."

"You have more than one leader?" I asked.

"We have three chiefs left to us, who rule their families--their clans. We have but one real leader. He is an old wise man left us by good fortune. He is our lone scientist. The chiefs of the clans listen to the leader, but they argue. Things look bad for us all."

"You are too few to reconquer the city?"

"Too few, yes. And time plays against us, for with the coming of the ships from our home planet--that I should call that tyrant's nest home!--there will be even more of the Schrees, then. We are a lost people now. There is no hope, eventually we will be hunted down as you earthmen will be hunted down, like animals. Made into slaves--and worse than slaves. You will learn what I mean when next you see your three friends."

It was too much for me. I asked:

"Why don't you leave this place, and go on to another?"

"On your little world? It is not big enough to hide ourselves from them. And we have lost our ships, we cannot get others."

"You think that they mean to conquer our whole planet?"

"In time they will do so. Not yet, but when they are many, they will spread, slaughter all who fight them, and enslave all who do not. They are very terrible creatures, not men at all, you know."

"Not like you and I?"

"Not at all. You will see, soon. Hurry, it is late, and we have council to attend."

There was a deep passion in her words, quick and sharp and strange on her lips as they were, a passion of anger and hopeless effort that somehow roused me into desire to help her and these strange people of hers. Too, if what she said was true, these raiders who had despoiled her people would in time engulf the world with a war of conquest, even if they were less able to defeat us than she estimated. I resolved to make the most of this opportunity to learn the worst of this hidden threat to men everywhere. I felt a kinship with Nokomee and her friend, silent and alert beside me, and I realized it could well be that I had in my hands the future of mankind, and that it behooved me not to let it fall through carelessness.

Lapsed now into silence, we reached the end of the trail along the ledge. We came out upon a broad shelf, with several cave mouths opening along its cliff-side. Gathered here in the twilight were some two-score men and women, bearing weapons; some the short powerful bow I had seen in Nokomee's hands; others weapons like Holaf's tapered tube; still others bearing small, round metal shields embossed with weird designs that meant nothing to me. Squatted here, without fire, they fell silent at our approach, eyeing me with curiosity and the beginnings of anger at my intrusion. Nokomee began to talk swiftly in that rattling, high-pitched tongue of theirs. I squatted down on my heels, took out my pipe, lit it. At the flare of my match Holaf struck it from my hand. I realized it had been a blunder, even a spark might attract attention to their presence on the hillside. Still, the incident told me Nokomee had not been lying to me.

Holaf pointed at the city far below, now glowing here and there with lights, and at the match on the ground. Then he motioned to a cave mouth, and I followed him. Inside there was a fire burning, furs strewn about the floor,
metal urns and even mirrors hung on the rough stone walls. I sat on a rude wooden bench of newly-hewed wood, lit my pipe again without interference. But I was sorry to miss that conference outside in the open air. I wanted to hear, even if I could not understand. Holaf still remained by my side, and his hand did not leave the oddly-carved butt of the tapered tube-gun.

I sat there, feeling very much alone, with Holaf watching me somberly, the only light a flickering amber from the fire. I started to my feet as a musically pitched, almost singing voice questioned Holaf in their tongue. I looked about for the source, then saw her moving toward me in the half-light, and I stepped back in a kind of awe and embarrassment, for this was new.

She was as tall as myself, shaped with slender Amazonian strength, but curved and soft and subtly aware of her feminine allure, strongly interested and pleased at the awe and pleasure in my face. Her, rounded, fully adult body was sketched over with a web of silklily gleaming black net, light and unsubstantial as a dream, clinging and wholly revealing. Her eyes were dark-lidded and wide-set, her brow high and proud, and about her neck hung a web of emeralds set in a golden mesh of yielding links.

She came on, moving on shoes like Japanese water shoes, completely mystifying as to how she balanced on the stilt-like soles. Stepping thus in little balancing steps like a dancer, she moved very close, peering into my eyes, so that I blushed deeply at the nearness and the nudity of her, and she laughed, amusedly, as at a child. Her long, gemmed hand reached out and touched me, and she talked to Holaf excitedly, her face all smiles and interest; I was a wholly fascinating new toy he had brought her, it seemed. Then she sank to the bench, crossing her lovely knees over her hands, clasped together as if to make sure they behaved. To me she was wholly cultured and I some strange boor who had never been in a drawing room. I felt the impact of that culture in her interested eyes and in the sleek, smart bearing of her utterly relaxed body. She stretched a hand to gesture me to be seated, and I tried Korean on her.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, lady. If I but knew who you were, and how to speak properly, there is much we could find of interest to discuss."

"I am sure of it, stranger. First you must tell me of yourself, and then later we will talk of what is familiar to me. I cannot put off the curiosity which burns me. Please tell me all about your people and yourself!" Her voice was hard to follow, she handled the clumsy Korean with a bird-like quickness and an utter disregard for the nature of the language. Her eyes burned into my own, and I sat embarrassed beside her, tongue-tied, while Holaf smiled quietly and kept his hand on his weapon.

So I talked about New York, about my home town in Indiana, about my mine in South America, about anything and everything, and she listened, rapt eyes encouraging me, hanging on every stumbling, mispronounced, difficult word. I would have given an arm to have been able to talk expertly in her own tongue.

Thus engaged, and engrossed by her, I glanced up absently to note Nokomee's eyes blazing into my own in fury, and spaced about the room in a listening circle, a score of others. I stopped abruptly, and Nokomee lashed out at the woman beside me with a string of alien expletives that made her face flame with an anger as great as Nokomee's own. I wondered vaguely what I had done....

Their strange, grim faces, all watching me, seeming to peer inside me, trying to gauge me as an enemy or a friend. I stood up, for the exciting near-nude body of the woman who had caused Nokomee's outburst was too close, too intimately relaxed.

Abruptly Nokomee took me by the hand, led me out and along the ledge on the cliff. Into another cavern entrance she led me, to a smaller chamber, where another fire burned, and another bench invited to its warmth. She half pushed me to a seat, and busied herself in the next adjoining chamber, rattling dishware, and now and again giving a sharp exclamation as of extreme disgust.

I gathered I had been guilty of falling for the Zerv equivalent of a vamp. How wrong I was in this deduction I was to learn. It was not the woman's beauty that Nokomee feared, but something vastly more dangerous. I was very ignorant then. The Zervs were an ancient people and their ways were strange entirely. For the net-clad beauty had been a "Zoorph." I asked Nokomee, as she repeated the word again.

"What is a Zoorph, that makes you so angry? I thought she was very charming. I saw no harm in talking to her!"

Nokomee thrust her head out of the curtained doorway, from which the smell of food told me I had not eaten since morning.

"A Zoorph dear child of earth, is a creature not good for man or beast! Only a Zerv would be fool enough to keep so dangerous an animal about! If I told you, you would not believe it."

"Tell me anyway, Nokomee."

The girl came, bearing food on a tray. She squatted at my feet, putting the tray on the bench, and holding a large graceful urn of some liquid to replenish my cup. Very prettily she did this, yet I gathered that it was something which would have overwhelmed me with the honor if I had understood. I did appreciate her service, and I tried to
say so, but she silenced me.

"Never mind, one day you will understand how proud we are, that in our own world and in our own society you would be less than a worm. Yet I serve you, who am more above you than a princess would be in your world. Thus does the world change about one, and one adjusts. But do not think of it. It must be, or some terrible thing like the Zoorph would seize upon you here among us."

I laughed a little, for I was sure she was telling a lie, to warn me against the "vamp" in the only words she could think of in the alien tongue.

Her face flushed deep red at my laughter, and she half rose as if to leave, but restrained her anger.

"A Zoorph is worse than a disease, it has enervated my people until they have lost everything, and still they are among us. They are children raised by a secret cult on my own world, trained into strange practices. It is somewhat like a witch or sorcerer would be to you, but much, much different. You could not understand unless you were raised among us. When men are tired of life, they go to a Zoorph. It is not nice to speak of, what they are and what they do. To us, it is like death, only worse. Yet we have them, as ants have pets, as dogs have lice, as your people have disease. It is a custom. It is a kind of escape from life and life's dullness--but it is escape into madness, for the Zoorph has an art that is utter degradation, and few realize how bad they are for us. You must never go near her again!"

Days passed into weeks, and every day I learned a few words of the Zerv language, every day I picked up a little more insight into their utterly different ways and customs and standards--their scale of values. It was a process replete with surprises, with revelations, with new understanding of nature itself as seen through the alien eyes.

I remained as a kind of semi-prisoner, tolerated because of Nokomee's position and her affection for me. Nokomee, I learned, was "of the blood," though there were few surviving of her family to carry on the power and prestige she would have inherited. Yet, she was "of the blood" and entitled to all the respect and obedience the Zervs gave even to their old ruler.

He was an attenuated skeleton of a man, with weary eyes and trembling hands, and I grew more and more sure that the inactivity against their usurpers visible in the valley beneath was due more to his age and timorous nature than to any inability to turn the tables. They seemed to hold the "Schrees" in contempt, yet never took any action against them, so that I wondered if the contempt were justified or was an inherited, sublimated hatred.

The supplies, rifles and ammunition which had been left on our horses when we entered the cavern of the golden image, had been brought to Nokomee's cavern and locked in a small chamber before my eyes. It was all there. As the time dragged on, I chafed at the inactivity, fought against the barriers of language and alien custom that separated me from these people, struggled to overcome their indifference and their, to me, impossible waiting for what I did not understand.

Finally I could wait no longer. In the night, I burst the lock of the closet with a bar, took out a rifle and .45 and two belts of cartridges. I slid over the lip of the ledge that hid us from the city's eyes. I was going to see for myself what we were hiding from, what we were waiting for. Free to explore that weird city of plodding lives, of strange unexplained sounds, of ominously hidden activity!

Scrambling, sliding, worrying in the dimness, I finally reached the less precipitous slopes of the base of the cliff. As I stopped to get a bearing on the direction of the city, above me came a slithering, a soft feminine exclamation, and down upon me came a perfumed weight, knocking me sprawling in the grass.

My eyes quickly adjusted, I crawled to the dim shape struggling to her feet. Her face was not Nokomee's, as I had at first thought. Those enormous shadowed eyes, that thin lovely nose, the flower-fragile lips, the mysterious allure--were the woman whom Nokomee had described as a "Zoorph" and whom she had both feared and despised. I spoke sharply in the tongue of the Zervs.

"Why do you follow me, Zoorph?"

"Because I am weary of being cooped up with those who do not trust me, just as you. I want to find a new, exciting thing; just as do you. Even if it is death or worse, I want it. I am alive, as are you."

I put down the dislike and distrust the girl Nokomee had aroused in me against her. Perhaps she had been merely jealous of her.

"Don't you know what could happen in the city?" To me it was curious that she should want to go where the others feared to go.

"I know no better than you what awaits there, and I do not believe what they have told me of the Schrees. They
are not wholly human, but neither are they evil wholly, as the Zervs suppose."

"Why do the Zervs wait, instead of trying to do something for themselves? They speak of the threat of these raiders, yet they do not try to help me bring others of my people here to stop the threat they speak of so fearfully. I do not understand."

"The old ruler thinks the ships will come and drive them off from his city. But he is wrong, they will never come. It is like waiting for the moon to fall. The raiders' ships will return, and they will be stronger than ever. But not a ship of the Zervs remains in neighboring space to succor us. Yet he hopes, and his followers wait. It is foolish, and he cannot trust you or men like you to get help for him. He is too old to meet new conditions and to understand."

Few of the Zervs had shown the rapt interest in me and my people that this Zoorph had made so plain. I thought backward on how carefully she and I had been kept apart since our first meeting, and I realized there was more to it than Nokomee's words of anger.

"What is a Zoorph, and what is your name? Why did Nokomee warn me against all Zoorphs?"

"A Zoorph is a member of a cult; a student of mysteries not understood by the many. The others have a superstition about us, that we destroy souls and make others slaves to our will. It is stupid, but it is like all superstitions--hard to disprove because so vague in nature." She flickered impossible eyelashes at me languishly, in perfect coquetry. "You don't think me dangerous to your soul, do you?"

I didn't. I thought her a very charming and talented woman, whom I wanted to know much better. I said so, and she laughed.

"You are wiser than I thought, to see through their lies. They are good people, but like all people everywhere, they have their little insanities, their beliefs and their intolerances."

Yet within me there was a little warning shudder borne of the strange power of her eyes on my own, of the chill of the night, of many little past-observed strangenesses in her ways, in the fear the Zervs bore for her ... I reserved something of caution. She saw this in my eyes and smiled sadly, and that sad and understanding smile was perfectly calculated to dispel my last doubt of her. I slid closer across the grass, to lie beside her.

"What could I gain by a knowledge of what lies in the city, Zoorph?"

"My name is Carna, stranger. In that city you can learn whether there is danger for your people in what the Schrees plan on earth. We could not tell that, for we do not know enough about your own race's abilities. You could steal a vehicle to take you to your own rich cities. And as for me, I could go with you, to practice my arts in your cities and become rich and famous."

"What are your arts, Carna?"

"Nothing you would call spectacular, perhaps. I can read thought, I can foretell the future, and I can sometimes make things happen fortunately, if I try very hard. Such things, very unsubstantial arts, not like your gun which kills. Subtle things, like making men fall in love with me, perhaps."

She laughed into my eyes and I got abruptly to my feet. She was telling the truth in the last sentence, and I did not blame Nokomee for fearing her power.

"Let us see, then, Carna, what the night can give us. I cannot wait forever for chance to bring me freedom. Come," I bent and helped her to her feet, very pleasant and clinging her grasp on my arm, very soft and utterly smooth the flesh of her arm in my hand, very graceful and lovely her swift movement to rise. My heart was beating wildly, she was a kind I understood, but could not resist any the better for knowing. Or was I unkind, and she but starved for kindness and human sympathy, so long among a people who disliked and feared her?

We walked along in the darkness, the distant moving lights of that city closer each step, and a dread in my breast at what I would find there, a dread that grew. Beside me Carna was silent, her face lovely and glowing in the night, her step graceful as a deer's.

We circled the high wall of white marble keeping some twenty feet away, where the grass gave knee-high cover we could drop into instantly. We came around to the far side from the cliff, and stopped where a paved highway ran smooth, like pebbled glass, straight across the valley. I glanced at Carna, she gestured toward the open gate in the wall, and smiled a daring word.

"In...?"

"In!" I answered, and like two kids, hand in hand, we stole through the shadowed gateway, sliding quickly out of the light, standing with our backs to the wall, looking up the long, dim-lit way along which a myriad dark doorways told of life. But it was seemingly deserted. Carna whispered softly:

"When it was ours, the night was gay with life and love, now--it is death!"

"Death or taxes, we're going to take a look."

We stole along the shadowed side of the street, the moon was up, shedding much too bright a light now for comfort. Perhaps a hundred yards along that strange street we went, I letting the Zoorph lead the way, for I had an idea she must know the city and have some plan, or she would not be here. If she meant to use me to escape into my
world, I was all for her.

Then, from ahead, came the sound of feet, many of them in unison. We darted into a doorway, crouched behind a balustrade. Nearer came the feet, and I peered between the interstices of the screening balustrade. The feet came on; slow, rhythmic, marching without zest or pause or break, perfection without snap. As the first marching figure came into sight in the moonlight, I shuddered to the core with something worse than fear.

For they were men who were no longer men! When Barto and Polter and Noldi had been carried off unconscious, Nokomee had told me:

"They are not my people. They go their way and we go ours. Time has made us a people divided. Time, and a cruel science."

These were the mole-men, the crab-men, the creatures built for specific purposes as tools are built. Each thing bore on his back a bale of goods, or a bar of metal, a burden sizeable enough for two ordinary men. They were strong, and they were silent and smooth-moving as machines. I realized they were machines--made out of flesh.

"Are these slaves, or what?" I asked Carna.

"These were once the slaves, or workmen of the race of Zervs. They now serve the Schrees, for they are mindless, in a way. They are not important. It is those who guard and guide them I wait to see. I have not yet seen a Schree, but only heard the Zervs describe them."

The nightmare procession went on for minutes, long minutes that were to me a nightmare. Yet I realized that if I had been raised to the idea of humankind made into machines, it would not be revolting--not after they had been hereditarily moulded for centuries into what they were. Yet what a crime it was, what they might have been if left to develop as nature intended, rather than as man cruelly mal-intended. They must have been once specially selected for strength as well as beauty, for about them was a sad and terrible grace, a remainder of noble chiseling of brow and nostril, distorted as by a fiend into the horror that it was--these had once been a noble race!

"Do you feel the terrible horror of this sight?" I asked Carna.

"Always I have felt the horror that was done to them in the past. It is still done to man. Look, there are the three who came with you, and fell into the hands of the priests. They are the thing that the Zervs really fear, yet they live with it, and have done so for centuries. They can despise the Schrees, but they are as bad themselves--look!"

I followed with my eye her pointing finger. Yes, that figure was hulking Barto, and I almost yelled "Jake, snap out of it!" before I remembered my own peril.

Then he came into the full light, and passed not twenty feet away. I leaned against the railing of stone, sick as a dog and retching. They had made him over, with some unknown aborted science of an evil world! Jake was clubfooted, lumbering, with his jaws grown into great jowls of bone, his arms elongated and ending in hooks. Two of the fingers, or the thumb and finger had been enlarged or grafted into a bone-like semblance of a crab's claw. What he was going to be when they got through, I didn't know, but neither did Jake. He didn't know anything! He clumped along, his crossed eyes unmoving, his back bent with a weight heavy for even his broad shoulders--a man no longer, but a mindless zombie. A cross-eyed zombie!

I cursed silently, tearing my hands against the stone as I resisted the impulse to fire and fire again upon those hopping, thin, white things that came after.

"Just what are those hopping things?"

"They are a separate race, who have lived with both Zervs and with Schrees. They are a part of our life. You have dogs, horses, machines. We have Jivros--that is, priests--and we have the workmen we call Shinros, and too, we have the Zoorphs!" She laughed a little as I stared at her. "Do not worry, the Zoorphs are not really so different. But the Schrees and Shinros are different."

"Damned, beastly, demoniac life it must be."

"To you, who expect things to be like your knowledge tells you it must be. To us, it is our way. For a Zerv, or for a Schree, it is a good way. The Jivros do the supervisory work, the Shinros do the hard work, and the Schrees take it easy and enjoy life. Why do you have machines?"

"Machines are not alive. That is different."

"Neither are the Shinros alive, they only seem so. They do not know what they have lost--it is much as if they had died."

"But come, I must show you where we can get a ship to take us away from this and into your world. I have a life to live, I want to live it! You--have a message to deliver to your people, or they will become the Shinros of the whole race of Schrees. I do not like to think what can happen to your world!"

I followed her again on our furtive way among the shadows. She was swift and sure, and made good time. She knew where she was going. It was a broad open space deep within the city. On three sides were wide closed doors like hangar doors. The fourth was a massive structure of rose granite, beetling above us, a monstrous shape in the dimness, throwing a shadow half across the paved space. We raced across the shadow toward the nearest doorway,
flattened against it, listening for life inside. Carna worked on the catch of the door, after a second slid the door aside slowly, carefully. Inside I could see a shimmering smoothness, round, higher than my head, a top-shaped object. I guessed that this was the ship she meant to steal from the Schrees. Suddenly the door she was sliding open scraped, and emitted a shrill, high-pitched sound. I did not know if it was an alarm activated by the opening door or just rust on the rails and wheels of the door mechanism. Carna cried:

"Hurry, get into the ship, we must take off at once. They will come; they must have heard that sound!"

I ducked into the darkness, circled the bulging shape, looking for an opening. Smooth, there seemed no way I could find.

"Here it is, help me open it," Carna panted behind me.

I leaped to her side. She was twisting at an inset handle around which faint lines indicated the door edge. I pulled her aside, took hold of the handle, twisted hard. It bent, then gave, and the door swung easily open in my hands. We tumbled in. Carna raced through the first chamber, and even as I got the door closed, the floor lifted under my feet easily, drifted out of the wide doorway, shot upward so quickly I was thrown to the floor. I lay there, the increasing acceleration pressing me hard against the cool metal. After a time I struggled up, made my way to the woman’s side.

Ahead was the moonlit range of mountains. Carna was setting a course straight along the ridge of them, heading southward.

"How far will this thing fly?" I asked.
"It will fly around your world many times, if I want it to."
"What kind of fuel does it use?" I asked incredulously.
"I don't know what that is. It uses a substance we call Ziss. It is a good fuel."
"It must be!"

I looked back along the ridge of the mountain's top toward the valley we had left. We were in a bubble on the top of the flat, circular ship; one could see in any direction. Back there a series of glowing round shapes shot upward, came after us in a long curve that would bring them ahead of us on our course. Carna changed her course to parallel the pursuit, and they changed again, to intercept her new direction. Again she changed, circling farther west.

But it was no use! Rapidly they overhauled us.
"Can't you get more speed out of it?" I shouted at her, for they were very close.
"We have been unlucky, my friend. This ship is not in good shape. There is something wrong with it. I cannot make it go as it should, or there is something I do not know...."

Swiftly they came up with us, over us, and beams of light shot from them down upon us. The ship was held now, rigid. One could feel the acceleration cease. Like a bird on a string we followed as they swung back toward the valley. Minutes later we were being lowered into the open space we had just left. I glanced the safety off my rifle, loosened the gun in my holster. I covered the door, shielding myself behind the round shape of a machine. But Carna put a hand on my weapon, shook her head.

"If you kill some of them, they will make of you a Shinro. If you submit meekly, it may be I can talk to someone and save you. I have ways. I understand them. They will be glad to get me, and I will tell them you know many things they need to know. I can save your life. Later we can try again, in another ship. Next time we will not be so unlucky."

It sounded like sense, and I looked into her deep eyes searchingly. She meant well. Perhaps she could do what she said. I did not know these aliens; she was almost one of them.

As the door opened in the side, I lay the rifle down, stood with crossed arms as the thin, hopping horrors came near.

These things had never been men. They had faces that were empty of features, just flat, shiny, gray eyes, two holes where they breathed, no mouth that I could see. There was a long neck around which the collar of their white robe was gathered in folds. Their hands were horny, like an insect's claws. They were not human, they were only four-limbed, and walked—or hopped—in an erect position. There the resemblance ceased.

They led us out, Carna rattling off a series of sounds I could hardly follow. Something about:

"We had to flee from the Zervs, we did not believe you would take us in, we had to steal a ship. I am Carna, a Zoorph of the first grade, and this man is a native of the United States, the greatest country of this earth. Do not harm him, he can help you if he wishes."

Her words must have had quite an effect, for the weird, insect-like men examined me with their eyes as we hurried along, across the hangar space, into the big building of rose granite. Within twenty minutes we were entering a tremendous room, and Carna nudged me.

"Their boss, Carl! Look impressed."

It was easy to look impressed. I was mightily impressed by the She on the throne!
I had no eyes for the score or so of Schrees that surrounded the massive carved chair, even though I was curious about their difference from men. Above them were her sleepy eyes, wide almonds, molten and wise, incandescent with intense inner fire above a mouth that was a wide, scarlet oval torn into the whitely-glowing face.

A great black pelt softened the harsh lines of the throne, framed her chalk-white body so that it curved starkly sensual, dominating the great chamber with beauty. It was a beauty one knew this woman used as a tool, a weapon, keen and polished and ready, and it struck at me swift as a great serpent, the fires behind her eyes driving the blow.

She wore a kind of sark of shadowy black veil, sewn over with sparkling bits of gem. It was in truth but an effective ornament for the proud firm breasts, the narrow waist, the arch of the hips and the curves of her thighs. Inadvertently I let out a low whistle of approbation and astonishment. Carna, beside me, nudged me sharply, and I snapped out of it.

The purple, lazy lids of her eyes moved, the slow weary-wise gaze centered on me, her hand moved. In two strides a man from the throne-side had me by the arm, and another seized my other, tugged me forward to her feet, thrust me down on my knees. Still, I looked. Curiosity and something more held me in a grip I couldn't shake.

This was more than a woman, I sensed. There was an awe of her throbbing in me. Not fear--something deeper, something one feels before the unexplainable, something one feels gazing at the moon and wondering; an ominous, deep, thrilling and unexplainable emotion.

Closer, I could see her firm flesh was dusted over with a glittering powder, the soft curves of her hair swept back to mingle and lose themselves in the black fur of the pelt so that the night-black hair seemed to spread everywhere about her and melt into the shadows.

Her hands were sinuous as serpents, the fingers tapering, the nails very long like the Chinese. Her nose was exquisite, but thin-edged, and with a cruel line on each side that vanished when she spoke.

"It is death to strangers in this valley...." she mused, not speaking to me or to anyone, but with a cruel intent to toy with me in the words, mocking, waiting for me to answer.

"I have been long on the way," I answered, in much the same tone, as though we were speaking of some one not present.

"The way to death is sometimes long, and sometimes short. And, too, there are things worse than death. But what was it you came here seeking?"

"I did not know, until just now," I answered, still looking at her eyes, which glanced at me, then away, then back again. She was interested in spite of her apparent weariness with routine--or perhaps with life itself.

"Now that you know, will you tell me?" She smiled a little, not a good smile, but a secret jest with herself. An appearance of extreme evil sat for a moment on her face, then went again, like the wind. Her voice was grave, careless, yet modulated with an extreme care as if she spoke to a child.

"I seek the wisdom I see in your eyes, to know what is and why it wearies you. I want to know a great many things, about your people and what they do here, what they mean to mine, what your plans may be--a great many things I need now."

The sleepiness left her eyes, and she bent toward me with the grace of a great cat and the shadows circling her eyes lifted a little. Wise, aloof, indifferent, yet she did not know what I was, or what I meant, and she meant to find out.

"So you know...." she mused, as if to herself.

"I know you are from space. I know it has been a long long time since you first touched here; your people, that is. I know that you drove the Zervs from this city and took it for your own. But that is all."

"It is too much. You cannot leave here." Her voice was sharp, and I was surprised to learn that she had even considered letting me go free. It was encouraging, after the dire pictures the Zervs and Nokomee had drawn for me of these Schrees.

I looked curiously at them, the Zervs had called them "not human." They were different, as a negro is different from a white, or an Oriental from a Finn. Their eyes were wide-set and a little prominent, their ears thinner and smaller, their necks very long and supple--different still from the Zervs. Yet they were a human race. I had misunderstood--or I had not yet met those whom the Zervs called Schree.

Carna had knelt beside me, and I murmured to her:

"Are these the Schrees, or something else?"

"These are the high-class Schrees, they are very like the Zervs in appearance. The other classes of the Schrees at sometime in the past were changed by medical treatments into a different appearance. It was a way of fixing the caste system permanently--understand?" She answered me swiftly, in a whisper, and the woman on the throne frowned as she noticed our conversation.

Her eyes fixed ours as she said, with a curiously excited inflection, no longer bored with us: "Take these two to..."
the place of questioning. I will supervise the proceeding. I must know what these two intended here, whether others of this man's people understand us."

"We're in for it!" said Carna, and I knew what she meant. Jerked to our feet, we were hurried from the big throne room, down a corridor, through a great open door which closed behind us.

That place! It was a laboratory out of Mr. Hyde's nightmares.

Up until now I had accepted the many divergencies and peculiarities of the Zervs, the priestly insect-men, the monstrous workers—all the variance of this colony from space—as only to be expected of another planet's races. I had consciously tried to resist the impact of horror on my mind, had tried to put it aside as a natural reaction and one which did not necessarily mean that this expedition from space was a horrible threat to men. I had tried to accept their ways as not necessarily monstrous, but as a different way of life that could be as good a way as our own if I once understood it. There were attractive points about the Zervs and even about these Schrees' rulers which bore out this impulse toward tolerance in me.

But in this laboratory—abattoir—some nameless, ominous aura or smell or electric force—what it was I know not—struck at my already staggering understanding with a final blow.

Now at last I met the real Schrees! I knew without asking. They seemed to me to be an attempt by the peculiar insect-like "priests" to make from normal men a creature more like themselves in appearance. Perhaps it had been done from the natural urge to have about them beings more like themselves than men... and it was plain that the race of the insect-like creatures and of men had become inextricably linked—become a social unity in the past. It was also increasingly plain that the four-limbed insect creatures had in the beginning been the cultured race, been the fathers of the science and culture of this race, had through the centuries lost their dominance to the Zervs and the Schree's upper classes—had retained the "priest" role as their own place in society. It was perhaps at that time that their science had brought the Schree type into existence. There were perhaps a hundred of them at work in the big chamber—a chamber bewilderingly filled with hanging surgical non-glare lights, filling the place with a shadowless illumination, revealing great, gurgling bottles of fluid with tubes and gleaming metal rods; pulsing elastic bulbs; throbbing little pumps, with row on row of gauges and dials and little levers along the walls.

There were a score of ominous-looking operating tables, some occupied, some empty, about them gathered group after group of white-masked Schrees. These were taller than men, near seven feet, with very bony arms and legs, a skeletal structure altered into attenuation, with high, narrow skulls, great liquid eyes, no brows, hairless skulls showing bare and pointed above the white surgical masks.

Very like the Jivro caste, yes, but different as men are different from insect. They walked with a long graceful stride, not hopping as the priests' class. Their eyes were mournful and liquid with a dog-like softness, their hands were snake-quick and long, they looked like sad-faced ghouls busy about the dismemberment of a corpse—a corpse of someone they had loved, and they appearing very sad about the necessity. Such was their appearance; mournful, ghoulish, yet human and warm in a repressed, frustrated way.

The tall, sad-eyed Schrees turned from the preparation of two rigs like dental chairs, except that they were not that at all, but only similarly surrounded with gadgetry incomprehensible to me. We had stood isolated, waiting, with four guards between us and the door.

As we were each placed in one of these chairs, our wrists and ankles fastened with straps of metal, I expected almost any horrible torture to be inflicted upon us.

They shot a beam of energy through my head and I heard words, sentences, a rapid expounding of alien grammar and pronunciation which sank deep into my brain. My memory was being ineradicably written upon with all the power needed to make of me whatever they wanted. But apparently their only purpose now was to give me a complete understanding of their language. An hour, two, swept by, and now the heretofore almost unintelligible gibberish about me became to my ears distinct and understandable words. I was now acquainted with the tongue of the Schrees, far better than little Nokomee had taught me the somewhat different tongue of the Zervs.

Then they wrapped about my waist and chest a strong net of metal mesh, and I knew that now something strenuous was going to occur, for I could not move a muscle because of the complete wrapping of metal mesh.

Now a metal disk was set to swinging in front of my nose so that I could not see what they were doing to my companion. I watched the metal disk, and saw behind it the tall swaying figure of the Queen enter and approach. She stopped a few feet from my chair, and her eyes were intent upon me. Then a light flashed blindingly in the reflecting disk, it went back and forth faster and faster, and I felt a strong vibration of energy pass in a beam through my head, throbbing, throbbing... darkness engulfed me. It was a darkness that was a black whirlwind of emotion. The sense of the desertion by humankind, by God and mercy and rationality swept through me and overwhelmed my inner self. I will never forget the utter agony of shrieking pain and loss that formed a whirling ocean of darkness into which I dived....

In this maelstrom of seeming destruction I lost all grip, had no will, was at sea mentally. Into this shrieking
hurricane of madness a calm voice intruded. I recognized a familiar note—it was the ruler herself, her voice no longer bored, but with a cruel curiosity that I knew meant to be satisfied if it killed me.

"Tell me what your people intend to do about the flying saucers they speak of in their newspapers?"

"They do not believe they exist; they are told they are delusions," I heard myself answering. I was surprised to hear my voice, for it came with no conscious volition on my part.

"That is for the public; that is a lie. But what do the powers behind the scenes intend to do about them?"

"They are searching for them, to learn all they can about them. They do not understand where they come from, but they have some information. They suspect they are from space, and are afraid of them."

"And they sent you here to learn what you could. They brought you the golden statuette to help you gain an entry, did they not?"

I tried to resist the impulse to tell the truth, for I could realize that if she thought I had the power of my government behind me, my fate might be different than if I did not. I tried to say "yes, they sent me," but I could not! I answered like an automaton:

"No, my government has no knowledge of my expedition. I came purely to get gold and for no other reason. Mining is my business."

She gave a little exclamation of frustration. Then after a pause she asked:

"Do you think our way of life and your own could live together in peace, could grow to be one?"

Again I made futile efforts to hide my revulsion and fear of them all. It was no use. The flood of force pouring through my head was more effective than any truth serum.

"No, to me you are horrors, and my people would never consent to live at peace with you. You could never conquer us. Until the last of our cultured members were dead they would resist the horrible practices of your culture."

"That is as I surmised," she mused. "But I would have you tell me why this is so. What is it you find so revolting about us."

"What have you done to my companions? Do you think men want that to happen to them?"

"That was a punishment for entering here without permission. That would not happen to any but enemies."

"Men could never accept the altering of the shapes of workers, the tinkering with the hereditary form of their children, the artificial grafting upon our race of revolting and unnecessary form changes. Your whole science is a degeneration of wisdom into evil, tampering with life itself. You are horrors, and you do not know it."

I could hear her steps as she turned and left, tapping angrily upon the floor. After her I could hear the shuffling, heavier tread of her retinue. As the flood of vibration ceased, I began to curse aloud for the undiplomatic truths I had been forced to utter. In seconds my arms were free, and I was led out, a tall grim-faced guard on each side, with a firm grip on my arms. I wondered what was happening to the lovely Zoorph, but I did not get a chance to look. I was thrown into a cell, and the heavy wooden door shut. The thud of a bar dropped in place punctuated the evening's experience with a glum finality.

* * *

I lay for hours with my mind in a whirl from the effects of the truth ray. Jivros, or insect-priests, moved phantom-like before my sleepless eyes, watching from the dark and waiting. Gradually my thinking became more normal, and I began a systematic analysis and summing up of what I had learned of these people. There were but a few members of the ruling groups, and it was evident the rule was split between the Jivro caste of the insect men and some normal-appearing groups who had divided the power with them in the past. Under these were the Schrees, and under these the malformed working caste or castes. The Schrees had contact with some space-state, the Zervs were outcasts of the ruler caste who had been driven from that space-state—perhaps more than one planet—sometime in the past and had hid out upon earth until recently located by the power that ruled on their home planets. Now they were fugitive and nearly powerless, and I knew the Zervs were few in number from my own observation. There were perhaps a hundred, perhaps two hundred. They had contact with some of the Jivros with whom they were familiar, but the appearance of Jake and Noldi and Polter among the workmen in the city told me that these Jivros could be traitors to them, could be giving new allegiance to the conquerors of the Zervs. My mind centered on two facts. The Jivro caste were the real source of the evil in these people. It was their unnatural attitude toward human life which had made this race the horror it was, and they were still exercising that evil influence.

Morning came through a high barred window, and after a while food came, slid beneath the door. I did not see the bearer of the food, though I called out in curiosity. He did not answer, only shuffled wearily away.

The morning crawled past, the sun mounted until I could see the golden orb near zenith. Then came what I dreaded, the tread of a number of feet. The bar was lifted; I saw four armed guards and a waiting white-robed Jivro, his protruding pupiless eyes moving as he ran his gaze over my figure. I could not help shrinking from the horror of his examination, brief though it was, for I realized he might be deciding just what freak of nature he could make out
of me.

I was marched out, down the corridor, up a long ramp, a turn, along two other corridors, up another ramp. The
tour ended before a wide metal door, the guards spaced themselves at each side, the door was opened by the agile,
hopping Jivro. I went in ahead of it.

There were but four beings in the room, and I stood before the long, foot-high table behind which the four
reclined upon cushioned couches.

They were four divergent creatures. One was the queen, whose name I had yet to hear spoken. One was a very
old Jivro, his skin ash-white and covered with a repulsive scale, like leprosy. The third was a mournful-eyed Schree,
clad in an ornamented smock-like garment, from which his thin limbs thrust grotesquely. The fourth was a
handsome, long-necked male who resembled the queen. He lounged negligently some distance from the three, as if
in attendance upon her. I deduced he was her paramour, husband or close relative, perhaps a brother.

I stood eyeing them silently, waiting. I gathered the three heads of the government were here, and the extra one
represented the balance of power in the hands of the queen. His negligent lack of interest seemed to me to be an
evident giving of his voice to the queen, if he was a part of this gathering.

The queen's voice had lost its sleepy, mocking tones, was sharp, incisive:

"You present a problem new to us, earthman. Sooner or later, if we decide to remain upon this planet
permanently, we will have to meet and conquer, or meet and engage in commerce with the other members of your
race. You are the first educated member of your race who has fallen into our hands. We must study your people, and
we would like your willing cooperation. Will you give it willingly? Or must we put you to death? Which would
perhaps symbolize, even indicate directly, our future attitude toward your races."

"I am quite willing," I said, before I had a chance to bungle it worse, "quite willing to exchange information on
your people for the same about my own. However, I doubt that your people will find this planet congenial to an
invader who ignores the natives as you have done."

"We did not come here to colonize, earthman. We came in pursuit of renegades from our law, fugitives who
fled when their plots were uncovered. But we are considering the possibility of a permanent colony here, and you
could help us...."

For an instant her eyes dwelt upon mine with a peculiar warning expression, as evident as a wink, and the
expression was evanescent as a breath. I caught on, and made my face agreeable and subservient. Immediately her
own reassumed a harsh, proud set, her voice became even more incisive and cold.

My eyes drifted casually to the blank, cold stare of the old Jivro, to the mournful liquid eyes of the Schree, on
to the apparently disinterested gaze of the queen's friend. The only ominous feeling I got was from the eyes of the
aged insect-man, and my deduction that they were the source of the evils of these people was strengthened. The
chills ran down my back, and something within me thrilled as I understood that this queen was playing a part to
please the Jivros, that her interests were actually divergent. Her voice was saying:

"You could help us greatly by explaining your life to us, who are so different; make it possible that in the future
trade and cultural intercourse might spring up between the two alien ways of life. There will be no peace without
understanding, you realize!"

"I quite agree with your views, and will help you in any way that I can," I said loudly, for the old Jivro seemed
to be hearing with difficulty. He leaned back at my words, seemed to relax as if pleased.

The queen turned to her companion, smiled and said:

"Genner, you will see that he is taken care of as a guest, and endeavor to learn what you can from him. I will
hold you responsible for the success of this experiment."

"Very well," Genner murmured, "but it seems to me, Wananda Highest, that we can never allow the wall of
secrecy between ourselves and the people of this planet to be breached. To consider doing otherwise ..." for an
instant his eye hesitated upon hers, then he went on, "... could hardly be logical, but of course, there is much we
could learn from them, and they from us. That, I see, as the only purpose of this exception."

Just then a great hullabaloo broke out in the corridors outside, the door burst open, and into the room three
captives were borne, half-carried, half-pushed. I stood back out of the way, and the three were prodded into a row in
front of the low table. Among them I recognized with a start my erstwhile guard, Holaf, of the Zervs.

Wananda leaned forward, her eyes glittering with sudden triumph, her voice thrilling with a cruel mocking
note.

"More of the skulking Zervs fail to avoid our warriors! Where did you find them, Officer?"

"They were attempting to release the captive Croen female in the crystal prison of the cave of the Golden
statue, your highness. Our spies among the Zervs informed us of the attempt."

Wananda's eyes blazed at Holaf. Her voice became more shrill with something almost like fear. The three men
shrank back visibly from her fury.
"So it is not enough you plot treason, you must also turn against your Gods? You know the Croen powers, you
know what she would do to us all, you included. But so that you can overcome the Schrees, nothing else to you is
sacred, nothing too vile for you to do. Away with them, let them become the least among the mindless men."

The tall Schree warriors, their long faces expressionless, started to hustle the three captives toward the door
again. Holaf wrenched free, turned, his face contorted with hatred.

"You have hounded us until we are but few, Wananda the Faithless, but you will never conquer us. We still
have your doom in our hands, and it will find you out. Death to you, woman without mercy, creature without soul!
These sacred Jivros plot your downfall, and your people pray that they will succeed. The ancient Jivro rule would be
better than the justice you administer, you snake in a woman's flesh!"

The Schree holding Holaf's arms let go, tugged a weapon from his belt, struck Holaf over the head with it. He
slumped unconscious, with blood running over his face from the blow. The three were taken out, and Wananda
leaned back. Seeing my intent face, she waved a hand to her companion, Genner, who rose to his feet and motioning
to me, preceded me from the room by another door than that which I had entered. I followed him.

Apparently I was on my honor, for no guard followed, and Genner bore no weapons I could see but a little
jeweled dagger in his belt.

As he walked a step ahead of me, I asked:

"Who is this Croen that Holaf spoke of, in the crystal column. I saw her, wondered at her, in the room of the
golden goddess. Why do they think she could be released?"

"The Croen are a powerful race of wizards, Carlin Keele. They live far off from our home planets in space, and
they have a code of conduct that makes them monitors, doctors, interferers in all matters of other races' business. If
she were released, she would at once attempt to overthrow our power, to set up a state after the Croen pattern. It is
their way. They consider themselves as superior to all others, and they do have a knowledge of nature which they
use to impose their will upon all peoples. They are worshipped as Gods by many primitive people, and so consider
themselves above all laws but their own. She was captured many years ago in an attempt to overthrow the rule of
Wananda upon a small satellite planet. Wananda did not kill her, but placed her in suspended animation within the
protective crystal plastic. Our queen intends to revive her and study her mind for her wisdom, but we have not had
time because of the press of events. Soon, now, she will become a tool in our hands to build greater the eminence of
Wananda."

"Peculiar looking creature, yet attractive," I murmured.

"The Croens are physically beautiful, but they are warlike and cruel, they do not desire peace and the way of
life of the Schrees and Jivros is an irritant to them. They hate and despise us, and we return them the favor."

I did not reply, but my heart seemed to throb in sympathy with the Zerv attempt to free the beautiful creature
from her living tomb.

"Could she turn the tables for the Zervs if they had succeeded?"

"I really don't know," answered Genner, opening a door and motioning me into the apartment. "These are my
quarters. There is plenty of room, the place is usually empty of all but slaves. I seldom sleep here myself, preferring
more congenial and less lonesome sleeping accommodations. I think you will find it comfortable. I will see you at
the evening meal time."

As I walked in, the door closed and I heard the lock click. I was a "guest" with reservations.

Curiously I examined the place, the unreadable books kept in niches behind transparent sections of the wall, the
strange furnishings, at once exotic and comfortless to me. The books I could not get at, finding no way to open the
transparent panels which seemed an integral part of the wall. I could not feel comfortable in the seats and lounges, as
they were very low, requiring an oriental squat at which I am not adept. I compromised by stretching out along a
hard couch raised some six inches above the floor. There were no gadgets to tinker with, the place was to me barren
of necessary appurtenances ... strange people, indeed.

As I was dozing off, the lock clicked in the door, and I sat up, startled to see Wananda glide in and close the
door quickly behind her. She was alone, and there was something furtive about her.

"Welcome to my abode, beautiful one."

The woman smiled, an almost human smile; reserved, yet with an unexpected warmth. I waited with intense
curiosity for her explanation of her visit.

"I come to you for aid, for I can talk to none of my own. I am in trouble which perhaps no one but you could
remedy. Will you give me your honor, will you do what I ask without question, will you be my friend?"

I was taken aback that this apparently powerful personage should be seeking aid of me, a prisoner. I answered:

"I see no reason why you should not trust me, as I know no one here to betray you to. But are you not the
supreme power here? Why should you want my aid?"

"Because you do not understand my position does not mean that I am not in trouble. These Jivros are difficult
allies for one with blood in her veins. I was raised to be a ruler. The Jivro priests were my tutors and my administrators before I came of age. It is only reluctantly they have followed the orders from the rulers of our home planets to obey me. They intend to slay me, and report my death as an accident. I live in fear, and I have long awaited their treachery. There is but one hope for me and that is Cyane, the Superior One whom I saved only by enclosing her in that living coffin. That is what I ask of you—to succeed where the Zervs have failed, and to release her and guide her in flight from here. She can lead your people, save them from these monstrous Jivros who have made of my race the things which you see. I would save your people as well as myself. Will you try to release her?"

I leaned back against the cushions, crossed my legs, took out my pipe. This was not exactly a surprise, but I had not realized the rift between her and the peculiar insect-men was such as to cause her to fear for her life.

"How does one release a person from such a death?" I asked. "In my people’s understanding of life, death comes with the stopping of the breath."

"She can be released by an injection of a stimulant which I can obtain for you. She is not dead, but in a condition very near to death, like a spider stung by a wasp. If she were free, she would soon scour your earth clean of the Jivros. Our race needs her even more than your own, yet I must pretend to be her enemy. I must pretend to be your seductress, andworm from you the knowledge which the Jivros will use to conquer and enslave your planet and your people. I must play this part, unnatural to me, of a cruel and heartless ruler, or they will have me killed by some subtle poison which they will call illness. You see, the Jivros are our doctors. Much of the wisdom of our race is in their hands. They are our priests and our administrators. They leave to us only useless occupations which will not allow us to be dangerous. For centuries they have been taking over every vital function of our life. I am allowed to live only so long as I am a willing tool, and foolish enough to wreak their evil will upon my people. It is a part I cannot continue to play. Every instinct of my being shrinks from what I am forced to order done daily, from what I am forced to allow them to do to human beings."

This was a different kettle of fish than I had expected. This slender, lovely creature, with her hands wrung together in pain and sorrow for her brutally maltreated people, this tear-streaked lovely face contorted with an agony which she had not spoken of to anyone else—this actress supreme, who for all her life had pretended to approve of the alien Jivro’s sabotage of her own racial stock—was a heart-rending picture, and her own face told me with its extreme tension that what she said was a fact. But perhaps this alien from space could act that well? I preferred to believe her.

"I don’t see how you expect me to get a chance to release Cyane of her crystal coffin? I will have no opportunity."

"I will make an opportunity. I am not yet alone or helpless, much as the insects would like me to be. This is my only power, that I am the same blood as the people, and not a Jivro. They know that, and constantly try to destroy this strength of mine by making me commit cruelties which I cannot always avoid for fear of such of them as the old Jivro whom you met at the council. So long as I retain his favor, I live. When he raises his finger in the death signal, my days will be few thereafter."

"I think I understand your position. I have heard of puppet rulers before—woman whom I am delighted to learn has a human heart after all. I am wholly with you, and want you to feel that you can trust me to the hilt."

She smiled and dried her eyes. After a moment she leaned forward, and the glory of her beauty, the near nudity of her utterly graceful body struck at me as she fixed my eyes with her own, her face now intent with will to make me completely understand quickly what she knew must be very obscure to me.

"The Jivros fear the power of Cyane, the Croen captive, as they fear death! The Croens have fought to destroy their power for centuries, on many planets in our area of space. Cyane is one of their greatest. She is a scientist of vast wisdom, and one who has developed a technique of increasing the vitality of life within herself, as well as in anyone she chooses to favor. You could well win from her such gifts, if you should release her. It is one reason I wish to release her, in order to win from her that secret of long life which she holds. The Croens are masters of warfare and she would be able, with only a little help, to develop an attack which they could not withstand."

"If they are so powerful, how is it they have not defeated the Jivros?"

"The Jivros are a very ancient, very widespread race. The Croens came into our space-area recently, as time goes, only three centuries by your time. They were lost. There were only a few hundred in a great ship, and they settled upon a small uninhabited and airless satellite of our home planet, were there for many years before they were discovered. When the Jivros attacked them to destroy them, they found in spite of their innumerable ships and countless warriors they could not harm them. But their attacks angered the superior ones, and they began a campaign of extermination against the insect men’s empire. Since the Croen were few, they began to recruit from among the Zervs and other groups who were subservient to the Schrees. The Schrees were the ancient tools of the Jivros, and have always held positions as tributary rulers, since the insect-men themselves found subject peoples obeyed the Schrees more readily. They have always kept the priest-like power and, by poisoning and other devices, remove any
Schree puppet who displeases them."

"Go on," I said huskily, her rapt face and intent manner, her utterly lovely ivory body, glittering everywhere with the shining powder which she used, the subtle penetrative scent of her--I was hard put to concentrate upon her words.

"I plan to have the crystal pillar opened, perhaps, have Cyane brought to my own chambers, and I will pretend to set up apparatus to read her sleeping mind and so learn from her. Naturally the Jivros will become suspicious of me if I do so, as they fear the knowledge of the Croen which has always proved too great for them. There will be but a few days time between my action in bringing her here, and my own death or her confiscation by the Jivros. But in order to overrule me in this, they will have to make a pretext, charge me with infidelity, convince the old Jivro that I intend harm to him and his. During that time you must find a way to release Cyane and escape with her."

"Why don't you yourself release her and escape with her?" I asked.

"Because I can be useful to her when she attacks us. Besides, I am constantly under the Jivro eyes, and they know me so well they would see my perturbation, they would know something was wrong and forestall me. You alone could do it, and, too, I depend upon your alien knowledge to provide a barrier or two to their overcoming you. Your weapons which you bore when we captured you--do they fear them?"

"I never shot any of them; I don't know."

"Perhaps I will send you with the party to get Cyane. That way you can find a chance to inject the stimulant when they are not looking. They must remove the crystal from about her to move her; it is too heavy to carry otherwise. Then when she awakes, you can find a way to divert their pursuit, provide a false trail. Do you understand?"

"I could try, but I cannot tell if I could outwit them or not."

"They are really very stupid things, the Jivros. Like an insect, their patterns are fixed and repetitive. They are almost incapable of original thought. Once you know them, you can always outwit them. With you will go my brother, Genner. He may be successful where you are not."

"It is agreed then." I stood up; this low couch made my knees stiff. She took my movement as a dismissal of her, and flushed deeply. I smiled at her embarrassment, and went down on one knee to bring my face level with hers where she half reclined on the bench-like lounge.

"Dear lady," I said in English, not finding the necessary Schree words in my artificial memory for a term of respect--then in Schree phrases, "I will do my utter best to help you and your people. It is my duty to my own race, too, as it is yours to yours. Trust me, so far as good-will may go. Together, we will rid ourselves of these unclean Jivros of yours!"

She rose then, and I stood too, still holding her hand that I had seized in my own to impress her with my sincerity. For an instant she looked at our two hands clasped together, then she placed an arm on my shoulder, leaning against me and trembling slightly with emotion. Tears sprang out in her eyes. She brushed them aside.

I did not know what to do. For fear of offending her, I restrained the impulse to take her in my arms, and it took great willpower.

Something about her aroused my deepest admiration. Here was a woman who had been playing a difficult part for years, whose heart was sore with sorrow for her blighted people, and who must yet seem to approve. The signs of long strain were very plain on her face. I understood that this was one of her greatest fears, that her mind would give way and betray her true emotions to the Jivros.

Clumsily I patted her bare shoulder. For an instant her wet cheek was pressed against my own, then she went gliding swiftly away, her face once again proud and empty of all human feeling. At the door she turned, swept her palm once over her face, removing the tears and as the hand passed upward she smiled as sweetly as a young girl, with a pathetic and utterly charming mischievous expression. Then the palm passed downward, and her face was left again stiff and masklike, the lips twisted a little into a cruel thinness, her eyes hard as agates on my own. She was superb, and I silently applauded. Then she was gone.

As I stood there, musing on the nature and the strange life of Wananda, a mocking, sultry laugh made me whirl, for I had thought I was alone.

Standing beside the tall, open window--a window I had examined and found impossible of exit because beneath it was a straight drop of some seventy or eighty feet--was my erstwhile companion and prisoner, the Zoorph, Carna!

Still in her hand was the long, fantastically ornamented drape behind which she had been concealed during my "secret" interview with the puppet queen.

"You!" I exploded. "Where did you come from and what did you hear?"

"Very interesting things, friend Keele. She is a fascinating woman, is she not?" Carna made a pretty mouth, as if kissing something, and with her fingers a gesture new to me, but one unmistakable in meaning. "She now has your simple heart in her hand, to do with as she wishes. You are a fine fool, you!"
"I thought you had psychic powers. You claim to read minds and foretell the future, and you do not understand that she is fine and honest and utterly admirable! You are the fool, Carna!"

She laughed.

"You are right, and not so simple. I said that only to know if your perceptions were keen enough to know that what she said was true."

"Now you know. How did you get here, what do you want, what have they done to you?"

She snapped her fingers, and gave the Zerv equivalent of "pouf."

"They gave me their tongue, as they did you, I notice. They questioned me much longer than you, as they thought I knew the Zervs might be caught. I did not tell them much. But it was my fault that poor Holaf was caught. I did know he was going to try to revive the Croen captive. They wrung that out of me, and then put me in a room directly above this one. I knew that you were below me from the talk of the guards. I made a rope from the hangings and slipped down to see you. I may go back up when I get ready."

She came toward me as she spoke, her hips undulating exquisitely, that sultry smile of completely improper intent on her beautiful face. She wore still the silkily gleaming black net in which I had first met her. It was torn now and even more revealing.

I fixed my eyes on the wide web of linked emeralds at her throat to keep my eyes from hers, for she had a disturbing power to make a man's head swim and his will disappear. It was perhaps no greater power than many another woman possesses, but to me she was particularly devastating. I moved back as she came toward me, smiling a little, and said in spite of my liking for her:

"Keep away from me, Zoorph! You will destroy my soul!"

She laughed huskily.

"What is a soul or so to the passion that could burn us, my Carl? Do you really fear me, stranger from a strange people? Don't you know how much I thirst to drink of your lips! Look at me, you coward. Are you afraid of a woman? Don't you know how curious I am as to how you of this planet make love? I who am a student of love, am most curious about you. Stand still. Here we are prisoners, about to die, perhaps, and you refuse me one sup of pleasure before we die? You are a cruel, and a spineless creature. I despise you, and yet I want you very much."

I kept backing away, around the room, and she pursued me at arm's length, her long graceful legs dramatically striding, making of her pursuit a humorous burlesque, yet I knew she was quite serious about it. If little Nokomee had not warned me against her, I might have succumbed then and there, for, as she said--"What good is a tomorrow that may never exist for us?"

"What did you come for, Carna? To make a fool of me?"

"I thought we might try to escape again, but this pretty queen of the accursed Schrees has charmed you to her will, and I must await a better opportunity. But that does not prevent me from trying to outdo her attraction for you. Do you love her already, Carl?"

"Of course not, I just met her."

This was utterly ridiculous, yet it was a lot of fun and I could see no real reason why I should resist Carna's advances. To me she was about the most attractive woman I had ever met, and I might never see her again. I gave up my retreat, seized the girl almost roughly in my arms, bent her back with a savage, long-drawn kiss and embrace. Then I released her, to see what she would make of an earthman's kiss.

She stood for an instant, her hand pressed to her lips, her eyes wide with surprise, one hand raised as if to push me away. Then she giggled like a young girl, and put both hands on my shoulders.

"So that is what you call love, strange one? Shall I show you how we of far-off Calmar do the first steps of courtship?"

"That would be interesting," I said huskily, my lips burning.

Her voice became low and penetrating.

"You will be two, yet alone, above the all." She said other words whose meanings I did not know. My head swam, my soul seemed to be floating in a sea of new and strange emotions. I sank into a dream state, and with her low suggestive words in my ears, a new world came gradually into form about us, we were two lovers walking among plumed fern-trees, beside deliciously tinkling streams, the songs of birds rang like little bells all about. I was conscious of her warm lips upon my own and of her eyes like two deep dark pools in which my own gaze swam and sank and rose.

Suddenly a rude, loud voice broke in, the dream of paradise vanished from about us.

Before us stood Genner, his face angry, and in the wall I saw the panel by which he had entered where I had thought was only blank wall. He cried:

"You, Zoorph, I had thought not to interfere. But you are not going to enslave this man to your will. We need him, and your people need him too, and what you do is not right, for you know as well as I that if he falls entirely
under your spell he will be left no will of his own!"

Carna, not even abashed at the intrusion, almost spit as she angrily retorted:

"What is the difference whose will he obeys so long as it is what we all desire that gets accomplished? He
would be better off with my experienced direction than with his own ignorance of our ways, in anything you plan.
Do you think I want to be left out? Do you think I do not desire freedom from the Jivros, too? Do you think I want to
be made into a mindless thing when I fail to please them?"

"Never mind; get back where you came from. This man is our ally, not our slave, and your behavior is bad. I
will hold this against you. Go!" He pointed at the window with one rigid, outstretched arm, and Carna moved slowly
away, saying:

"No, Prince, do not think me an enemy! It is only that my heart is moved toward this strange one, I wanted him
very much, and how else can a Zoorph love than as she has been taught?"

The prince smiled at her words, his arm fell to his side.

"Very well, little temptress. Kiss your love goodbye. It may be a long time before I let you see him again. If he
desires it, you may meet later on. But I will warn him, so that he does not become your slave."

"I would not rob him of his self, my Prince. I have an affection for this one!"

"We will see that you do not, sweet Carna. Now get out, and be quick. The time approaches."

She darted to my side, where I sat still bewildered by the eerie yet utterly delightful experience with the
witchery of a Zoorph, pressed burning lips to my own, caressed my cheek with her fingertips, gave my hand a quite
American squeeze. Then I watched her slender legs swing up and out of sight as she went up her improvised ladder
hand over hand. She was athletic as a dancer.

"Whew," I said, passing my hand over my heated face, and grinning at the Prince.

"Yes, whew! If it had not been for me you would have become her property, for they are very accomplished in
making people do what they want."

"Hypnotism, developed beyond anything I ever heard of! It must be hereditary, such power!" I mused aloud.

Genner answered as if I spoke to him.

"The word hypnotism I know not, I guess you mean what we call Zoorph. It is a cult, teaching the art of
enslaving others to your will. But she is a good girl, and her Zoorph qualities are not evil. For your own sake,
remember always to hold yourself in check, or she will automatically become your mistress. A man does not like to
be a slave even to so charming a mistress."

I did not say anything. I saw nothing wrong with the idea just then.

"Were you there behind the panel while your sister and I talked?"

"Of course. To make sure nothing went amiss. If some curious Jivro had come to the door, she would have
joined me in the passage."

The Prince sat down across from me on a low stool.

"I will lead this group she will send to bring the Croen. You will naturally accompany us, as I am to keep an
eye on you. Wananda will give you the fluid to inject into her veins. You must not be seen making the injection.
Somewhere along the way she will revive. She is an extremely strong creature, and will immediately make her
escape. I will order none to shoot at her with vibro guns, as we do not wish her harmed. We will hurry back to get
ships to pursue and capture her. But we will be unable to capture her.

"If you can manage to keep up with her in her flight, do so. You should be able to outrun a Jivro; they are not
very fast. But whether you can keep up with the Croen, that I doubt. However, make the attempt, and when you are
alone with her, explain why we want her to escape, who her friends are. If you do not do that, she may elect to make
her way through the wilderness, which would be fatal for her. Knowing she has allies among us, she will find a way
to attack us."

I grunted. I did not see how they expected one lone woman, however fantastically gifted with wits and know-
how, to overcome the ships, armament and organization of the Jivros, even with Wananda working to neutralize
their power.

"She must be a wizard; you expect such wonders of her!"

"There will be a ship waiting to pick her up as soon as she is out of sight of the Jivros who will accompany us. I
have sent it already. It waits in the hills by the barrier. With you along, you can contact the remaining Zervs. They
will augment your power. I can send more ships manned with my men, later. We have been preparing for this a long
time."

"Aren't you doing a lot of talking? Walls have ears, you know, and those Jivros of yours look pretty shifty to
me."

"It is the hour of their sleep. They are creatures of regularity, like ants, you know. They live by routine. There
are only guards awake. I know exactly where every one of them stands at this moment, where every one of them
sleeps. I have not been inactive."

***

We filed out of the city gate, a party of nearly fifty, a score of them bearers of a big palanquin-like vehicle in which they proposed to carry the Croen's inert body.

I was remembering the brief examination of her that I had made when I entered the cavern of the golden statue. A four-armed female of near-human aspect, but with a single horn on her forehead. A member of a race from distant space, alien even to these visitors to earth. She had been utterly different from anything I had even imagined as human--yet somewhere, somehow the origin of that race had been similar to our own. I wondered if space was peopled with such near-human races, all descendant from some ancient space-traveling race who had colonized--then passed on into forgotten time?

The party wound on, taking that same trail by which I had entered the cavern with Hank and Jake and Frans. Silently I blessed the fate that had spared me the things that had been done to them. Their only release, I imagined, could be death.

Overhead the rocky walls began to close, the light grew dim, ahead came that eerie glow from the magnetic statue. The prince's eyes caught mine in a swift, silent order to be ready, and the two of us drew ahead of the column. In my jacket pocket I held the hypodermic, one of Schree design, different from a modern medical hypodermic only in that it was decorated with incut figures of glorified Jivros, carved in the crystalline cylinder, and the metal was of gold.

There were only two of the repellent insect-men with us. I surmised they were there only as observers, but that was not the case. They were there because they had to be. I could see an unusual agitation on their blank, bulge-eyed faces, if those insect masks could be called faces. They were afraid of this Croen female, even in her inert condition.

The tall, graceful Schree warriors followed us into the cavern, and last of all came the two hopping Jivros. The intense attraction of the statue drew me, but I remembered how I had avoided it before, and kept my eyes averted. Like light on a moth's eyes, the power of it seemed to strike into the will only when the eyes were upon it.

We gathered around the column of crystal. The Schrees attached a loop of rope to the top, pulled it carefully from the base. When it was stretched out horizontal upon the floor, the two Jivros set to work with little spinning metal disk-saws, cutting a line entirely around it lengthwise. Then they tapped it with small hammers, and the cut cracked through. Lifting off the top section like the lid of a sarcophagus, the Croen lay exposed to the light of day.

I stood entranced by the exquisite beauty and majesty of the naked creature until Prince Genner nudged me with an elbow. Even as he did so, he whirled, pointed, cried out:

"There, through that doorway, one of the traitorous Zervs spies upon us. Catch him, my warriors, before they bring the others down upon us!"

As if drilled or awaiting this order, the tall Schrees set off as one man, running through the same doorway by which I had followed the angry Nokomee.

The prince and I were left alone with the two Jivros, who stood beside the nude figure of the alien Croen. They eyed us, their eyes jerking nervously from our faces to the body of the Croen. Quite calmly the Prince tugged a vibro-gun, very like the weapon Holaf had worn at his waist, from his belt and trained it upon the two horrors.

"This day will come for all the Jivros," cried the prince in a triumphant voice, and shot a terrible blue bolt of force into the body of each of them. The second had snapped a little weapon from his breast, hidden in the folds of his white robe, and as he fell, the beam of it cut a long smoking channel in the floor rock. The prince calmly picked it up, pressed the trigger lever, handed the thing to me. I pocketed it, then stepped over to the nude body of the Croen. I inserted the needle carefully in the artery at her inner elbow, pushed the plunger slowly home, my eyes on her face with a deep awe.

The prince bent beside me, watching her face intently, and both of us stood rapt, waiting for I knew not what except that it would be more marvelous to meet such a god-like creature as this face to face than anything else that had ever happened to me.

But a sound of feet up the corridor made Prince Genner spring to his feet.

"Quick, man, help me get these dead horrors out of sight! I do not trust all those warriors, though most of them are in sympathy with us."

We sprang to the dead things. I bent and picked one up by the shoulders. Surprisingly, frighteningly light they were, as if filled with cotton. Their limbs were truly skeletal, and curiously I tugged the white robe from the strange insect body as I followed the prince. The thorax, the wasp-waist, the long pendulous abdomen, the atrophied center limbs folded across the wasp-waist--the whole thing was like a great white wasp without wings. As we flung them into an empty chamber, I turned the burden face down, and on the back were two thin wisps of residual wings. Once these things had been winged!

We sped back to the side of the sleeping Croen.
I stopped ten feet from the giant figure, surprise, awe, a thrill of admiration filling me! She was sitting up, her hands at her temples, peering about with her great eyes distracted. On her face, even in this condition of tension, still unaware of her surroundings, was the greatest evidence of intelligence I had ever sensed. This Croen race, I realized, was something truly beyond an earthman's understanding.

But the prince had no time for the awed, stupefied condition into which sight of her had struck me.

"Come, Cyane, great one, we have released you, but you must flee at once. I know how weak you must be, but if you can, please rise and flee. This man will accompany you. He is alien to us, and it is better that he be out of the hands of the Jivros as quickly as possible. Go, dear one, swiftly, swiftly--we will find you later!"

The great body moved, gathered itself, stood tottering, gazing wildly about. The prince pointed at the cavern entrance where our footprints still showed in the dust. To me he cried: "Go up the rocky side as far as you can when you reach the slopes. The north side, earthman. Keep going, and conceal yourselves in the bush. I will guide the search away from you."

I ran ahead of the tottering figure and she followed, her steps gathering strength. Faster she followed until we raced along the dim cavern way. The rocky roof opened out and the blue sky showed overhead. The prince had gestured to me when we had entered to a ledge that angled upward from the gully, and I knew now what he had meant.

I could not keep up with the great strides of the now fully aroused Croen goddess. She turned back, picked me up like a child, and in great leaps bounded up the side of the canyon along the ledge. Up and up and over, and still she ran, untiring. I was not rescuing, I was being rescued!

As we ran beneath the shadow of the trees, a figure rose suddenly up before us. I was astounded to see it was Holaf, whom I had thought the Jivros had already dealt with.

"I await you, Cyane, great one, to guide you to safety. The prince has sent me," he cried.

The great striding creature slowed, spoke to me with a voice full of a deep music.

"Do you trust this man?"

"He may be trusted in this case. He has already risked his life to set you free."

She set me down. I looked at Holaf, who was too excited to be amused.

"Hasten, we must get under cover at once. A place awaits, and many men, arms, tools. We have long fought for this day, Cyane!" Holaf was wholly ecstatic to see the success of his plans. I realized the prince had made an ally of him with the same kind of interview the queen had granted me.

Holaf led us around the side of the mountain, keeping in the shelter of the trees, and by a back route to the same hideaway in the mountainside where I had first met him.

I greeted Nokomee with a glad smile, but her smile was not so glad and my heart was hurt to find she was angry with me. But the great Croen creature left us no time for argument.

The caves where the two hundred or so Zervs had hidden for so long were quite numerous and confusingly branched. There was room there to hide an army if needed.

I went at once to the small chamber where Nokomee had placed the packs and camping equipment from the horses, and took out one of Hank's big old forty-fives, belted it on. The old-fashioned belt was filled with cartridges. I also took my own Winchester Model .70. I had a plentiful supply of 130-grain Spitzer-point bullets, a high-velocity, long-range killer that I might get a chance to use. I filled my pockets with cartridges, took a knapsack and filled that. So, burdened down with lethal equipment, I hurried back to Cyane's side. I didn't want to miss a move of that visitor from far space. I wanted to learn, and I had an idea she would show plenty of science if she got into action. The prince wasn't gambling on her for nothing, not with that glorious sister of his in jeopardy.

She had seated herself on that same big bench where I had first met the Zoorph, Carna, and the Zervs were coming and going to her rapidly-given orders. A dozen of the older Zervs were assembling apparatus under her direction, and if I expected to learn something, I saw I was going to be disappointed, for the stuff was inexplicable to me.

I went on outside to the ledge from which the city could be seen. I was worried about how Genner had explained to the Jivros the death of the two who had accompanied him. I had taken a pair of small binoculars from my packs, and seeing activity near the gates of the wall, I trained the lenses upon the wall.

I gave a cry which brought the Zervs speeding to me. I handed the focused glasses to Holaf, pointed at the gates. He put them to his eyes, then he too gave a cry of warning, and raced back to the Croen.

For, filing out of the gates and spreading out across the valley was the vanguard of an army. The glass had shown the streets filled with marching men.

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For a few minutes I could not understand exactly what had happened, then I guessed. The prince had asked for permission to use the entire forces of the city in a search for the Croen! The strategy of the man was exquisite. He was playing on the Jivro fear of the Croen to get the military power fully in his hands!
Even as the great limbs of the Croen woman brought her to my side, as I handed her the glasses, round disk ships began to rise from the center of the city one after the other until at least five score of the smaller type were in the sky. After them came two of the larger craft that I knew were really space ships with huge inner chambers in the bottom where the small craft nested.

An all-out search for the Croen was on in earnest!

But now quite suddenly an astonishing thing happened. One of the great mother ships swung in a circle, came alongside the other, and from the great center bulge of the upper surface a blue beam lashed out, struck the other in a slicing flare and sheared off the entire upper bulge in one blow. The great ship faltered for an instant, then began to fall. It struck the ground near the wall with a blinding explosion. As the great mushroom of white smoke began to lift up, the stem of the mushroom blew away, and where the ship had fallen was only a hole, surrounded by bits of shattered metal. The wall near the explosion was breached in a fifty-foot-wide break, and the bodies of men could be seen through the breach, killed by concussion.

From the city a blazing yellow beam lanced here and there in pursuit of the traitor disk, but it darted like a dragonfly, up, down, and zig-zag. The pursuing beam came nowhere near it. Somehow I knew the prince, and perhaps Wananda too, were in that ship, and my heart was in my throat as I thought of the queen in that ship, being shot at by the repulsive insect men.

The army deploying on the plain kept right on marching, columns slanting outward from the center, forming three columns that spread out like the extending prongs of a trident. I could make nothing of it.

Several dogfights had broken out among the smaller disk ships since the fall of the mother disk, but these were quickly over, and the flight came on, swift as arrows.

The remaining mother disk settled to earth on the level land directly below our hiding place, and the smaller disk settled now around it. The army marched on, nearer and nearer.

I looked at Holaf, handed him the glasses.

"I don't know whether we are lost, or, whether the prince has joined us, deserting the Jivros in the city you Zervs built."

"None but Prince Genner knew our hiding place, and who else would place themselves under our fire range, knowing we were here?" Even as he spoke, the door opened in the side of the great disk, and the prince sprang out, turning to assist his sister to the ground.

The Croen, Cyane, standing beside me, suddenly leaped off the ledge, her long limbs making easy going of the sloping detritus below. Seconds later she was running easily across the plain toward the ship, and I was surprised to see the prince and the queen bow their knees to her, kneel before her as if praying to a goddess. She touched the bowed heads with her fingertips, and the three figures then entered the disk and the door closed. The ship lifted, took off alone in a southerly direction, flying higher and higher and out of sight. Even as it disappeared, another great disk lifted from the city, set out in the same direction in pursuit.

But the smaller ships below lifted at once as they sighted this pursuit, set out after the second mother disk.

"I guess we're going to miss the fighting," I said to Holaf.

"We can get into it when the time is right. We've got to move at once. The Jivros know our location now. Come on!"

Holaf strode back into the cavern that had been the Zerv's hideout for so long. I followed, stopping curiously to examine the apparatus which the Croen had abandoned on the advent of the prince. It was a kind of still, bubbling now with a wick lamp under the red fluid, and nearly a gallon of the end product had collected in a big jar.

"What was this distillation all about?" I asked Holaf.

"It was a medicine she was making for the Shinro. She said that an injection into their blood would increase their perceptions to a human range of intelligence, and that then we could use their resulting rage against their mutilators. It is only a temporary effect. It will wear off in a day, leave them again to the stupidity the Jivros gave them. Now, she's gone, I don't even know the dosage. It is useless, the prince took her from us."

"We can use it, if it is complete. I have the needle I used to revive the Croen. Bring the stuff; we'll try it."

"We could circle the army, get into the city...." said Holaf, his eyes glittering on mine.

"Let's go," I cried, getting his idea.

* * *

We were near a hundred and fifty young Zerv fighters, and perhaps as many women and old men and children. We wound through the passages of the tunnels in the mountain, came out on the far side from the valley. Along the mountainside we traveled, and I realized we were at the mercy of any force we met, being too few and too hampered with baggage and the helpless members of the Zerv families.

But Holaf knew what to do. He pointed out a trail toward the wilderness to the thin little column, told them where to take cover and await his return. Then with myself and a dozen of his best warriors, he turned his face again
We circled the valley, marching hard, crossing the upper narrow end. Coming toward the city, twilight was closing down, and we made the last few miles in complete darkness.

Near the walls, Holaf chopped a thirty-foot sapling, which we carried to the wall. A young Zerv swarmed up the pole, let down a rope to help the ascent of the others. I climbed the rough pole after him. I hadn't the athletic ability of these Zervs who seemed to like to climb ropes hand over hand. So over and down into the silent city we went, drawing up pole and rope after us, hiding them in the shadows of the wall.

Like shadows we stole along the streets, and after long minutes heard the unmistakable feet of the Shinros. They came with that ghastly mechanical rhythmic tread, eyes staring, backs burdened. I guessed that now their burdens were materials for the defense of the wall. We followed, and not far distant from the breach of the explosion of the disk ship, found our chance. They were accompanied by four of the hopping Jivros, and upon the back of each a young Zerv sprang, silent as stalking cats, striking them down, crushing their skulls with vibro-gun barrels.

Holaf and I set to work immediately on the mindless Shinros, injecting shots of the red fluid into their veins one by one, varying the shots to gauge the effect. But it was potent stuff, and before I had the third man under the needle, the first was speaking in a hoarse, angry voice.

"What has happened to me, what--what?"

Holaf said: "These are almost all graft jobs, were once captives and normal men. The result, if this shot works, is going to be a thoroughly angry man, fighting mad for the blood of the Jivros." Then he raised his voice to the newly revived Shinro.

"You were made into a beast of burden by the Jivro insects! Tonight you will get your revenge. This shot of sense we are giving you will last only till daylight, so your life does not matter—it will revert to the beast in the morning. Go and spend your time where it will hurt the Jivros most—spill their blood. Their power is ending this night! This is the beginning of the end for all the Jivro parasites of our race. What we begin tonight will not stop till every Jivro in the ancient Schree group of planets is dead and gone!"

As we completed our injections, the column stood waiting, but a column of sane men, ready to shed Jivro blood for their revenge.

"Go as if to get more burdens of stone to repair the wall. When the Jivros show themselves, kill, get weapons, do not stop killing until they are gone or you are dead. You have but this night; make the most of it."

The column plodded off, in the same apparent condition we had first met them. But in their brains was boiling, enraged sanity, in a condition of complete rebellion, of murderous intent.

"They'll sell their lives for something worthwhile, tonight," said Holaf into my ear, as we set off on their trail. We intended to make the most of any opening the revived Shinros made for us.

Two more columns of toiling Shinros we liberated with injections, then our supply of fluid was exhausted. Just what more to do to hurt the Jivros we didn't know.

"How many ships do those Jivros have? Why are they always in hiding? Since I've been around here I haven't seen a dozen of 'em at one time!" I asked Holaf, my feet tired from sneaking along the deserted streets.

"They never come out in the open except for some express reason, such as driving the Shinros to work. They still have probably a score of ships."

"Twenty of those big disks?" I asked.

"Yes, I would say that many. But they will not bring them out to battle unless there is no other way. A Jivro never does anything he can get a human to do. Now that they have only the Shinros in the city, with the army out there searching for the Croen—and maybe the most of it deserting to some rendezvous the prince sent them word about—they will do nothing unless they must. You know how a spider hides when it senses danger?"

"There are many insects that hide when they are in fear."

"They have that trait, but they also have courage when desperation drives them. Now they are holed up in their strongholds, waiting developments. They will only come out to fight if they see an opportunity to crush their opposition, or if they are driven forth."

Suddenly the long beam of a searchlight lanced across the night sky above, then another and another. For an instant a huge disk showed in the beam. It tilted and drove abruptly sideways out of the light. The beam danced after. It was not seen again, and still more beams winked on, began to search, systematically quartering the sky.

"I would say our friends, the Jivros, were in for it. The prince and the Croen are attacking," I said to Holaf.

He grunted.

"I didn't expect it so soon. They do not have the strength in ships. But the Croen must have some stunt figured out to equalize their power."

We moved along pretty rapidly, keeping to the shadows, and soon were again at the side of that flat, paved place from which the disk ships took off. Overhead loomed the beetling walls of the palace from which the prince
had led his people in revolt—manned now by the Jivros. I wondered how it felt to them to have to do their own fighting.

The beams moving about from the top of the building lit the streets about us with a distinct glow. It was no place to remain. We moved back along the parallel street, and I had an idea. Whatever was I carrying all this weight of heavy game rifle and knapsack of cartridges, and not even getting in position for a shot? I gestured to Holaf and tapped the rifle, pointing up.

He got the idea, led me to a dark doorway and we entered the building, made our way to the roof. Lying prone along the parapet of the roof, I adjusted the sights for two hundred yards, and swung the rifle sight slowly across the flat roof of the palace. The reflections of the big searchlights made the surface quite bright, and about each light was a group of the tall white-robed Jivros. They made perfect targets!

I began to fire, taking my time, centering each figure exactly. At each shot, one Jivro fell. I had fired but a score of times, and the white-robed creatures began to leave the lights, to cluster about the archway over the roof stair.

Grouped as they now were, I did not need to aim. I fired four more clips as rapidly as I could load them. Then the remaining Jivros began to swing the great beams in a frantic search for the deadly fire. As the beam swung toward us, Holaf seized my head, pushed it beneath the parapet. The beam swept on without pausing. I raised my head and kept on firing.

All of the beams but two were now stationary and unattended. I could not reach these, the angle of fire was wrong; but I could see the base of the lights, and as they swung again toward me, I fired into the center of the beam. It blinked out. Holaf clapped me on the shoulder.

"Get the rest of the lights, man, never mind the damned insects! The Croen will take care of them soon enough."

One by one I put out the search beams, the sky overhead grew dark again.

"These are the creatures who expect to conquer the earth!" I cried out scornfully to Holaf. "They could be bested by a bunch of boy scouts with twenty-twos!"

"They have never fought! They are only priests, not warriors. They are not thinking of conquering anything now, without their willing servants. They are fighting only for life!"

Overhead still wheeled the circle of guarding disks, manned, I knew, by the inexperienced priest-like insect men. I took a careful aim at the glowing transparent bulge in the center of the nearest, hoping the alien plastic was as soft as the earth plastics. But there was no way to tell if it had pierced the shell of plastic, or if it had done any harm.

Fumbling in my pockets, I pulled out a loaded clip, lay there pondering with the clip in front of my nose.

Absently I noted the black band around the nose of the bullets, indicating it was a high-velocity, armor-piercing cartridge, manufactured by the U.S. Army for exactly such emergencies as I faced. I did not know if it would prove too big a powder-charge for my rifle, I did not know then even how I came to have the cartridges. Polter had bought some Army ammunition and these must have been among his things. I may have been firing them steadily and not known the difference.

I inserted the clip, and lay there with my fore-sight following the disk ship in its steady circling flight. Just where would an armor-piercing steel bullet do the most harm? I shot the clip out at the great round body of the thing, trying to guess where a hit might damage machinery or pierce fuel tanks. There was no visible result, and I gave the flying disks up as a bad job. How did I know they were built to resist meteors in ultra high-speed space flight? It didn't even occur to me.

"Where're your buddies?" I asked Holaf. He lay beside me peering down into the street below.

"Gone to join the Shinro. They are storming the doors of the palace now." He gestured toward the street.

I leaned over the parapet. Below in the street the hideous, mutilated bodies of the Shinro moved in a mass. They had brought up a huge beam, and were pounding it against the great palace doors. Others climbed toward the tall barred windows, some of them slipped through. But of the white-robed Jivros there was now no visible sign.

I was about to send a few shots through those same windows, when a waving white cloth from a window near the top of the huge structure drew my eyes. A sudden fear struck my heart. Could that be my Zoorph, left there—could that be Carna? I felt sure it was, and something warm and pitiful seemed to flutter in my chest as I thought of her alone among those hopping Jivros. I got to my feet, started across the roof.

"Where are you going, earthman?" asked Holaf, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"I am going into that place, but there is no need you accompanying me. I think I saw Carna at her window, a prisoner! I would like to free her."

Holaf gave a cry of unbelief.

"No, you cannot do that! The Croen means to destroy that place down to the ground. Carna will have to perish with it. It is too bad, but you cannot enter there. I know what is going to happen."

Even as he spoke, a great white blossom of flame spurted suddenly over our heads, spread and spread across
the sky above the circling ships. Looking up, my eyes were struck blind. I dropped to the roof surface with agony. Then came the terrific, stunning concussion. The prince was letting off the fireworks at last! I exulted, even as I despaired. Somehow I only now realized that this waiting, strange Zoorph in her prison, who faced death because forgotten by her friends--must not die! In my heart some warm thing she had waked there with her magic breathed, moved, sprang into complete life. I could not see her die! I must get into that place that I saw was doomed, even as I now saw two of the great ships above falter in flight, turn and slide downward at increasing speed. The concussion had broken them, perhaps destroyed the life within them. I realized that in a short time the same thing was going to happen to the headquarters of the Jivros.

Below, the booming of the great ram against the palace door ceased, there came wild shouts, cheers, running feet, terrible screams of agony. I ran down the ramps up which we had ascended to the roof. Heedless of danger, I raced along the dark street, across the wide-open space surrounding the palace.

About the palace door the dead were sprawled in mangled heaps. Among the dead were several white robes, now stained with the pale blood of the Jivros. I surmised the frightened creatures had opened the door, intending to kill the men wielding the ram--and had been unable to do a complete job. The doors gaped open. I stumbled over the reeking heap of slain. A dying man raised one horrible crab claw to me, called out my name! It was Jake, his ugly face now a horror. I had not even known he had received the reviving shot of the Croen medicine.

I bent to hear his words, but he only looked at me for a second, his lips formed one word: "Gold!" He laughed bitterly, repeated it: "Gold, hell!" and then his head dropped lifeless.

I raced on into the place, and at my heels came Holaf. In his hands he held the vibro gun, and on his face was a wild triumph. He kept crying aloud:

"Death to the Jivros! An end to tyranny!"

I had no time for the political angles which so inspired Holaf. I raced upward along the same paths by which Prince Genner had led me to my own detention quarters. I did not know how to reach Carna's room except that it lay directly above my own. I raced into the open door of the prince's quarters, and to that window by which Carna had entered. I leaned out, shouted at the top of my voice.

"Zoorph, are you there?"

Her voice came to me with a message of relief, yet it justified my worse fears. She was here, and the place was about to be blasted by some titanic explosive of the Croen science creation! Her words were indistinct, but the tone was almost mocking, and I thought I heard her laugh.

"Can you come down, Carna, or do I have to come after you?"

Seconds later the knotted drape she had used before swayed down into sight, I grasped it to steady it. Her bare legs followed, and now her voice came to me with a sweet mockery:

"Never let it be said that Carna required a lover to climb to her window! Rather let it be said that passion made Carna risk..."

Overhead another of the terrible blasts of flame blazed across the sky. The light blazed all about us, and Carna leaped from the window ledge into my arms even as the concussion struck at us. I lost my balance; we fell to the floor together ... and her voice went calmly, mockingly on, loud in the sudden ensuing silence. "... death itself to be at her lover's side! And it sounds as if we both risked death this night!"

I lay there staring into those mysterious depths of her strange wide-spaced eyes, and she giggled a little. I could not help laughing. Even as I struggled to retain sense an almost hysterical laugh of relief broke from me.

We got to our feet, and in spite of the terrible danger, our arms kept hold of each other, our eyes still held together, and our lips were drawn together and burned there for minutes.

"This is madness, woman, we must get out of here. The Croen has made bombs for the prince's ships. He has rebelled against the Jivros, released the Croen, Cyane, they will blast this place, perhaps the whole city, before this night is over!"

"So no one placed any value on the life or the help of Carna but the earth man! Why did you come here for me, Carl?"

"I saw your scarf at the window. I learned then what I did not know before--I could not let you die! Do you know what I felt when I knew you were still in this prison?"

"Of course I know. You see, Carl, the magic of the Zoorphs is really a magic of love. You love me, and I willed it so. You will always love me now!"

I was not entranced by her words.

"We have no time for a discussion of metaphysics or of love, woman. Come, we must get out."

Carna gestured toward the doorway. I whirled, stood frozen with startled nerves. There stood the old Jivro whom I had met in the council beside the queen. In his hands were no weapons, and at his back were no tall Schree guards. I wondered if the desertion of the Jivros had been so complete. Even as I stooped to retrieve the heavy rifle
from the floor, his hands gestured, and the rifle eluded my reach, seeming to glide across the floor. I followed it, and he gestured again.

Some force seemed to freeze me. It had not been nerves that held me before, I learned, but his eyes upon me! Unwinking, the ancient master of what worlds unknown to me, regarded me, and I knew I was helpless before the power he controlled. My lips moved, but no sound came out.

A sudden blast of light came from the window, and the vast concussion shook the building terribly. For an instant I felt freedom in my limbs. I tugged out the .45 at my belt, leveled it, fired. The Old One staggered, his eyes blazed at me, and his hand gestured again. The gun fell from my hands, and some terrible black thing struck into my brain, tearing, rending. I fell forward into blackness....

* * *

Swirling nothingness, a dry cachination as of some dead-as-dust thing laughing at life itself, a shuddering vibrance flooding through my flesh in waves of terrible nausea, a dim glow that grew into terrifying painful brilliance, then paled and died again into the swirling blankness that was not death, but a knowledge of deep injury....

Again and again the swirling horror of my brain slowed, almost stopped. My eyes almost opened into the painful light, and the deep interior vibrating sensation swelled into overpowering violence. I sank again into darkness. Over and over I struggled almost to the doors of consciousness, only to be shoved back by the consciously controlled exterior force.

At last the sickness passed, and my mind quieted. I struggled into wakefulness. As I opened my eyes, the face of the old Jivro gaped with its noseless, bulging eyes not a foot away, the thin, wide lips and mouth hanging open like a trap, the ridges across the mouth like a fish, white and horrible.

I retched at the repellant sight, and the words came out so strangely, like a mechanical voice:
"Tell me, earthman, how is the weapon with which you shot my men on the roof made? What are the details of its construction, and the formula for its explosive?"

I almost laughed.
"You are ridiculous, old insect! Such things are known only to technicians in factories, not to mining men like myself."

Again the blinding light struck at me, the sickening shaking of the vibrance welled through me. I sank and was raised again to consciousness.

Still the same foolish old insect face, the same bulging ignorant eyes. The words:
"Tell, then, how this Croen and the forces of Prince Genner may be overcome? Speak, earthman."

The compulsion moved me, and I answered:
"There is no way you can overcome them, Jivro. You are doomed, and there is no hope for your tyranny over the Schrees to continue. They have tired of the Jivros, and you deserve what you are going to get."

Again the sickening application of force and again the exterior compulsion to speak. I said:
"Your only chance to get back power is to get forces from your home in space, wherever that may be. You cannot overcome these fighting men and their weapons, which are as good as your weapons, for you Jivros have relied for too long upon the Schrees and Shinros for your fighting, and for your thinking too, by the questions you ask. Have you not done any thinking in your life, that you ask me such silly questions?"

A change came over the old creature. I knew he was wounded, for I had seen the glistening milky fluid pouring from the wound in his breast. He leaned weakly against the table to which I was strapped, his eyes on mine glazing over with death. The wide lips at the very bottom of the flat face, moved:
"The Jivro Empire is ending, I think, earthman. We dug our own grave when we relegated all unpleasant duties to our conquered races. For an age the Jivro has been a creature shunning all work and effort, even thinking. We were bound to lose our grip. I see now that I am really foolish, and not a strong being of intellect. Our doom is written, and the day of the writing was that day when we conquered and enslaved the Schrees."

"Now you are talking sense, Old One. You see what is plain to all others; at last it becomes clear to you. But you are dying, and it is too late for wisdom to come to the Jivros. Once you set your feet on the path to greatness; but when you did evil, your feet naturally turned to the downward path of decadence. Evil is not a way of life, it is a way of death."

The bulging eyes on mine flickered with a fierce inner fire for an instant, then the head bent lower. For an instant he tottered there beside me, then crashed to the floor with a sound like a bundle of dry sticks.

I turned my head, saw that I was in the chamber of my first interrogation, and the sound of feet about me was the Jivro "doctors," moving to carry away their ruler. I saw the sleek body of Carna on a table but a dozen feet away. Three of the tall white-robed insects bent over her, one moving a control in a great lamp device, another scribbling on a pad, and the third was speaking. Evidently the Zoorph was getting the third degree, too. I lay back weakly. I felt
as if I had been through a washing machine and some of my buttons left in the wringer.

As I closed my eyes, a vast boom crashed into my ears, the table jumped beneath me, pieces of masonry fell bounding on the floor and I raised my head, staring wildly. Evidently the prince and the Croen were still bombing the place.

I tugged at the straps on my wrists and ankles. They gave a little. I kept on tugging, turning my head as far as I could to see how the insect men were taking their bombardment. They stood, near fifty of them, in a group by the door. Evidently they had started to run out when the crash came, but had stopped when it was evident the roof was going to remain intact. If those things had any sense they would be in the deepest sub-basement they could find, I figured. The Schrees must have been carrying them as helpless parasites for too many centuries to realize they could do without them, for them to be so inept.

Straining my neck, I watched the grotesque high-breasted white figures about the doorway, they were tittering to each other in some tongue I did not know, a strange sound like the rasping of corn husks under squeaking wagon wheels. Suddenly the whole palace shook terribly, the floor seemed to reel, an unbearable sound raged at my ears. I cringed from the pain of the sound. When I opened my eyes, the whole mass of the Jivro medicals was jammed in the doorway, struggling to get over each other, and the squeaking and rasping increased into a bedlam of sound. I laughed, a deep "ha ha," and from the neighboring table Carna cried:

"See what wonderful creatures are the tyrants when things are not going their way. If I had known they were like that in war, I would have killed them all myself long, long, ago. I would have poisoned them, and when they asked me who did it, I would have said, boo and they would all have run away and hid!"

As the last of them got through the door, I gave my loosened straps one mighty pull, and the heavy leather tore. I could hear it part in the sudden silence. Again and again I strained, and at last the leather parted entirely. My right hand was free. Feverishly I tore at the other fastenings. There could be but little time left us before that bombing struck dead center and brought the whole palace down. We had to get out. I knew it quite as well as those fleeing insect men.

Free at last, I rolled off the table, landed on all fours, leaped to Carna's side, and released the buckles of the straps. As she sat up, her face level with mine, she pursed her lips, and I gave her a hearty smack. As her arms went about my neck, I picked her up, raced through the doorway, along the passage, down the ramps. I was weaponless, but I had no longer any fear of the Jivros. I saw a group of them busy in a big chamber as I passed, but I raced on, spinning around the next corner, down the ramps and on ... on ... until I felt the coolness of fresh air ahead, ran out beneath the stars again, and along the shadowed street.

Putting my Zoorph back on her feet, we raced toward that breach in the wall. Over our heads the great blasting explosions went on, and I saw but three of the circling disks left to the defense of the city.

Outside the city wall we stopped to catch our breath, leaning against the wall in the shadow.

Carna said, musingly: "It is all over for the ancient Empire of the Jivros, if help does not come for them tonight. For, now that they are seen to be so helpless without their slaves and their fighting men, the news will spread. Planet after planet will rise against them. This is their finish!"

"They expected to conquer earth, Carna. They could never have done it. For a little while, perhaps, but not for long."

"They might have! They are like ants; they have a highly developed pattern of activity. But when that pattern is disrupted, they are lost. They do not think--they remember."

"We've got to make contact with the queen and with Genner and the Croen. We will be left out of things." I was wondering what Carna's future plans were.

"You are interested in the beautiful sister of the Prince?" asked Carna.

"You are interested in the so handsome Prince?" I answered in the same tone of voice.

"Of course, what woman would not be! But I am more interested in you, for I fell in love with you. But I can fall out again, and maybe--who knows...." she laughed.

"What's more to the point, Carna, is she interested in me?"

"I could tell you," said Carna, her eyes mysterious on my own, luminous and huge in the darkness.

"Well, perhaps you had better tell me, then."

"Why? I love you!"

"You mean she is interested in me!?"

"Very much, and she is a very smart woman who has ways of getting what she wants. I am very much afraid she will take you with her to space when they go, and leave poor Carna in her ruined city, with no one but the wild beasts and the dead bodies. This will be the end of this place."

"You are wrong!" I smiled, thinking the girl was flattering me.

"No, not wrong, dear earthman. I am very much afraid of the future, for I am to lose you, but I have a way of
avoiding that."

"And what is that way?"

"You will find out when the time comes, and you may like it very much!"

"Let's get away from this wall where we can see what's going on...."

We plodded across the level, grassy valley floor, walking backward some of the time, watching the great circling ships above the city's center, and the lancing blue paths of their rays stabbing at some darting adversary high above them.

Then from the western sky came a series of round low shapes, speeding so rapidly the eye could hardly distinguish them from the darkly glowing horizon. After their passage, in a close series, came the air-scream of falling missiles, high-pitched, then came a terrific cannonading of explosions. Fountains of fire sprang up in exact sequence, one after the other. The ground shook and shook underfoot, each shock seeming greater, to add its strength to the one preceding it. I knew that this was for the Jivros the end of their plans on earth.

Simultaneous with the arrow-swift flight, two great blazing lances of blue fire shot downward from the ships far overhead, transfixed the circling spheres one after the other. They tilted, plunged slowly, faster and faster--ended in great splashes of fire and sound somewhere in the city below.

I mopped my face. The night was hot, and relief flooded me.

"We got out of there just in time, Miss Mystic!"

She nodded, her white smile in the night a beautiful thing.

"What is this Miss Mystic word you use?"

"It means Zoorph, Carna. It is U.S.A. speech."

"U.S.A. speech," she parroted. "Some day I will talk U.S.A. speech, too, like you!"

I hope so. This tongue of yours gives me cramps in the jaws.

We plodded on across the grass, heading for the cliff ledge where we had met. I knew no where else to go. Quite suddenly came a soft sussuration overhead, a light-beam lanced down, pinning us there. I tossed Carna aside, rolled myself out of the path of light. But mercilessly the light beam spread, until we were again within the circle of illumination.

But no blue death ray followed. The dark shape settled to the earth beside us, and the door in the side opened.

I sprang to my feet in glad surprise to see Holaf in the round doorway, motioning us to enter. He cried:

"Come, the day of the Jivro has ended, there is work now for men to do!"

Carna laughed happily, ran to the doorway, and as Holaf caught her waist and swung her up, she kissed him on the cheek, still laughing in abandoned joy to know that finally the centuries-long nightmare fastened on her people was ended. I followed more sedately, wondering what now? I thought of poor cross-eyed Jake Barto, and of the three fortune-hunters who had gone the same path--and as I shook Holaf's hand, questioned the ecstatic confidence of release upon his face.

"Suppose the Empire sends ships here, will they not destroy all you have gained? Why do you feel so sure their power is broken? They were but few here?"

"They will not send ships, for no messenger got away. What do you think the ships of the prince have been doing? This is the beginning of their end!"

"How did you get out of the palace? The last I saw you, you were storming the place, gun in hand, and cheering...."

"When the bombs began to burst against the very roof, I got out. I killed a few Jivros first, though! It has been a good time; the best of my life!"

"Were you picked up as you picked us up?"

"Of course. Look there who it is that has done us the honor...."

My eyes followed his finger pointing through the far arched doorway to the control room. At the bank of levers and dials, her face intent upon the scene through the circular plastic dome, sat Wananda. Inadvertently my eyes went to Carna's face; she nodded once, vigorously. I knew she meant:

"See, I have told you the truth. She knew where you were, her heart told her, who else would descend to pick you up while the fighting was still going on?"

I went to her, and stood for a moment beside her, watching her swift hands, the light on her midnight hair, the delicate superb chiseling of her forehead and nose, the exquisite aura of womanhood about her--she was every inch a queen.

She turned, startled to find me there, then smiled, and a warm flush spread slowly from her neck upward to her temples. She knew that I knew! She laughed a little quiet sound to herself.

"That is why the Zoorphs are hated, earthman. One can never keep a secret!"

"You must have the powers of Carna yourself, to know that she told me." I answered.
"I have studied their methods. One comes by such talents hereditarily. The Zoorph is only an organization which concentrates on taking in and teaching such gifted children. I, as a princess, had a tutor of their sect. I know that you love her, too, you know."

"And not yourself. But she confesses that I love her only because of her skill at hypnosis, or something of the kind. To me that seems unfair, but I cannot help it. I love her, though I am drawn to you. But why should we concern ourselves with these matters? You will go back to space with your ships to carry rebellion to the other Jivro strongholds. I will be left behind to mourn you both."

"Why should you be left behind? Do you find the Schree or the Zerv company so repellent?"

"Not at all. I should desire nothing more than to see the worlds of other suns, other places in the far paths of space. Yet..."

"Yet what? Have you a wife here, children?"

"No, not that. But I have possessions it cost me many years of effort to acquire."

Carna came silently into the room, stood on the other side of the queen. For an instant Wananda closed her eyes, and some subtle sense of my own told me they were talking with each other in a way I could not hear.

Wananda opened her eyes, turned to me, smiling whimsically.

"Carna suggests that she will give your love to me in return for a certain favor."

"Do you want my love, Wananda?" I asked softly.

She did not stop smiling secretly to some sound she heard and I did not.

"You see, earthman, our race has never developed the morals and inhibitions which your people find so necessary. We are polygamous, and not apt to be jealous. She offers to give you to me as a royal husband in return for the privilege of being your slave, your housekeeper, your body-servant as it were. What do you say?"

I was stunned. So openly to be bargained over; frankly to be invited to marriage, to two women at the same time! Weakly I countered:

"Your people would object to an alien consort!"

"The word is strange to me. Among us you would be a ruler if you married me. Among us all men have several wives. But women have but one husband."

"You are offering me the rule of the Schrees?"

"Yes, and if our coming war with the Jivro creatures turns out well, it will mean not one planet, but many. I cannot say how many, as some of those never allied with the Schrees before will naturally gravitate to us in gratitude for our releasing them from the Jivros. I am agreeable mainly because I know that we need your earth science, your different culture—as wedded to our own science we would be invincible. We will need everything finally to conquer the ancient ingrown tyranny of the Jivros. I am not offering you exactly any bed of roses. Besides, I like and trust Carna. I can understand why she loves you, and why she bargains for any part of you. She knows I have but to exert my own wisdom of Zoorph to release you from her hold on you."

"I see. Let me get this straight. You love me; it is agreeable to you that I continue to love Carna; but I will love you too. Two wives who love me, a kingdom, and the chance of knocking over a whole empire of insects who have parasitized human races in space and meant to do it here. There is no way I can refuse!"

Carna laughed.

"With two of us working your mind for you, how could you refuse?"

Wananda frowned at Carna’s frankness.

"It is stated in the nineteenth law of Zoorph code that no victim is ever to be told of his enslavement openly, Carna. Why do you break the law?"

"I don't know, Wananda Highest. I think it is because I want to be fair to him, and give him a chance to do his own thinking, too."

I grinned.

"Our race has long been familiar with your so-called magic, dear ones. We call it hypnotism, and if you think I cannot resist it, remember that I shot the Old One with his eyes upon me."

Wananda suddenly set the big lever she held into a notch, turned to me, her face full of a charming surprise which I yet knew was an act.

"So you think you can resist your wives' wills, do you, earthman? Come, Carna, let us humble his boasts once and, for all!"

Their two lovely faces pressed cheek to cheek, the two pair of eyes bored into my own, and four quick slim hands gestured about my chin. A dizzy enervation swam into me as though I were bleeding to death, as though honey and whiskey were being poured down my throat, as though I had fallen suddenly onto a pink cloud of spun candy.

Visions of terrific pleasure began to hum in my head, my knees gradually gave way beneath me, until I was on
my knees before the two women. My hands were unconsciously extended as if to fend them off, and each of them
seized a hand, pulled me to the round bench at the back of the control cabin. They stroked my cheeks, began to
murmur their "magical" phrases in their mysterious mystic secret words, and my wits began to float into a very
genuine paradise where their two faces, side by side, became flower and fruit and tree and earth itself.

When I awoke from the dream into which they had sent me, Carna was seated beside me, nodding sleepily, her
head on her chest, and Wananda had returned to the controls of the ship. As I looked at each of them, I found a new
something had been added! I loved each of them equally well!

I sat up, stretching. Sometimes it is comforting to have problems decided for one. Now I did not have to go
through any excruciating pangs of conscience or guilt or fight myself into a state of not wanting one or the other of
them. They had just adjusted me to the situation mentally, and I felt that everything was perfect in the best of all
possible marriages for me!

"Well, I'm getting hungry!" I cried, apropos of nothing except that I did feel pangs.

My Zoorph did not even get up. She reached out one hand to where a covered tray sat on the bench beside her,
and handed it to me. I took off the lid, and on it were broiled chops, steaming deliciously baked beans, some kind of
soft brown bread--fruit, a sweet perfumed wine.

"The master is hungry, Carna will provide!"

If I get cross-eyed as Jake Barto, it will be from trying to see two women at once.

Oh yes, I forgot to tell you that Nokomee became the prince's third wife. I wished her happiness. For me, two
are enough!

THE END
For thousands of years the big brain served as a master switchboard for the thoughts and emotions of humanity. Now the central mind was showing signs of decay ... and men went mad.

The trouble began in a seemingly trivial way. Connor had wanted to speak to Rhoda, his wife, wished himself onto a trunk line and then waited. "Dallas Shipping here, Mars and points Jupiterward, at your service," said a business-is-business, unwifely voice in his mind.

"I was not calling you," he thought back into the line, now also getting a picture, first flat, then properly 3-D and in color. It was a paraNormally luxurious commercial office.

"I am the receptionist at Dallas Shipping," the woman thought back firmly. "You rang and I answered."

"I'm sure I rang right," Connor insisted.

"And I'm sure I know my job," Dallas Shipping answered. "I have received as many as five hundred thought messages a day, some of them highly detailed and technical and--"

"Forget it," snapped Connor. "Let's say I focussed wrong."

He pulled back and twenty seconds later finally had Rhoda on the line. "Queerest thing happened," he projected. "I just got a wrong party."

"Nothing queer about it," his wife smiled, springing to warm life on his inner eye. "You just weren't concentrating, Connor."

"Don't you hand me that too," he grumbled. "I know I thought on the right line into Central. Haven't I been using the System for sixty years?"

"Exactly--all habit and no attention."

How smugly soothing she was some days! "I think the trouble's in Central itself. The Switcher isn't receiving me clearly."

"Lately I've had some peculiar miscalls myself," Rhoda said nervously. "But you can't blame Central Switching!"

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" By now he was equally nervous and only too happy to end the conversation. Ordinarily communications were not monitored but if this one had been there could certainly be a slander complaint.

* * *

On his way home in the monorail Connor tried to reach his office and had the frightening experience of having his telepathic call refused by Central. Then he refused in turn to accept a call being projected at him, but when an Urgent classification was added he had to take it. "For your unfounded slander of Central Switching's functioning," announced the mechanically-synthesized voice, "you are hereby Suspended indefinitely from the telepathic net. From this point on all paraNormal privileges are withdrawn and you will be able to communicate with your fellows only in person or by written message."

Stunned, Connor looked about at his fellow passengers. Most of them had their eyes closed and their faces showed the mild little smile which was the outer hallmark of a mind at rest, tuned in to a music channel or some other of the hundreds of entertainment lines available from Central. How much he had taken that for granted just a few minutes ago!

Three men, more shabbily dressed, were unsmilingly reading books. They were fellow pariahs, Suspended for one reason or another from paraNormal privileges. Only the dullest, lowest-paying jobs were available to them while anyone inside the System could have Central read any book and transmit the information directly into his cortex. The shabbiest one of all looked up and his sympathetic glance showed that he had instantly grasped Connor's changed situation.

Connor looked hastily away; he didn't want any sympathy from that kind of 'human' being! Then he shuddered. Wasn't he, himself, now that kind in every way except his ability to admit it?

When he stepped onto the lushly hydroponic platform at the suburban stop the paraNormals, ordinarily friendly, showed that they, too, already realized what had happened. Each pair of suddenly icy eyes went past him as if he were not there at all.

He walked up the turf-covered lane toward his house, feeling hopelessly defeated. How would he manage to maintain a home here in the middle of green and luxuriant beauty? More people than ever were now outside the System for one reason or another and most of these unfortunates were crowded in metropolitan centers which were
slumhells to anyone who had known something better.

How could he have been so thoughtless because of a little lapse in Central's mechanism? Now that it was
denied him, probably forever, he saw more clearly the essential perfection of the system that had brought order into
the chaos following the discovery of universal paraNormal capacities. At first there had been endless interference
between minds trying to reach each other while fighting off unwanted calls. Men had even suggested this blessing
turned curse be annulled.

The Central Synaptic Computation Receptor and Transmitter System had ended all such negative thinking. For
the past century and a half it had neatly routed telepathic transmissions with an efficiency that made ancient
telephone exchanges look like Stone Age toys. A mind could instantly exchange information with any other
Subscribing mind and still shut itself off through the Central machine if and when it needed privacy. Except, he
shuddered once more, if Central put that Urgent rating on a call. Now only Rhoda could get a job to keep them from
the inner slumlands.

He turned into his garden and watched Max, the robot, spading in the petunia bed. The chrysanthemums really
needed more attention and he was going to think the order to Max when he realized with a new shock that all orders
would have to be oral now. He gave up the idea of saying anything and stomped gloomily into the house.

* * *

As he hung his jacket in the hall closet he heard Rhoda coming downstairs. "Queer thing happened today," he
said with forced cheerfulness, "but we'll manage." He stopped as Rhoda appeared. Her eyes were red and puffed.
"I tried to reach you," she sobbed.
"Oh, you already know. Well, we can manage, you know, honey. You can work two days a week and--"
"You don't understand," she screamed at him. "I'm Suspended too! I tried to tell it I hadn't done anything but it
said I was guilty by being associated with you."

Stunned, he fell back into a chair. "Not you, too, darling!" He had been getting used to the idea of his own
reduced status but this was too brutal. "Tell Central you'll leave me and the guilt will be gone."

"You fool, I did say that and my defense was refused!"

Tears welled in his eyes. Was there no bottom to this horror? "You yourself suggested that?"

"Why shouldn't I?" she cried. "It wasn't my fault at all."

He sat there and tried not to listen as waves of hate rolled over him. Then the front bell rang and Rhoda
answered it.

"I haven't been able to reach you," someone was saying through the door. It was Sheila Williams who lived just
down the lane. "Lately lines seem to get tied up more and more. It's about tonight's game."

Just then Rhoda opened the door and Sheila came to an abrupt halt as she saw her old friend's face. Her
expression turned stony and she said, "I wanted you to know the game is off." Then she strode away.

Unbelieving, Rhoda watched her go. "After forty years!" she exclaimed. She slowly came back to her husband
and stared down at him. "Forty years of 'undying' friendship, gone like that!" Her eyes softened a little. "Maybe I'm
wrong, Connor, maybe I said too much through Central myself. And maybe I'd have acted like Sheila if they had
been the ones."

He withdrew his hands from his face. "I've done the same thing to other wretches myself. We'll just have to get
used to it somehow. I've enough social credits to hang on here a year anyway."

"Get used to it," she repeated dully. This time there was no denunciation but she had to flee up the stairs to be
alone.

He went to the big bay window and, trying to keep his mind blank, watched Max re-spading the petunia bed. He
really should go out and tell the robot to stop, he decided, otherwise the same work would be repeated again and
again. But he just watched for the next hour as Max kept returning to the far end of the bed and working his way up
to the window, nodding mindlessly with each neat twist of his spade attachment.

Rhoda came back downstairs and said, "It's six-thirty. The first time since the boys left that they didn't call us at
six." He thought of Ted on Mars and Phil on Venus and sighed. "By now," she went on, "they know what's
happened. Usually colonial children just refuse to have anything more to do with parents like us. And they're right--
they have their own futures to consider."

"They'll still write to us," he started reassuring her but she had already gone outside where he could hear her
giving Max vocal instructions for preparing dinner. Which was just as well--she would know the truth soon enough.
Without a doubt the boys were now also guilty by association and they'd have nothing left to lose by maintaining
contact.

At dinner, though, he felt less kindly toward her and snapped a few times. Then it was Rhoda's turn to exercise
forebearance and to try to smooth things over. Once she looked out the picture window at the perfect synthetic
thatch of the Williams' great cottage, peeping over the hollyhock-topped rise of ground at the end of the garden.
"Well?" he demanded. "Well?"

"Nothing, Connor."

"You sighed and I want to know what the devil--"

"Since you insist--I was thinking how lucky Sheila Williams always is. Ten years ago the government authorized twins for her while I haven't had a child in thirty years, and now our disaster forewarns her. She'll never get caught off guard on a paranormal line."

* * *

He snapped his fingers and Max brought out the pudding in a softly shining silver bowl. Above it hovered a bluish halo of flaming brandy. "Maybe not. I've heard of people even being suspended without a reason." He slowly savored the first spoonful as if it might be the last ever. From now on every privileged pleasure would have that special value. "One more year of such delights."

"If we can stand the ostracism."

"We can." Suddenly he was all angry determination. "I did the wrong thing today, admitted, but it really was the truth, what I said. I've concentrated right and still got wrong numbers!"

"Me too, but I kept thinking it was my own fault."

"The real truth's that while the System assumes more authority each decade it keeps getting less efficient."

"Well, why doesn't the government do something, get everything back in working order?"

His grin showed no pleasure. "Do you know anybody who could help repair a Master Central Computer?"

"Not personally but there must be--"

"Must be nothing! People are slack from having it so good, don't think as much as they used to. Why bother when you can tap Central for any information? Almost any information."

"How can it all end?"

"Who knows and who cares?" He was angry all over again. "It will still be working well enough for a few centuries and we, we're just left out in the cold! I'm only ninety, I can live another sixty years, and you, you're going to have a good seventy-five more of this deprivation."

Max was standing at the foot of the table, metal visual lids closed as he waited for instructions. Rhoda considered him unthinkingly, then snapped back to attention. "Nothing more, Max, go to the kitchen and disconnect until you hear from us."

"Yes," he said in that programmed tone which indicated endless gratitude for the privilege of half-being.

"That ends my sad day," Connor sighed. "I'm taking a blackout pill and intend to stay that way for the next fourteen hours."

* * * * *

The next morning he rode into the city in the same car as the one that had brought him back the day before. None of the regulars even deigned to look in his direction. There was another change today. Only two fellow suspendeds were reading their books even though there had been three for the past few months. Which meant another one had exhausted his income and was being forced into the inner city.

At the office none of Connor's associates greeted him. They didn't even have to contrast the new tension in his face with the easy-going, flannelled contentment of their fellows. Undoubtedly somebody had tried to reach him or Rhoda and heard the Suspension Notice on their severed thought-lines.

As was also to be expected, there was a notice on his desk that his executive services would no longer be needed.

He quickly gathered up his personal things and went downstairs, passing through the office workers pool. Miss Wilson, his suspended secretary, came up to him. She looked saddened yet, curiously, almost triumphant too. "We all heard the bad news this morning," she said, her blue eyes never wavering. "We want you to know how sorry we are since you're not accustomed--"

"I'll never be accustomed to it," he said bitterly.

"No, Mr. Newman, you mustn't think that way. Human beings can get accustomed to whatever's necessary."

"Necessary? Not in my books!"

"Some day you may feel differently. I was born into a suspended family and we've managed. Being on the outside has its compensations."

"Such as?"

"We-I-l-I-", she faltered, "I really don't know exactly. But you must have faith it will be so." She pulled out a card from a pocket of her sheath dress. "Maybe you'll want to use this some day."

He glanced at the card which said, John Newbridge, Doctor at Mind, 96th Level, Harker Building, Appointments by Writing Only. There was no thought-line coding.

"I have no doubt," he muttered. But she was starting to look hurt so he carefully slid the card into his wallet.
"He's very helpful," she said. "I mean, helpful for people who have adjustment problems."
"You're a good girl," he said huskily. "Maybe we'll meet someday again. I'll have my wife call--write to you so you can visit us before we have to come into the city."
"That," she smiled happily, "would be so wonderful, Mr. Newman. I've never been in a home like that." Then, choking with emotion, she turned and hurried away.

* * *

When he reached home and told Rhoda what had happened, his wife was not in the least bit moved. "I'll never let that girl in my house," she said through thin lips. "A classless nothing! I'm going to keep my pride while I can."

There was some sense to her viewpoint but, he felt uncertainly, not enough for him to remain silent. "We have to adjust, darling, can't go on thinking we're what we're not."

"Why can't we?" she exploded. "I couldn't even order food today. Max had to go to the AutoMart and pick it up!"

"What are you trying to say?"

"That you made this mess!"

For a while he listened, dully unresponsive, but eventually the vituperation became too bitter and he came back at her with equal vigor. Until, weeping, she rushed upstairs once more.

That was the first of many arguments. Anything could bring them on, instructions for Max that she chose to consider erroneous, a biting statement from him that she was deliberately making herself physically unattractive. More and more Rhoda took to going into the city while he killed time making crude, tentative adjustments on Max. What the devil, he occasionally wondered, could she be doing there?

But most of the time he did not bother about it; he had found a consolation of his own. At first it had been impossible to make the slightest changes in Max, even those that permitted the robot to remain conscious and give advice. Again and again his mind strained toward Central until the icy-edged truth cut into his brain--there was no line.

Out of boredom, though, he plugged away, walked past the disdainfully-staring eyes of neighbors to the village library, and withdrew dusty microfiles on robotry. Eventually he had acquired a little skill at contemplating what, essentially, remained a mystery to his easily-tired mind. It was not completely satisfactory but it would be enough to get him a better-than-average menial job when he had finally accepted his new condition.

At long last a letter came from Ted on Mars. It said:

"Guilty by association, that's what I am! When it first happened I was furious with the two of you but resignation has its own consolations and I've given up the ranting. Of course, I've lost my job and my new one will keep me from Earth a longer time but the real loss is not being able to think on Earth Central once a day. As you know, it's a funny civilization here anyway. As yet, there's no local telepathic Central but all Active Communicators are permitted to think in on Earth Central once a day--except for the big shots who can even telepath social engagements to each other by way of Earth! Privileged but a pretty dull crowd anyway.

Oh yes, another exception to the general ration, Suspendeds like me. Funny thing about that, seems to me there are more Suspended from the Earth System all the time. Maybe I'm imagining it.

As lovingly as ever, your son, Ted. (NO. More than ever!)

Rhoda really went to pieces for a while after that letter but, oddly enough, all recriminations soon stopped. She began going into the city every day and after each visit seemed a little calmer for having done so.

* * *

Finally Connor could no longer remain silent about it. But by now all conversations had to be broached by tactful beating around the bush so he began by saying he had decided to take a lower level job in the metropolis.

Rhoda was not surprised. "I know. A good idea but I think you should wait a while longer and do something else first."

That made him suspicious. "Are you developing a new kind of unblockable ESP? How'd you know?"

"No," she laughed. "Some day we will maybe and people will use it better this time. But right now I'm just going by what I see. You've been studying Max and I knew you were bound to get restless." She became thoughtful. "What you really want to know, though, is what I've been doing in the city. Well, at first I did very little. I kept ending up in theatres where we Suspendeds can go. That gave a little relief. But since Ted's letter it's been different. I finally got up the courage to see Dr. Newbridge."

"Newbridge!"

"Connor, he's a great man. You should see him too."

"My mind may have smaller scope outside the System but what's left of it isn't cracking, Rhoda." Working himself into a spasm of righteous rage, he stalked out into the garden and tried to convince himself he was calmly studying the rose bushes' growth. But Sheila and Tony Williams came down the lane that skirted the garden and, as
their eyes moved haughtily past him, his rage shifted its focus. He came back into the house and remained in sullen silence.

Rhoda went on as if there had been no interruption. "I still say Dr. Newbridge is a great man. He dropped out of the System of his own free will and that certainly took courage!"

"He willingly gave up his advantages and privileges?"

"Yes. And he's explained why to me. He felt it was destroying every Subscriber's ability to think and that it could not last. Some day we would be without anything to do our thinking and he wanted out."

Connor sat down and stared thoughtfully out the window. Max had just lumbered into the garden and, having unscrewed one hand to replace it with a flexible spade, was starting on the evening schedule for turning over the soil at the base of the plants. He would go methodically down one flower bed, then up the next one, until all had been worked over, then would start all over again unless ordered to stop. "Are we to end up the same way?" Connor shuddered. He slapped his knee. "All right, I'll go with you tomorrow. I've got to see what he's like--a man who'd voluntarily surrender ninety percent of his powers!"

* * * * *

The next morning they rode into the city together and went to the Harker Building. It was in an area dense with non-telepaths each one showing that telltale cleft of anxiety in his forehead but briskly going about his business as if anxiety were actually a liveable quality. Newbridge had the same look but there was a nonetheless reassuring ease to the way he greeted them. He was tall and white-haired and his face frequently assumed an abstracted look as if his mind were reaching far away.

"You've come here," he said, "for two reasons. The first is dissatisfaction with your life. More precisely, you're dissatisfied with your attitude toward life but you wouldn't be willing to put it that way, not yet. Secondly, you want to know why anyone would willingly leave the System."

Connor leaned back in his chair. "That'll do for a starter."

"Right. Well, there aren't many anomalies like me but we do exist. Most people outside the System are there because they've been Suspended for supposed infractions, or they've been put out through guilt by association, or because they were born into a family already in that condition. Nothing like that happened to me. From early childhood I was trained by parents and teachers to discipline the projective potential of my mind into the System. Like every other paraNormal, I received my education by tapping Central for contact with information centers and other minds. But I was a fluke." His dark blue eyes twinkled. "Biological units are never so standardized that all of them fall under any system that can be devised. I functioned in this System, true, but I could imagine my mind existing outside, could see my functioning from the outside. This is terribly rare--most people are limited to the functions which sustain them. They experience nothing else except when circumstances force them to. I, though, could see the System was not all-powerful."

"Not all-powerful!" Connor exploded. "It got rid of me awfully easily."

His wife tried to calm him. "Listen, dear, then decide."

"You're surviving as a pariah, Mr. Newman, aren't you? Your wife tells me you've even started to study robot controls, valuable knowledge for the future and personally satisfying now. Millions of people do survive as outsiders, as do the planetary colonists who only have limited access so far to social telepathy. The System has built into it defenses against Subscribers who lack confidence in it--if it didn't it would collapse. But people in the System are not forced to remain there. They can will themselves out any time they close their minds to it, as I did. But they don't want to will themselves out of it--you certainly didn't--and their comfortable inertia keeps everything going. I think you have to know a little about its history, a history which never would have interested you if you were still comfortably inside it."

He slowly outlined the way it had developed. First those uncertain steps toward understanding the universally latent powers of telepathy, then growing chaos as each individual spent most of his time fighting off unwanted messages. After a period of desperate discomfort a few great minds, made superhuman by their ability to tap each others' resources, had devised the Central System Switchboard. Only living units, delicately poised between rigid order and sheer chaos, could receive mental messages but this problem had been solved by the molecular biologists with their synthesized, self-replicating axons, vastly elongated and cunningly intertwined by the billions. These responded to every properly-modulated thought wave passing through them and made the same careful sortings as a human cell absorbing matter from the world. Then, to make certain this central mind would never become chaotic, there was programmed into it an automatic rejection of all sceptical challenges.

"That was the highest moment of our race," Newbridge sighed. "We had harnessed infinite complexities to our needs. But the success was too complete. Ever since then humanity has become more and more dependent on what was to be essentially a tool and nothing more. Each generation became lazier and there's no one alive who can keep this Central System in proper working order." He leaned forward to emphasize his point. "You see, it's very slowly
breaking down. There's a steady accretion of inefficiency mutations in the axons and that's why more and more switching mistakes are being made--as in your case."

* * *

Connor was dazed by it all. "What's going to be the upshot, I mean, how is it going to break down?"

Newbridge threw up his hands. "I don't know--it's probably a long way off anyway. I guess the most likely thing is that more and more errors will accumulate and plenty of people will be Suspended just because Central is developing irrational quirks. Maybe the critical social mass for change will exist only when more are outside the System than inside. I suspect when that happens we'll be able to return to direct telepathic contact. As things are, our projection attempts are always blocked." A buzzing sound came out of a small black box on the doctor's desk, startling Connor who in his executive days had received all such signals directly in his head. "Well, I've another patient waiting so this will have to be the end of our chat."

Connor and his wife exchanged glances. He said, "I'd like to come back. I'll probably have a twenty-hour week so I'll be in town a few days a week."

"More than welcome to come again," Newbridge grinned. "Just make the arrangements with Miss Richards, my nurse."

When they were in the street Rhoda asked, "Well, what do you think now?"

"I don't know what to think yet--but I do feel better. Rhoda, would you mind going home alone? I think I'll find a job right away."

"Mind?" she laughed. "It's wonderful news!"

After he left her he wandered around the city awhile. In his paraNormal days he had never noticed them but it certainly was true that there were a lot of Suspendeds about. He studied some of them as he went along, trying to fathom their likes and dislikes by the way they moved and their expressions. But, unlike the paraNormals, each was different and it was impossible to see deeply into them.

Then, as he rounded a corner, he was suddenly face to face with his new enemy. A large flat park stood before him and there in the middle was a hundred-story tower of smooth seamless material, the home of the Central System's brain. There were smaller towers at many points in the world but this was the most important, capable of receiving on its mile-long axons, antennas of the very soul itself, every thought projected at it from any point in the solar system. The housing gleamed blindingly in the sun of high noon, as perfect as the day it had been completed. That surface was designed to repel all but the most unusual of the radiation barrages that could bring on subtle changes in the brain within. The breakdown, he thought bitterly, would take too many centuries to consider.

He turned away and headed into an Employment Exchange. The man behind the desk there was a Suspended, too, and showed himself to be sympathetically understanding as soon as he studied the application form. "ParaNormal until a few months ago," he nodded. "Tough change to make, I guess."

Connor managed a little grin. "Maybe I'll be grateful it happened some day."

"A curious thought, to say the least." He glanced down the application again. "Always some kind of work available although there do seem to be more Suspendeds all the time. Robot repair--that's good! Always a shortage there."

So Connor went to work in a large building downtown along with several hundred other men whose principal duty was overseeing the repair of robot servitors by other servitors and rectifying any minor errors that persisted. He was pleased to find that, while some of his fellow workmen knew much more about the work than he did, there were as many who knew less. But the most pleasing thing of all was the way they cooperated with one another. They could not reach directly into each other's minds but the very denial of this power gave them a sense of common need.

* * *

He visited Newbridge once a week and that, too, proved increasingly helpful. As time went on, he found he was spending less of it regretting what he had lost. But once in a while a paraNormal came through the workshop, eyes moving past the Suspendeds as if they did not exist and the old resentment would return in all its bitterness. And when he himself did not feel this way he could still sense it in men around him.

"Perfectly natural way to feel," Rhoda said, "not that it serves any purpose."

"It's paraNormal lack of reaction," he tried to explain, "that's what really bothers me. They don't even bother to notice our hatred because we have the strength of insects next to theirs. They can all draw on each others' resources and that totals to infinitely more than any of us have, even if as individuals they're so much less. The perfect form of security."

But for a moment one day that security seemed to be collapsing. Above the work floor in Connor's factory there was a gallery of small but luxurious offices in which the executive staff of paraNormals 'worked.' None of them came in more than two days a week but use of these offices was rotated among them so all were ordinarily occupied
and workers, going upstairs to the stock depot, could see paraNormals in various stages of relaxation. Usually the paraNormal kept his feet on a desk rest and, eyes closed, contemplated incoming entertainment. On rarer occasions he would be leaning over a document on the desk as his mind received the proper decision from Central.

This particular morning Connor was feeling bitterly envious as he went by the offices. He had already seen seven smugly-similar faces when he came by Room Eight. Suddenly the face of its occupant contorted in agony, then the man got up and paced about as if in a trap. Deciding he had seen more than was good for him, Connor hurried on. But the man in Nine was acting out the same curious drama. He quickly retraced his steps, passing one scene of consternation after another, and went back down to the work floor, wondering what it all meant.

Soon everybody knew something extraordinary was afoot as all the paraNormals swarmed noisily onto the runway overlooking the floor. They were shouting wordless sounds at each other, floundering about as they did so. Then, with equal suddenness, everything was calm again and, faces more relaxed, they went back into their offices.

That evening Connor heard the same story everywhere—for ten minutes all paraNormals had gone berserk. On the monorail he noticed that, though still more relaxed than their unwelcome fellows, they no longer exuded that grating absolute sense of security. No doubt about it—for a few minutes something had gone wrong, completely wrong, with the Central System. "I don't like it," Rhoda said. "Let's see Dr. Newbridge tomorrow."

"I'll bet it's a good sign." Newbridge, though, was also worried when they got to see him. "They're losing some of their self-confidence," he said, "and that means they're going to start noticing us. Figure it out, Newman, about one-third the population of Earth--nobody can get exact figures--is outside the System. The paraNormals will want to reduce our numbers if more breakdowns take place. I'll have to go into hiding soon."

"But why you of all people?" Connor protested.

"Because I and a few thousand others like me represent not only an alternative way of life--all Suspendeds do that--but we possess more intensive knowledge for rehabilitating society after Central's collapse. That collapse may come much sooner than we've been expecting. When it does we're going to have enormous hordes of paras milling around, helplessly waiting to learn how to think for themselves again. Well, when we finally reach the telepath stage next time we'll have to manage it better." He took out an envelope. "If anything happens to me, this contains the names of some people you're to contact."

"Why don't you come to our place now?" asked Rhoda. "We'll still be able to hold it for a few more months."

"Can't go yet, too many things to clear up. But maybe later." He rose and extended his hand to them. "Anyway it's a kind--and brave--offer."

"Sounds overly melodramatic to me," Connor said when they were outside. "Who'd want to harm a psychiatric worker with no knowledge except what's in his head and his personal library?"

* * *

But he stopped harping on the point when they reached the monorail station. Three Suspendeds, obviously better educated than most, were being led away by a large group of paraNormals. The paraNormals had their smug expressions back but there was a strange gleam of determination in their eyes. "Sometimes life itself gets overly melodramatic," Rhoda said nervously.

The possible fate of these arrested men haunted him all the way home as did the hostile stares of the people in the monorail car. At home, though, there was the momentary consolation of a pair of letters from the boys. There was little information in them but they did at least convey in every line love for their parents.

But even this consolation did not last long. Why, Connor muttered to himself, did they have to wait for letters when telephone and radio systems could have eased their loneliness so much more effectively? Because the paras did not need such systems and their needs were the only ones that mattered! His fingers itched to achieve something more substantial than the work, now childishly routine, that he was doing at the factory. Just from studying Max he knew he could devise such workable communication systems. But all that was idle daydreaming—it wouldn't be in his lifetime.

The next morning Rhoda insisted they go back into the city to try once more to persuade Newbridge to leave. When they arrived at the Harker Building it seemed strangely quiet. The few people who were about kept avoiding each others' glances and they found themselves alone in the elevator to the 96th level. But Miss Richards, the doctor's nurse-secretary, was standing in the corridor as they got out. She was trembling and found it difficult to talk. "Don't--don't go in," she stuttered. "No help now."

He pushed past her, took one glance at the fire-charred consulting room where a few blackened splinters of bone remained and turned away, leading the two women to the elevator. At first Miss Richards did not want to go but he forced her to come along. "You have to get away from here--can't do any good for him now."

She sucked in air desperately, blinked back her tears and nodded. "There was another ten-minute breakdown this morning. A lot of paraNormals panicked and a vigilante pack came here to fire-blast the Doctor. They said I'd
be next if things got any worse."
Connor pinched his forehead to hold back his own anguish, then pulled out a sheet of paper. "Dr. Newbridge
was afraid of something like this. He gave me a list of names."
"I know, Mr. Newman, I know them by heart."
"Shouldn't we try to contact one of them?"
As they came out into the street, she stopped and thought a moment. "Crane would be the easiest to reach. He's
an untitled psychiatrist and one of the alternate leaders for the underground."
"Underground?"
"Oh, they tried to be prepared for every eventual--"
"It's impossible!" Rhoda broke in. She had been looking up and down the great avenue as they talked. "There
isn't one person in the street, not one!"
An abandoned robot cab stood at the curb and he threw open the door. "Come on, get in! Something's
happening. Miss Richards, set it for this Crane's address."
The cab started to shoot uptown, turning a corner into another deserted boulevard. As it skirted the great Park,
he pointed at Central Tower. There seemed to be a slight crack in the smooth surface half way up but, as a moment's
mist engulfed the tower, it looked flawless again. Then all the mist was gone and the crack was back, a little larger
than before.
* * *
Connor leaned forward and set the cab for top speed as they rounded into the straight-away of another uptown
street. Occasionally they caught glimpses of frightened faces, clumped in lobby entrances, and once two bodies
came flying out of a window far ahead. "They're killing our people everywhere," moaned the nurse.
As they approached the crushed forms, Connor slowed down a little. "They're dressed too well--what's left of
them. They're paraNormals!"
A minute later they were at the large apartment block where Crane lived. They entered the building through a
lobby jammed with more silent people. All were Suspendeds.
At first Crane did not want to let the trio in but when he recognized Newbridge's nurse he unlocked the heavily-
bolted door. He was a massively-built man with dark eyes set deeply beneath a jutting brow and the eyes did not
blink as Miss Richards told him what had happened. "We'll miss him," he said, then turned abruptly on Connor.
"Have you any skills?"
"Robotics," he answered.
The great head nodded as Connor told of his experience at work and on Max. "Good, we're going to need
people like you for rebuilding." He pulled a radio sender and receiver from a cabinet and held an earphone close to
his temple, continuing to nod. Then he put it down again. "I know what you're going to say--illegal, won't work and
all that. Well, a few of us have been waiting for the chance to build our own communication web and now we can do
it."
"I just want to know why you keep mentioning our rebuilding. They're more likely to destroy all of us in their
present mood."
"Us?" He took them to the window and pointed toward the harbor where thousands of black specks were
tumbling into the water. "They're destroying themselves! Some jumping from buildings but most pouring toward the
sea, a kind of oceanic urge to escape completely from themselves, to bury themselves in something infinitely bigger
than their separate hollow beings. Before they were more like contented robots. Now they're more like suicidal
lemmings because they can't exist without this common brain to which they've given so little and from which they've
taken so much."
Connor squared his shoulders. "We'll have our work cut out for us. Dr. Newbridge saw it all coming, you did
too."
"Not quite," Crane sighed. "We assumed that at the time of complete breakdown the System would open up,
throwing all the Subscribers out of it, leaving them disconnected from each other and waiting for our help. But it
worked out in just the opposite manner!"
"You mean that the System is staying closed as it breaks down? Like a telephone exchange in which all the
lines remained connected and every call went to all telephones."
"Exactly," Crane replied.
"I don't understand this technical talk," Rhoda protested, watching in hypnotized horror as the speck swarm
swelled ever larger in the sea.
"I'll put it this way," Crane explained. "Their only hope was to have time to develop the desire for release from
the System as it died. But they are dying inside it. You see, Mrs. Newman, every thought in every paraNormal's
head, every notion, every image, no matter how stupidly trivial, is now pouring into every other paraNormal's head.
They're over-communicating to the point where there's nothing left to communicate but death itself!"
THE END
Prologue

By July 1, 1916, the war had involved every civilized nation upon the globe except the United States of North and of South America, which had up to that time succeeded in maintaining their neutrality. Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Switzerland, Poland, Austria Hungary, Lombardy, and Servia, had been devastated. Five million adult male human beings had been exterminated by the machines of war, by disease, and by famine. Ten million had been crippled or invalided. Fifteen million women and children had been rendered widows or orphans. Industry there was none. No crops were harvested or sown. The ocean was devoid of sails. Throughout European Christendom women had taken the place of men as field hands, labourers, mechanics, merchants, and manufacturers. The amalgamated debt of the involved nations, amounting to more than $100,000,000,000, had bankrupted the world. Yet the starving armies continued to slaughter one another.

Siberia was a vast charnel-house of Tartars, Chinese, and Russians. Northern Africa was a holocaust. Within sixty miles of Paris lay an army of two million Germans, while three million Russians had invested Berlin. In Belgium an English army of eight hundred and fifty thousand men faced an equal force of Prussians and Austrians, neither daring to take the offensive.

The inventive genius of mankind, stimulated by the exigencies of war, had produced a multitude of death-dealing mechanisms, most of which had in turn been rendered ineffective by some counter-invention of another nation. Three of these products of the human brain, however, remained unneutralized and in large part accounted for the impasse at which the hostile armies found themselves. One of these had revolutionized warfare in the field, and the other two had destroyed those two most important factors of the preliminary campaign—the aeroplane and the submarine. The German dirigibles had all been annihilated within the first ten months of the war in their great cross-channel raid by Pathé contact bombs trailed at the ends of wires by high-flying French planes. This, of course, had from the beginning been confidently predicted by the French War Department. But by November, 1915, both the allied and the German aerial fleets had been wiped from the clouds by Federston's vortex guns, which by projecting a whirling ring of air to a height of over five thousand feet crumpled the craft in mid-sky like so many butterflies in a simoon.

The second of these momentous inventions was Captain Barlow's device for destroying the periscopes of submarines, thus rendering them blind and helpless. Once they were forced to the surface such craft were easily destroyed by gun fire or driven to a sullen refuge in protecting harbours.

The third, and perhaps the most vital, invention was Dufay's nitrogen-iodide pellets, which when sown by pneumatic guns upon the slopes of a battlefield, the ground outside intrenchments, or round the glacis of a fortification made approach by an attacking army impossible and the position impregnable. These pellets, only the size of No. 4 bird shot and harmless out of contact with air, became highly explosive two minutes after they had been scattered broadcast upon the soil, and any friction would discharge them with sufficient force to fracture or dislocate the bones of the human foot or to put out of service the leg of a horse. The victim attempting to drag himself away inevitably sustained further and more serious injuries, and no aid could be given to the injured, as it was impossible to reach them. A field well planted with such pellets was an impassable barrier to either infantry or cavalry, and thus any attack upon a fortified position was doomed to failure. By surprise alone could a general expect to achieve a victory. Offensive warfare had come almost to a standstill.

Germany had seized Holland, Denmark, and Switzerland. Italy had annexed Dalmatia and the Trentino; and a new Slav republic had arisen out of what had been Hungary, Croatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Servia, Roumania, Montenegro, Albania, and Bulgaria. Turkey had vanished from the map of Europe; while the United States of South America, composed of the Spanish-speaking South American Republics, had been formed. The mortality continued at an average of two thousand a day, of which 75 per cent. was due to starvation and the plague. Maritime commerce had ceased entirely, and in consequence of this the merchant ships of all nations rotted at the docks.

The Emperor of Germany, and the kings of England and of Italy, had all voluntarily abdicated in favour of a
republican form of government. Europe and Asia had run amuck, hysterical with fear and blood. As well try to pacify a pack of mad and fighting dogs as these frenzied myriads with their half-crazed generals. They lay, these armies, across the fair bosom of the earth like dying monsters, crimson in their own blood, yet still able to writhe upward and deal death to any other that might approach. They were at a deadlock, yet each feared to make the first overtures for peace. There was, in actuality, no longer even an English or a German nation. It was an orgy of homicide, in which the best of mankind were wantonly destroyed, leaving only the puny, the feeble-minded, the deformed, and the ineffectual to perpetuate the race.

It was three minutes past three postmeridian in the operating room of the new Wireless Station recently installed at the United States Naval Observatory at Georgetown. Bill Hood, the afternoon operator, was sitting in his shirt sleeves with his receivers at his ears, smoking a corncob pipe and awaiting a call from the flagship Lincoln of the North Atlantic Patrol with which, somewhere just off Hatteras, he had been in communication a few moments before. The air was quiet.

Hood was a fat man, and so of course good-natured; but he was serious about his work and hated all interfering amateurs. Of late these wireless pests had become particularly obnoxious, as practically everything was sent out in code and they had nothing with which to occupy themselves. But it was a hot day and none of them seemed to be at work. On one side of his desk a tall thermometer indicated that the temperature of the room was 91 degrees Fahrenheit; on the other a big clock, connected with some extraneous mechanism by a complicated system of brass rods and wires, ticked off the minutes and seconds with a peculiar metallic self-consciousness, as if aware of its own importance in being the official timepiece, as far as there was an official timepiece, for the entire United States of America.

Hood from time to time tested his converters and detector, and then resumed his non-official study of the adventures of a great detective who pursued the baffling criminal by the aid of all the latest scientific discoveries. Hood thought it was good stuff, although at the same time he knew, of course, that it was rot. He was a practical man of little imagination, and, though the detective did not interest him particularly, he liked the scientific part of the stories. He was thrifty, of Scotch-Irish descent, and at two minutes past three had never had an adventure in his life. At three minutes past three he began his career as one of the celebrities of the world.

As the minute hand of the official clock dropped into its slot somebody called the Naval Observatory. The call was so faint as to be barely audible, in spite of the fact that Hood's instrument was tuned for a three-thousand-metre wave. Supposing quite naturally that the person calling had a shorter wave, he gradually cut out the inductance of his receiver; but the sound faded out entirely, and he returned to his original inductance and shunted in his condenser, upon which the call immediately increased in volume. Evidently the other chap was using a big wave, bigger than Georgetown.

Hood puckered his brows and looked about him. Lying on a shelf above his instrument was one of the new ballast coils that Henderson had used with the long waves from lightning flashes, and he leaned over and connected the heavy spiral of closely wound wire, throwing it into his circuit. Instantly the telephones spoke so loud that he could hear the shrill cry of the spark even from where the receivers lay beside him on the table. Quickly fastening them to his ears he listened. The sound was clear, sharp, and metallic, and vastly higher in pitch than a ship's call. It couldn't be the Lincoln.

"By gum!" muttered Hood. "That fellow must have a twelve-thousand-metre wave length with fifty kilowatts behind it, sure! There ain't another station in the world but this can pick him up!"

"NAA--NAA--NAA," came the call.

Throwing in his rheostat he sent an "O.K" in reply, and waited expectantly, pencil in hand. A moment more and he dropped his pencil in disgust.

"Just another bug!" he remarked aloud to the thermometer. "Ought to be poisoned! What a whale of a wave length, though!"

For several minutes he listened intently, for the amateur was sending insistently, repeating everything twice as if he meant business.

"He's a jolly joker all right," muttered Hood, this time to the clock. "Must be pretty hard up for something to do!"

Then he laughed out loud and took up the pencil again. This amateur, whoever he was, was almost as good as his detective story. The "bug" called the Naval Observatory once more and began repeating his entire message for the third time.

"To all mankind"--he addressed himself modestly--"To all mankind--To all mankind--I am the dictator--of human destiny--Through the earth's rotation--I control--day and night--summer and winter--I command the--cessation of hostilities and--the abolition of war upon the globe--I appoint the--United States--as my agent for this
purpose—As evidence of my power I shall increase the length of the day—from midnight to midnight—of Thursday, July 22d, by the period of five minutes.—PAX."

The jolly joker, having repeated thus his extraordinary message to all mankind, stopped sending.
"Well, I'll be hanged!" gasped Bill Hood. Then he wound up his magnetic detector and sent an answering challenge into the ether.
"Can--the--funny--stuff!" he snapped. "And tune out--or--we'll revoke--your license!"
"What a gall!" he grunted, folding up the yellow sheet of pad paper upon which he had taken down the message to all mankind and thrusting it into his book for a marker. "All the fools aren't dead yet!"
Then he picked up the Lincoln and got down to real work. The "bug" and his message passed from memory.

II

The following Thursday afternoon a perspiring and dusty stranger from St. Louis, who, with the Metropolitan Art Museum as his objective, was trudging wearily through Central Park, New York City, at two o'clock, paused to gaze with some interest at the obelisk known as Cleopatra's Needle. The heat rose in shimmering waves from the asphalt of the roadway, but the stranger was used to heat and he was conscientiously engaged in the duty of seeing New York. Opposite the Museum he seated himself upon a bench in the shade of a faded dogwood and wiped the moisture from his eyes. The glare from the unprotected boulevards was terrific. Under these somewhat unfavourable conditions he was occupied in studying the monument of Egypt's past magnificence when he felt a slight dragging sensation. It was indefinable and had no visual concomitant. But it was as though the brakes were being gently applied to a Pullman train. He was the only human being in the neighbourhood; not even a policeman was visible; and the experience gave him a creepy feeling. Then to his amazement Cleopatra's Needle slowly toppled from its pedestal and fell with a crash across the roadway. At first he thought it an optical illusion and wiped his eyes again, but it was nothing of the kind. The monument, which had a moment before pointed to the zenith, now lay shattered in three pieces upon the softening concrete of the drive. The stranger arose and examined the fragments of the monolith, one of which lay squarely across the road, barring all passage. Round the pedestal were scattered small pieces of broken granite, and from these, after looking about cautiously, he chose one with care and placed it in his pocket.
"Gosh!" he whispered to himself as he hurried toward Fifth Avenue. "That'll just be something to tell 'em at home! Eh, Bill?"

The dragging sensation experienced by the tourist from St. Louis was felt by many millions of people all over the world, but, as in most countries it occurred coincidently with pronounced earthquake shocks and tremblings, for the most part it passed unnoticed as a specific, individual phenomenon.

Hood, in the wireless room at Georgetown, suddenly heard in his receivers a roar like that of Niagara and quickly removed them from his ears. He had never known such statics. He was familiar with electrical disturbances in the ether, but this was beyond anything in his experience. Moreover, when he next tried to use his instruments he discovered that something had put the whole apparatus out of commission. About an hour later he felt a pronounced pressure in his eardrums, which gradually passed off. The wireless refused to work for nearly eight hours, and it was still recalcitrant when he went off duty at seven o'clock. He had not felt the quivering of the earth round Washington, and being an unimaginative man he accepted the other facts of the situation philosophically. The statics would pass, and then Georgetown would be in communication with the rest of the world again, that was all. At seven o'clock the night shift came in, and Hood borrowed a pipeful of tobacco from him and put on his coat.
"Say, Bill, did you feel the shock?" asked the shift, hanging up his hat and taking a match from Hood.
"No," answered the latter, "but the statics have put the machine on the blink. She'll come round all right in an hour or so. The air's gummy with ions. Shock, did you say?"
"Sure. Had 'em all over the country. Say, the boys at the magnetic observatory claim their compass shifted east and west instead of north and south, and stayed that way for five minutes. Didn't you feel the air pressure? I should worry! And say, I just dropped into the Meteorological Department's office and looked at the barometer. She'd jumped up half an inch in about two seconds, wiggled round some, and then come back to normal. You can see the curve yourself if you ask Fraser to show you the self-registering barograph. Some doin's, I tell you!"
He nodded his head with an air of importance.
"Take your word for it," answered Hood without emotion, save for a slight annoyance at the other's arrogation of superior information. "'Tain't the first time there's been an earthquake since creation." And he strolled out, swinging to the doors behind him.

The night shift settled himself before the instruments with a look of dreary resignation.
"Say," he muttered aloud, "you couldn't jar that feller with a thirteen-inch bomb! He wouldn't even rub himself!"

Hood, meantime, bought an evening paper and walked slowly to the district where he lived. It was a fine night
and there was no particular excitement in the streets. His wife opened the door.

"Well," she greeted him, "I'm glad you've come home at last. I was plumb scared something had happened to you. Such a shaking and rumbling and rattling I never did hear! Did you feel it?"

"I didn't feel nothin'!" answered Bill Hood. "Some one said there was a shock, that was all I heard about it. The machine's out of kilter."

"They won't blame you, will they?" she asked anxiously.

"You bet they won't!" he replied. "Look here, I'm hungry. Are the waffles ready?"

"Have 'em in a jiffy!" she smiled. "You go in and read your paper."

He did as he was directed, and seated himself in a rocker under the gaslight. After perusing the baseball news he turned back to the front page. The paper was a fairly late edition, containing up-to-the-minute telegraphic notes. In the centre column, alongside the announcement of the annihilation of three entire regiments of Silesians by the explosion of nitroglycerine concealed in dummy gun carriages, was the following:

CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE FALLS
EARTHQUAKE DESTROYS FAMOUS MONUMENT
SHOCKS FELT HERE AND ALL OVER U. S.

Washington was visited by a succession of earthquake shocks early this afternoon, which, in varying force, were felt throughout the United States and Europe. Little damage was done, but those having offices in tall buildings had an unpleasant experience which they will not soon forget. A peculiar phenomenon accompanying this seismic disturbance was the variation of the magnetic needle by over eighty degrees from north to east and an extraordinary rise and fall of the barometer. All wireless communication had to be abandoned, owing to the ionizing of the atmosphere, and up to the time this edition went to press had not been resumed. Telegrams by way of Colon report similar disturbances in South America. In New York the monument in Central Park known as Cleopatra's Needle was thrown from its pedestal and broken into three pieces. The contract for its repair and replacement has already been let. The famous monument was a present from the Khedive of Egypt to the United States, and formerly stood in Alexandria. The late William H. Vanderbilt defrayed the expense of transporting it to this country.

Bill Hood read this with scant interest. The Giants had knocked the Braves' pitcher out of the box, and an earthquake seemed a small matter. His mind did not once revert to the mysterious message from Pax the day before. He was thinking of something far more important.

"Say, Nellie," he demanded, tossing aside the paper impatiently, "ain't those waffles ready yet?"

III

On that same evening, Thursday, July 22d, two astronomers attached to the Naval Observatory sat in the half darkness of the meridian-circle room watching the firmament sweep slowly across the aperture of the giant lens. The chamber was as quiet as the grave, the two men rarely speaking as they noted their observations. Paris might be taken, Berlin be razed, London put to the torch; a million human beings might be blown into eternity, or the shrieks of mangled creatures lying in heaps before pellet-strewn barbed-wire entanglements rend the summer night; great battleships of the line might plunge to the bottom, carrying their crews with them; and the dead of two continents rot unburied--yet unmoved the stars would pursue their nightly march across the heavens, cruel day would follow pitiless night, and the careless earth follow its accustomed orbit as though the race were not writhing in its death agony. Gazing into the infinity of space human existence seemed but the scum upon a rainpool, human warfare but the frenzy of insectivora. Unmindful of the starving hordes of Paris and Berlin, of plague-swept Russia, or of the drowned thousands of the North Baltic Fleet, these two men calmly studied the procession of the stars--the onward bore of the universe through space, and the spectra of newborn or dying worlds.

It was a suffocatingly hot night and their foreheads reeked with sweat. Dim shapes on the walls of the room indicated what by day was a tangle of clockwork and recording instruments, connected by electricity with various buttons and switches upon the table. The brother of the big clock in the wireless operating room hung nearby, its face illuminated by a tiny electric lamp, showing the hour to be eleven-fifty. Occasionally the younger man made a remark in a low tone, and the elder wrote something on a card.

"The 'seeing' is poor to-night," said Evarts, the younger man. "The upper air is full of striae and, though it seems like a clear night, everything looks dim--a volcanic haze probably. Perhaps the Aleutian Islands are in eruption again."

"Very likely," answered Thornton, the elder astronomer. "The shocks this afternoon would indicate something of the sort."

"Curious performance of the magnetic needle. They say it held due east for several minutes," continued Evarts, hoping to engage his senior in conversation--almost an impossibility, as he well knew.

Thornton did not reply. He was carefully observing the infinitesimal approach of a certain star to the meridian line, marked by a thread across the circle's aperture. When that point of light should cross the thread it would be
midnight, and July 22, 1916, would be gone forever. Every midnight the indicating stars crossed the thread exactly on time, each night a trifle earlier than the night before by a definite and calculable amount, due to the march of the earth around the sun. So they had crossed the lines in every observatory since clocks and telescopes had been invented. Heretofore, no matter what cataclysm of nature had occurred, the star had always crossed the line not a second too soon or a second too late, but exactly on time. It was the one positively predictable thing, foretellable for ten or for ten thousand years by a simple mathematical calculation. It was surer than death or the tax-man. It was absolute.

Thornton was a reserved man of few words—impersonal, methodical, serious. He spent many nights there with Evarts, hardly exchanging a phrase with him, and then only on some matter immediately concerned with their work. Evarts could dimly see his long, grave profile bending over his eyepiece, shrouded in the heavy shadows across the table. He felt a great respect, even tenderness, for this taciturn, high-principled, devoted scientist. He had never seen him excited, hardly ever aroused. He was a man of figures, whose only passion seemed to be the "music of the spheres."

A long silence followed, during which Thornton seemed to bend more intently than ever over his eyepiece. The hand of the big clock slipped gradually to midnight.

"There's something wrong with the clock," said Thornton suddenly, and his voice sounded curiously dry, almost unnatural. "Telephone to the equatorial room for the time."

Puzzled by Thornton's manner Evarts did as instructed.

"Forty seconds past midnight," came the reply from the equatorial observer.

Evarts repeated the answer for Thornton's benefit, looking at their own clock at the same time. It pointed to exactly forty seconds past the hour. He heard Thornton suppress something like an oath.

"There's something the matter!" repeated Thornton dumbly. "Aeta isn't within five minutes of crossing. Both clocks can't be wrong!"

He pressed a button that connected with the wireless room.

"What's the time?" he called sharply through the nickel-plated speaking-tube.

"Forty-five seconds past the hour," came the answer. Then: "But I want to see you, sir. There's something queer going on. May I come in?"

"Come!" almost shouted Thornton.

A moment later the flushed face of Williams, the night operator, appeared in the doorway.

"Excuse me, sir," he stammered, "but something fierce must have happened! I thought you ought to know. The Eiffel Tower has been trying to talk to us for over two hours, but I can't get what he's saying."

"What's the matter—atmospherics?" snapped Evarts.

"No; the air was full of them, sir—shrieking with them you might say; but they've stopped now. The trouble has been that I've been jammed by the Brussels station talking to the Belgian Congo—same wave length—and I couldn't tune Brussels out. Every once in a while I'd get a word of what Paris was saying, and it's always the same word—'heure.' But just now Brussels stopped sending and I got the complete message of the Eiffel Tower. They wanted to know our time by Greenwich. I gave it to 'em. Then Paris said to tell you to take your transit with great care and send result to them immediately----"

The ordinarily calm Thornton gave a great suspiration and his face was livid. "Aeta's just crossed—we're five minutes out! Evarts, am I crazy? Am I talking straight?"

Evarts laid his hand on the other's arm.

"The earthquake's knocked out your transit," he suggested.

"And Paris—how about Paris?" asked Thornton. He wrote something down on a card mechanically and started for the door. "Get me the Eiffel Tower!" he ordered Williams.

The three men stood motionless, as the wireless man sent the Eiffel Tower call hurtling across the Atlantic:

"ETA--ETA--ETA."

"All right," whispered Williams, "I've got 'em."

"Tell Paris that our clocks are all out five minutes according to the meridian."

Williams worked the key rapidly, and then listened.

"The Eiffel Tower says that their chronometers also appear to be out by the same time, and that Greenwich and Moscow both report the same thing. Wait a minute! He says Moscow has wired that at eight o'clock last evening a tremendous aurora of bright yellow light was seen to the northwest, and that their spectroscopes showed the helium line only. He wants to know if we have any explanation to offer-----"

"Explanation!" gasped Evarts. "Tell Paris that we had earthquake shocks here together with violent seismic movements, sudden rise in barometer, followed by fall, statics, and erratic variation in the magnetic needle."

"What does it all mean?" murmured Thornton, staring blankly at the younger man.
The key rattled and the rotary spark whined into a shriek. Then silence.

"Paris says that the same manifestations have been observed in Russia, Algeria, Italy, and London," called out Williams. "Ah! What's that? Nauen's calling." Again he sent the blue flame crackling between the coils. "Nauen reports an error of five minutes in their meridian observations according to the official clocks. And hello! He says Berlin has capitulated and that the Russians began marching through at daylight--that is about two hours ago. He says he is about to turn the station over to the Allied Commissioners, who will at once assume charge."

Evarts whistled.

"How about it?" he asked of Thornton.

The latter shook his head gravely.

"It may be--explainable--or," he added hoarsely, "it may mean the end of the world."

Williams sprang from his chair and confronted Thornton.

"What do you mean?" he almost shouted.

"Perhaps the universe is running down!" said Evarts soothingly. "At any rate, keep it to yourself, old chap. If the jig is up there's no use scaring people to death a month or so too soon!"

Thornton grasped an arm of each.

"Not a word of this to anybody!" he ground out through compressed lips. "Absolute silence, or hell may break loose on earth!"

IV

Free translation of the Official Report of the Imperial Commission of the Berlin Academy of Science to the Imperial Commissioners of the German Federated States:

The unprecedented cosmic phenomena which occurred on the 22d and 27th days of the month of July, and which were felt over the entire surface of the globe, have left a permanent effect of such magnitude on the position of the earth's axis in space and the duration of the period of the rotation, that it is impossible to predict at the present time the ultimate changes or modifications in the climatic conditions which may follow. This commission has considered most carefully the possible causes that may have been responsible for this catastrophe--(Weltunfall)--and by eliminating every hypothesis that was incapable of explaining all of the various disturbances, is now in a position to present two theories, either one of which appears to be capable of explaining the recent disturbances.

The phenomena in question may be briefly summarized as follows;

1. THE YELLOW AURORA. In Northern Europe this appeared suddenly on the night of July 22d as a broad, faint sheaf--(Lichtbündel)--of clear yellow light in the western sky. Reports from America show that at Washington it appeared in the north as a narrow shaft of light, inclined at an angle of about thirty degrees with the horizon, and shooting off to the east. Near the horizon it was extremely brilliant, and the spectroscope showed that the light was due to glowing helium gas.

The Potsdam Observatory reported that the presence of sodium has been detected in the aurora; but this appears to have been a mistake due to the faintness of the light and the circumstance that no comparison spectrum was impressed on the plate. On the photograph made at the Washington Observatory the helium line is certain, as a second exposure was made with a sodium flame; and the two lines are shown distinctly separated.

2. THE NEGATIVE ACCELERATION. This phenomenon was observed to a greater or less extent all over the globe. It was especially marked near the equator; but in Northern Europe it was noted by only a few observers, though many clocks were stopped and other instruments deranged. There appears to be no doubt that a force of terrific magnitude was applied in a tangential direction to the surface of the earth, in such a direction as to oppose its axial rotation, with the effect that the surface velocity was diminished by about one part in three hundred, resulting in a lengthening of the day by five minutes, thirteen and a half seconds.

The application of this brake--(Bremskraft), as we may term it--caused acceleration phenomena to manifest themselves precisely as on a railroad train when being brought to a stop. The change in the surface speed of the earth at the equator has amounted to about 6.4 kilometres an hour; and various observations show that this change of velocity was brought about by the operation of the unknown force for a period of time of less than three minutes. The negative acceleration thus represented would certainly be too small to produce any marked physiological sensations, and yet the reports from various places indicate that they were certainly observed. The sensations felt are usually described as similar to those experienced in a moving automobile when the brake is very gently applied.

Moreover, certain destructive actions are reported from localities near the equator--chimneys fell and tall buildings swayed; while from New York comes the report that the obelisk in Central Park was thrown from its pedestal. It appears that these effects were due to the circumstance that the alteration of velocity was propagated through the earth as a wave similar to an earthquake wave, and that the effects were cumulative at certain points--a theory that is substantiated by reports that at certain localities, even near the equator, no effects were noted.

3. TIDAL WAVES. These were observed everywhere and were very destructive in many places. In the Panama
Canal, which is near the equator and which runs nearly east and west, the sweep of the water was so great that it flowed over the Gatun Lock. On the eastern coasts of the various continents there was a recession of the sea, the fall of the tide being from three to five metres below the low-water mark. On the western coasts there was a corresponding rise, which in some cases reached a level of over twelve metres.

That the tidal phenomena were not more marked and more destructive is a matter of great surprise, and has been considered as evidence that the retarding force was not applied at a single spot on the earth's surface, but was a distributed force, which acted on the water as well as on the land, though to a less extent. It is difficult, however, to conceive of a force capable of acting in such a way; and Björnson's theory of the magnetic vortex in the ether has been rejected by this commission.

4. ATMOSPHERIC DISTURBANCES. Some time after the appearance of the yellow aurora a sudden rise in atmospheric pressure, followed by a gradual fall considerably below the normal pressure, was recorded over the entire surface of the globe. Calculations based on the time of arrival of this disturbance at widely separated points show that it proceeded with the velocity of sound from a point situated probably in Northern Labrador. The maximum rise of pressure recorded was registered at Halifax, the self-recording barographs showing that the pressure rose over six centimetres in less than five minutes.

5. SHIFT IN DIRECTION OF THE EARTH'S AXIS. The axis of the earth has been shifted in space by the disturbance and now points almost exactly toward the double star Delta Ursæ Minoris. This change appears to have resulted from the circumstance that the force was applied to the surface of the globe in a direction not quite parallel to the direction of rotation, the result being the development of a new axis and a shift in the positions of the poles, which it will now be necessary to rediscover.

It appears that these most remarkable cosmic phenomena can be explained in either of two ways: they may have resulted from an explosive or volcanic discharge from the surface of the earth, or from the oblique impact of a meteoric stream moving at a very high velocity. It seems unlikely that sufficient energy to bring about the observed changes could have been developed by a volcanic disturbance of the ordinary type; but if radioactive forces are allowed to come into play the amount of energy available is practically unlimited.

It is difficult, however, to conceive of any way in which a sudden liberation of atomic energy could have been brought about by any terrestrial agency; so that the first theory, though able to account for the facts, seems to be the less tenable of the two. The meteoric theory offers no especial difficulty. The energy delivered by a comparatively small mass of finely divided matter, moving at a velocity of several hundred kilometres a second—and such a velocity is by no means unknown—would be amply sufficient to alter the velocity of rotation by the small amount observed.

Moreover, the impact of such a meteoric stream may have developed a temperature sufficiently high to bring about radioactive changes, the effect of which would be to expel helium and other disintegration products at cathode-ray velocity—(Kathoden-Strahlen-Fortpflanzungsgeschwindigkeit)—from the surface of the earth; and the recoil exerted by this expulsion would add itself to the force of the meteoric impact.

The presence of helium makes this latter hypothesis not altogether improbable, while the atmospheric wave of pressure would result at once from the disruption of the air by the passage of the meteor stream through it. Exploration of the region in which it seems probable that the disturbance took place will undoubtedly furnish the data necessary for the complete solution of the problem. [Pp. 17-19.]

V

At ten o'clock one evening, shortly after the occurrences heretofore described, an extraordinary conference occurred at the White House, probably the most remarkable ever held there or elsewhere. At the long table at which the cabinet meetings took place sat six gentlemen in evening dress, each trying to appear unconcerned, if not amused. At the head of the table was the President of the United States; next to him Count von Koenitz, the German Ambassador, representing the Imperial[1] German Commissioners, who had taken over the reins of the German Government after the abdication of the Kaiser; and, on the opposite side, Monsieur Emil Liban, Prince Rostoloff, and Sir John Smith, the respective ambassadors of France, Russia, and Great Britain. The sixth person was Thornton, the astronomer.

[Footnote 1: The Germans were unwilling to surrender the use of the words "Empire" and "Imperial," even after they had adopted a republican form of government.]

The President had only succeeded in bringing this conference about after the greatest effort and the most skillful diplomacy—in view of the extreme importance which, he assured them all, he attached to the matters which he desired to lay before them. Only for this reason had the ambassadors of warring nations consented to meet—unofficially as it were.

"With great respect, your Excellency," said Count von Koenitz, "the matter is preposterous—as much so as a fairy tale by Grimm! This wireless operator of whom you speak is lying about these messages. If he received them at
all—a fact which hangs solely upon his word—he received them after and not before the phenomena recorded."

The President shook his head. "That might hold true of the first message—the one received July 19th," said he, "but the second message, foretelling the lengthening of July 27th, was delivered on that day, and was in my hands before the disturbances occurred."

Von Koenitz fingered his moustache and shrugged his shoulders. It was clear that he regarded the whole affair as absurd, undignified.

Monsieur Liban turned impatiently from him.

"Your Excellency," he said, addressing the President, "I cannot share the views of Count von Koenitz. I regard this affair as of the most stupendous importance. Messages or no messages, extraordinary natural phenomena are occurring which may shortly end in the extinction of human life upon the planet. A power which can control the length of the day can annihilate the globe."

"You cannot change the facts," remarked Prince Rostoloff sternly to the German Ambassador. "The earth has changed its orbit. Professor Vaskofsky, of the Imperial College, has so declared. There is some cause. Be it God or devil, there is a cause. Are we to sit still and do nothing while the globe's crust freezes and our armies congeal into corpses?" He trembled with agitation.

"Calm yourself, mon cher Prince!" said Monsieur Liban. "So far we have gained fifteen minutes and have lost nothing! But, as you say, whether or not the sender of these messages is responsible, there is a cause, and we must find it."

"But how? That is the question," exclaimed the President almost apologetically, for he felt, as did Count von Koenitz, that somehow an explanation would shortly be forthcoming that would make this conference seem the height of the ridiculous. "I have already," he added hastily, "instructed the entire force of the National Academy of Sciences to direct its energies toward the solution of these phenomena. Undoubtedly Great Britain, Russia, Germany, and France are doing the same. The scientists report that the yellow aurora seen in the north, the earthquakes, the variation of the compass, and the eccentricities of the barometer are probably all connected more or less directly with the change in the earth's orbit. But they offer no explanation. They do not suggest what the aurora is nor why its appearance should have this effect. It, therefore, seems to me clearly my duty to lay before you all the facts as far as they are known to me. Among these facts are the mysterious messages received by wireless at the Naval Observatory immediately preceding these events."

"Post hoc, ergo propter hoc!" half sneered Von Koenitz.

The President smiled wearily.

"What do you wish me to do?" he asked, glancing round the table. "Shall we remain inactive? Shall we wait and see what may happen?"

"No! No!" shouted Rostoloff, jumping to his feet. "Another week and we may all be plunged into eternity. It is suicidal not to regard this matter seriously. We are sick from war. And perhaps Count von Koenitz, in view of the fall of Berlin, would welcome something of the sort as an honourable way out of his country's difficulties."

"Sir!" cried the count, leaping to his feet. "Have a care! It has cost Russia four million men to reach Berlin. When we have taken Paris we shall recapture Berlin and commence the march of our victorious eagles toward Moscow and the Winter Palace."

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Be seated, I implore you!" exclaimed the President.

The Russian and German ambassadors somewhat ungraciously resumed their former places, casting at each other glances of undisguised contempt.

"As I see the matter," continued the President, "there are two distinct propositions before you: The first relates to how far the extraordinary events of the past week are of such a character as to demand joint investigation and action by the Powers. The second involves the cause of these events and their connection with and relation to the sender of the messages signed Pax. I shall ask you to signify your opinion as to each of these questions."

"I believe that some action should be taken, based on the assumption that they are manifestations of one and the same power or cause," said Monsieur Liban emphatically.

"I agree with the French Ambassador," growled Rostoloff.

"I am of opinion that the phenomena should be the subject of proper scientific investigation," remarked Count von Koenitz more calmly. "But as far as these messages are concerned they are, if I may be pardoned for saying so, a foolish joke. It is undignified to take any cognizance of them."

"What do you think, Sir John?" asked the President, turning to the English Ambassador.

"Before making up my mind," returned the latter quietly, "I should like to see the operator who received them."

"By all means!" exclaimed Von Koenitz.

The President pressed a button and his secretary entered.

"I had anticipated such a desire on the part of all of you," he announced, "and arranged to have him here. He is
waiting outside. Shall I have him brought in?"

"Yes! Yes!" answered Rostoloff. And the others nodded.

The door opened, and Bill Hood, wearing his best new blue suit and nervously twisting a faded bicycle cap between his fingers, stumbled awkwardly into the room. His face was bright red with embarrassment and one of his cheeks exhibited a marked protuberance. He blinked in the glare of the electric light.

"Mr. Hood," the President addressed him courteously, "I have sent for you to explain to these gentlemen, who are the ambassadors of the great European Powers, the circumstances under which you received the wireless messages from the unknown person describing himself as 'Pax.'"

Hood shifted from his right to his left foot and pressed his lips together. Von Koenitz fingered the waxed ends of his moustache and regarded the operator whimsically.

"In the first place," went on the President, "we desire to know whether the messages which you have reported were received under ordinary or under unusual conditions. In a word, could you form any opinion as to the whereabouts of the sender?"

Hood scratched the side of his nose in a manner politely doubtful.

"Sure thing, your Honour," he answered at last. "Sure the conditions was unusual. That feller has some juice and no mistake."

"Juice?" inquired Von Koenitz.

"Yare--current. Whines like a steel top. Fifty kilowatts sure, and maybe more! And a twelve-thousand-metre wave."

"I do not fully understand," interjected Rostoloff. "Please explain, sir."

"Ain't nothin' to explain," returned Hood. "He's just got a hell of a wave length, that's all. Biggest on earth. We're only tuned for a three-thousand-metre wave. At first I could hardly take him at all. I had to throw in our new Henderson ballast coils before I could hear properly. I reckon there ain't another station in Christendom can get him."

"Ah," remarked Von Koenitz. "One of your millionaire amateurs, I suppose."

"Yare," agreed Hood. "I thought sure he was a nut."

"A what?" interrupted Sir John Smith.

"A nut," answered Hood. "A crank, so to speak."

"Ah, 'krank!'" nodded the German. "Exactly--a lunatic! That is precisely what I say!"

"But I don't think it's no nut now," countered Hood valiantly. "If he is a bug he's the biggest bug in all creation, that's all I can say. He's got the goods, that's what he's got. He'll do some damage before he gets through."

"Are these messages addressed to anybody in particular?" inquired Sir John, who was studying Hood intently.

"Well, they are and they ain't. Pax--that's what he calls himself--signals NAA, our number, you understand, and then says what he has to say to the whole world, care of the United States. The first message I thought was a joke and stuck it in a book I was reading, 'Silas Snooks'----"

"What?" ejaculated Von Koenitz impatiently.

"Snooks--man's name--feller in the book--nothing to do with this business," explained the operator. "I forgot all about it. But after the earthquake and all the rest of the fuss I dug it out and gave it to Mr. Thornton. Then on the 27th came the next one, saying that Pax was getting tired of waiting for us and was going to start something. That came at one o'clock in the afternoon, and the fun began at three sharp. The whole observatory went on the blink. Say, there ain't any doubt in your minds that it's him, is there?"

Von Koenitz looked cynically round the room.

"There is not!" exclaimed Rostoloff and Liban in the same breath.

The German laughed.

"Speak for yourselves, Excellencies," he sneered. His tone nettled the wireless representative of the sovereign American people.

"Do you think I'm a liar?" he demanded, clenching his jaw and glaring at Von Koenitz.

The German Ambassador shrugged his shoulders again. Such things were impossible in a civilized country--at Potsdam--but what could you expect----

"Steady, Hood!" whispered Thornton.

"Remember, Mr. Hood, that you are here to answer our questions," said the President sternly. "You must not address his Excellency, Baron von Koenitz, in this fashion."

"But the man was making a monkey of me!" muttered Hood. "All I say is, look out. This Pax is on his job and means business. I just got another call before I came over here--at nine o'clock."

"What was its purport?" inquired the President.

"Why, it said Pax was getting tired of nothing being done and wanted action of some sort. Said that men were
dying like flies, and he proposed to put an end to it at any cost. And--and----"

"Yes! Yes!" ejaculated Liban breathlessly.

"And he would give further evidence of his control over the forces of nature to-night."

"Ha! Ha!" Von Koenitz leaned back in amusement. "My friend," he chuckled, "you--are--the 'nut'!"

What form Hood's resentment might have taken is problematical; but as the German's words left his mouth the electric lights suddenly went out and the windows rattled ominously. At the same moment each occupant of the room felt himself sway slightly toward the east wall, on which appeared a bright yellow glow. Instinctively they all turned to the window which faced the north. The whole sky was flooded with an orange-yellow aurora that rivalled the sunlight in intensity.

"What'd I tell you?" mumbled Hood.

The Executive Mansion quivered, and even in that yellow light the faces of the ambassadors seemed pale with fear. And then as the glow slowly faded in the north there floated down across the aperture of the window something soft and fluffy like feathers. Thicker and faster it came until the lawn of the White House was covered with it. The air in the room turned cold. Through the window a large flake circled and lit on the back of Rostoloff's head.

"Snow!" he cried. "A snowstorm--in August!"

The President arose and closed the window. Almost immediately the electric lights burned up again.

"Now are you satisfied?" cried Liban to the German.

"Satisfied?" growled Von Koenitz. "I have seen plenty of snowstorms in August. They have them daily in the Alps. You ask me if I am satisfied. Of what? That earthquakes, the aurora borealis, electrical disturbances, snowstorms exist--yes. That a mysterious bugaboo is responsible for these things--no!"

"What, then, do you require?" gasped Liban.

"More than a snowstorm!" retorted the German. "When I was a boy at the gymnasium we had a thunderstorm with fishes in it. They were everywhere one stepped, all over the ground. But we did not conclude that Jonah was giving us a demonstration of his power over the whale."

He faced the others defiantly; in his voice was mockery.

"You may retire, Mr. Hood," said the President. "But you will kindly wait outside."

"That is an honest man if ever I saw one, Mr. President," announced Sir John, after the operator had gone out.

"I am satisfied that we are in communication with a human being of practically supernatural powers."

"What, then, shall be done?" inquired Rostoloff anxiously. "The world will be annihilated!"

"Your Excellencies"--Von Koenitz arose and took up a graceful position at the end of the table--"I must protest against what seems to me to be an extraordinary credulity upon the part of all of you. I speak to you as a rational human being, not as an ambassador. Something has occurred to affect the earth's orbit. It may result in a calamity. None can foretell. This planet may be drawn off into space by the attraction of some wandering world that has not yet come within observation. But one thing we know: No power on or of the earth can possibly derange its relation to the other celestial bodies. That would be, as you say here, 'lifting one's self by one's own boot-straps.' I do not doubt the accuracy of your clocks and scientific instruments. Those of my own country are in harmony with yours. But to say that the cause of all this is a man is preposterous. If the mysterious Pax makes the heavens fall, they will tumble on his own head. Is he going to send himself to eternity along with the rest of us? Hardly! This Hood is a monstrous liar or a dangerous lunatic. Even if he has received these messages, they are the emanations of a crank, as, he says, he himself first suspected. Let us master this hysteria born of the strain of constant war. In a word, let us go to bed."

"Count von Koenitz," replied Sir John after a pause, "you speak forcefully, even persuasively. But your argument is based upon a proposition that is scientifically fallacious. An atom of gunpowder can disintegrate itself, 'lift itself by its own boot-straps!' Why not the earth? Have we as yet begun to solve all the mysteries of nature? Is it inconceivable that there should be an undiscovered explosive capable of disrupting the globe? We have earthquakes. Is it beyond imagination that the forces which produce them can be controlled?"

"My dear Sir John," returned Von Koenitz courteously, "my ultimate answer is that we have no adequate reason to connect the phenomena which have disturbed the earth's rotation with any human agency."

"That," interposed the President, "is something upon which individuals may well differ. I suppose that under other conditions you would be open to conviction?"

"Assuredly," answered Von Koenitz. "Should the sender of these messages prophesy the performance of some miracle that could not be explained by natural causes, I would be forced to admit my error."

Monsieur Liban had also arisen and was walking nervously up and down the room. Suddenly he turned to Von Koenitz and in a voice shaking with emotion cried: "Let us then invite Pax to give us a sign that will satisfy you."

"Monsieur Liban," replied Von Koenitz stiffly, "I refuse to place myself in the position of communicating with a lunatic."
"Very well," shouted the Frenchman, "I will take the responsibility of making myself ridiculous. I will request the President of the United States to act as the agent of France for this purpose."

He drew a notebook and a fountain pen from his pocket and carefully wrote out a message which he handed to the President. The latter read it aloud:

"Pax: The Ambassador of the French Republic requests me to communicate to you the fact that he desires some further evidence of your power to control the movements of the earth and the destinies of mankind, such phenomena to be preferably of a harmless character, but inexplicable by any theory of natural causation. I await your reply.

"THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES."

"Send for Hood," ordered the President to the secretary who answered the bell. "Gentlemen, I suggest that we ourselves go to Georgetown and superintend the sending of this message."

Half an hour later Bill Hood sat in his customary chair in the wireless operating room surrounded by the President of the United States, the ambassadors of France, Germany, Great Britain, and Russia, and Professor Thornton. The faces of all wore expressions of the utmost seriousness, except that of Von Koenitz, who looked as if he were participating in an elaborate hoax. Several of these distinguished gentlemen had never seen a wireless apparatus before, and showed some excitement as Hood made ready to send the most famous message ever transmitted through the ether. At last he threw over his rheostat and the hum of the rotary spark rose into its staccato song. Hood sent out a few V's and then began calling:

"PAX--PAX--PAX."

Breathlessly the group waited while he listened for a reply. Again he called:

"PAX--PAX--PAX."

He had already thrown in his Henderson ballast coils and was ready for the now familiar wave. He closed his eyes, waiting for that sharp metallic cry that came no one knew whence. The others in the group also listened intently, as if by so doing they, too, might hear the answer if any there should be. Suddenly Hood stiffened.

"There he is!" he whispered. The President handed him the message, and Hood's fingers played over the key while the spark sent its singing note through the ether.

"Such phenomena to be preferably of a harmless character, but inexplicable by any theory of natural causation," he concluded.

An uncanny dread seized on Thornton, who had withdrawn himself into the background. What was this strange communion? Who was this mysterious Pax? Were these real men or creatures of a grotesque dream? Was he not drowsing over his eyepiece in the meridian-circle room? Then a simultaneous movement upon the part of those gathered round the operator convinced him of the reality of what was taking place. Hood was laboriously writing upon a sheet of yellow pad paper, and the ambassadors were unceremoniously crowding each other in their eagerness to read.

"To the President of the United States," wrote Hood: "In reply to your message requesting further evidence of my power to compel the cessation of hostilities within twenty-four hours, I"--there was a pause for nearly a minute, during which the ticking of the big clock sounded to Thornton like revolver shots--"I will excavate a channel through the Atlas Mountains and divert the Mediterranean into the Sahara Desert. PAX."

Silence followed the final transcription of the message from the unknown--a silence broken only by Bill Hood's tremulous, half-whispered: "He'll do it all right!"

Then the German Ambassador laughed.

"And thus save your ingenious nation a vast amount of trouble, Monsieur Liban," said he.

VI

A Tripolitan fisherman, Mohammed Ben Ali el Bad, a holy man nearly seventy years of age, who had twice made the journey to Mecca and who now in his declining years occupied himself with reading the Koran and instructing his grandsons in the profession of fishing for mullet along the reefs of the Gulf of Cabes, had anchored for the night off the Tunisian coast, about midway between Sfax and Lesser Syrtis. The mullet had been running thick and he was well satisfied, for by the next evening he would surely complete his load and be able to return home to the house of his daughter, Fatima, the wife of Abbas, the confectioner. Her youngest son, Abdullah, a lithe lad of seventeen, was at that moment engaged in folding their prayer rugs, which had been spread in the bow of the falukah in order that they might have a clearer view as they knelt toward the Holy City. Chud, their slave, was cleaning mullet in the waist and chanting some weird song of his native land.

Mohammed Ben Ali el Bad was sitting cross-legged in the stern, smoking a hookah and watching the full moon sail slowly up above the Atlas Range to the southwest. The wind had died down and the sea was calm, heaving slowly with great orange-purple swells resembling watered silk. In the west still lingered the fast-fading afterglow, above which the stars glimmered faintly. Along the coast lights twinkled in scattered coves. Half a mile astern the Italian cruiser Fiala lay slowly swinging at anchor. From the forecastle came the smell of fried mullet. Mohammed
Ben Ali was at peace with himself and with the world, including even the irritating Chud. The west darkened and the stars burned more brilliantly. With the hookah gurgling softly at his feet, Mohammed leaned back his head and gazed in silent appreciation at the wonders of the heavens. There was Turka Kabar, the crocodile; and Menish el Tabir, the sleeping beauty; and Rook Hamana, the leopard, and there--up there to the far north--was a shooting star. How gracefully it shot across the sky, leaving its wake of yellow light behind it! It was the season for shooting stars, he recollected. In an instant it would be gone--like a man's life! Saddened, he looked down at his hookah. When he should look up again--if in only an instant--the star would be gone. Presently he did look up again. But the star was still there, coming his way!

He rubbed his old eyes, keen as they were from habituation to the blinding light of the desert. Yes, the star was coming--coming fast.

"Abdullah!" he called in his high-pitched voice. "Chud! Come, see the star!"

Together they watched it sweep onward.

"By Allah! That is no star!" suddenly cried Abdullah. "It is an air-flying fire chariot! I can see it with my eyes--black, and spouting flames from behind."

"Black," echoed Chud gutturally. "Black and round! Oh, Allah!" He fell on his knees and knocked his head against the deck.

The star, or whatever it was, swung in a wide circle toward the coast, and Mohammed and Abdullah now saw that what they had taken to be a trail of fire behind was in fact a broad beam of yellow light that pointed diagonally earthward. It swept nearer and nearer, illuminating the whole sky and casting a shimmering reflection upon the waves.

A shrill whistle trilled across the water, accompanied by the sound of footsteps running along the decks of the cruiser. Lights flashed. Muffled orders were shouted.

"By the beard of the Prophet!" cried Mohammed Ali. "Something is going to happen!"

The small black object from which the incandescent beam descended passed at that moment athwart the face of the moon, and Abdullah saw that it was round and flat like a ring. The ray of light came from a point directly above it, passing through its aperture downward to the sea.

"Boom!" The fishing-boat shook to the thunder of the Fiala's eight-inch gun, and a blinding spurt of flame leaped from the cruiser's bows. With a whining shriek a shell rose toward the moon. There was a quick flash followed by a dull concussion. The shell had not reached a tenth of the distance to the flying machine.

And then everything happened at once. Mohammed described afterward to a gaping multitude of dirty villagers, while he sat enthroned upon his daughter's threshold, how the star-ship had sailed across the face of the moon and come to a standstill above the mountains, with its beam of yellow light pointing directly downward so that the coast could be seen bright as day from Sfax to Cabes. He saw, he said, genii climbing up and down on the beam, passing through its aperture downward to the sea. 

But that as it may, he swears upon the Beard of the Prophet that a second ray of light--of a lavender colour, like the eye of a long-dead mullet--flashed down alongside the yellow beam. Instantly the earth blew up like a cannon--up into the air, a thousand miles up. It was as light as noonday. Deafened by titanic concussions he fell half dead. The sea boiled and gave off thick clouds of steam through which flashed dazzling discharges of lightning accompanied by a thundering, grinding sound like a million mills. The ocean heaved spasmodically and the air shook with a rending, ripping noise, as if Nature were bent upon destroying her own handiwork. The glare was so dazzling that sight was impossible. The falukah was tossed this way and that, as if caught in a simoon, and he was rolled hither and yon in the company of Chud, Abdullah, and the headless mullet.

This earsplitting racket continued, he says, without interruption for two days. Abdullah says it was several hours; the official report of the Fiala gives it as six minutes. And then it began to rain in torrents until he was almost drowned. A great wind arose and lashed the ocean, and a whirlpool seized the falukah and whirled it round and round. Darkness descended upon the earth, and in the general mess Mohammed hit his head a terrific blow against the mast. He was sure it was but a matter of seconds before they would be dashed to pieces by the waves. The falukah spun like a marine top with a swift sideways motion. Something was dragging them along, sucking them in. The Fiala went careening by, her fighting masts hanging in shreds. The air was full of falling rocks, trees, splinters, and thick clouds of dust that turned the water yellow in the lightning flashes. The mast went crashing over and a lemon tree descended to take its place. Great streams of lava poured down out of the air, and masses of opaque matter plunged into the sea all about the falukah. Scalding mud, stones, hail, fell upon the deck.

And still the fishing-boat, gyrating like a leaf, remained afloat with its crew of half-crazed Arabs. Suffocated, stunned, scalded, petrified with fear, they lay among the mullet while the falukah raced along in its wild dance with death. Mohammed recalls seeing what he thought to be a great cliff rush by close beside them. The falukah plunged over a waterfall and was almost submerged, was caught again in a maelstrom, and went twirling on in the blackness. They all were deathly sick, but were too terrified to move.
And then the nearer roaring ceased. The air was less congested. They were still showered with sand, clods of earth, twigs, and pebbles, it is true, but the genii had stopped hurling mountains at each other. The darkness became less opaque, the water smoother. Soon they could see the moon through the clouds of settling dust, and gradually they could discern the stars. The falukah was rocking gently upon a broad expanse of muddy ocean, surrounded by a yellow scum broken here and there by a floating tree. The Fiala had vanished. No light shone upon the face of the waters. But death had not overtaken them. Overcome by exhaustion and terror Mohammed lay among the mullet, his legs entangled in the lemon tree. Did he dream it? He cannot tell. But as he lost consciousness he thinks he saw a star shooting toward the north.

When he awoke the falukah lay motionless upon a boundless ochre sea. They were beyond sight of land. Out of a sky slightly dim the sun burned pitilessly down, sending warmth into their bodies and courage to their hearts. All about them upon the water floated the evidences of the cataclysm of the preceding night—trees, shrubs, dead birds, and the distorted corpse of a camel. Kneeling without their prayer rugs among the mullet they raised their voices in praise of Allah and his Prophet.

VII

Within twenty-four hours of the destruction of the Mountains of Atlas by the Flying Ring and the consequent flooding of the Sahara, the official gazettes and such newspapers as were still published announced that the Powers had agreed upon an armistice and accepted a proposition of mediation on the part of the United States looking toward permanent peace. The news of the devastation and flood caused by this strange and terrible dreadnought of the air created the profoundest apprehension and caused the wildest rumours, for what had happened in Tunis was assumed as likely to occur in London, Paris, or New York. Wireless messages flashed the story from Algiers to Cartagena, and it was thence disseminated throughout the civilized world by the wireless stations at Paris, Nauen, Moscow, and Georgetown.

The fact that the rotation of the earth had been retarded was still a secret, and the appearance of the Ring had not as yet been connected with any of the extraordinary phenomena surrounding it; but the newspaper editorials universally agreed that whatever nation owned and controlled this new instrument of war could dictate its own terms. It was generally supposed that the blasting of the mountain chain of Northern Africa had been an experiment to test and demonstrate the powers of this new demoniacal invention, and in view of its success it did not seem surprising that the nations had hastened to agree to an armistice, for the Power that controlled a force capable of producing such an extraordinary physical cataclysm could annihilate every capital, every army, every people upon the globe or even the globe itself.

The flight of the Ring machine had been observed at several different points, beginning at Cape Race, where at about four A.M. the wireless operator reported what he supposed to be a large comet discharging earthward a diagonal shaft of orange-yellow light and moving at incredible velocity in a southeasterly direction. During the following day the lookout on the Vira, a fishguard and scout cruiser of the North Atlantic Patrol, saw a black speck soaring among the clouds which he took to be a lost monoplane fighting to regain the coast of Ireland. At sundown an amateur wireless operator at St. Michael's in the Azores noted a small comet sweeping across the sky far to the north. This comet an hour or so later passed directly over the cities of Lisbon, Linares, Lorca, Cartagena, and Algiers, and was clearly observable from Badajoz, Almadén, Seville, Cordova, Grenada, Oran, Biskra, and Tunis, and at the latter places it was easily possible for telescopic observers to determine its size, shape, and general construction.

Daniel W. Quinn, Jr., the acting United States Consul stationed at Biskra, who happened to be dining with the abbot of the Franciscan monastery at Linares, sent the following account of the flight of the Ring to the State Department at Washington, where it is now on file. [See Vol. 27, pp. 491-498, with footnote, of Official Records of the Consular Correspondence for 1915-1916.] After describing general conditions in Algeria he continues:

We had gone upon the roof in the early evening to look at the sky through the large telescope presented to the Franciscans by Count Philippe d’Ormay, when Father Antoine called my attention to a comet that was apparently coming straight toward us. Instead, however, of leaving a horizontal trail of fire behind it, this comet or meteorite seemed to shoot an almost vertical beam of orange light toward the earth. It produced a very strange effect on all of us, since a normal comet or other celestial body that left a wake of light of that sort behind it would naturally be expected to be moving upward toward the zenith, instead of in a direction parallel to the earth. It looked somehow as if the tail of the comet had been bent over. As soon as it came near enough so that we could focus the telescope upon it we discovered that it was a new sort of flying machine. It passed over our heads at a height no greater than ten thousand feet, if as great as that, and we could see that it was a cylindrical ring like a doughnut or an anchor ring, constructed, I believe, of highly polished metal, the inner aperture being about twenty-five yards in diameter. The tube of the cylinder looked to be about twenty feet thick, and had circular windows or portholes that were brilliantly lighted.
The strangest thing about it was that it carried a superstructure consisting of a number of arms meeting at a point above the centre of the opening and supporting some sort of apparatus from which the beam of light emanated. This appliance, which we supposed to be a gigantic searchlight, was focused down through the Ring and could apparently be moved at will over a limited radius of about fifteen degrees. We could not understand this, nor why the light was thrown from outside and above instead of from inside the flying machine, but the explanation may be found in the immense heat that must have been required to generate the light, since it illuminated the entire country for fifty miles or so, and we were able to read without trouble the fine print of the abbot's rubric. This Flying Ring moved on an even keel at the tremendous velocity of about two hundred miles an hour. We wondered what would happen if it turned turtle, for in that case the weight of the superstructure would have rendered it impossible for the machine to right itself. In fact, none of us had ever imagined any such air monster before. Beside it a Zeppelin seemed like a wooden toy.

The Ring passed over the mountains toward Cabes and within a short time a volcanic eruption occurred that destroyed a section of the Atlas Range. [Mr. Quinn here describes with considerable detail the destruction of the mountains.] The next morning I found Biskra crowded with Arabs, who reported that the ocean had poured through the passage made by the eruption and was flooding the entire desert as far south as the oasis of Wargla, and that it had come within twelve miles of the walls of our own city. I at once hired a donkey and made a personal investigation, with the result that I can report as a fact that the entire desert east and south of Biskra is inundated to a depth of from seven to ten feet and that the water gives no sign of going down. The loss of life seems to have been negligible, owing to the fact that the height of the water is not great and that many unexpected islands have provided safety for the caravans that were in transitu. These are now marooned and waiting for assistance, which I am informed will be sent from Cabes in the form of flat-bottomed boats fitted with motor auxiliaries.

Respectfully submitted,

D. W. QUINN, Jr., Acting U. S. Consul.

The Italian cruiser Fiala, which had been carried one hundred and eighty miles into the desert on the night of the eruption, grounded safely on the plateau of Tasili, but the volcanic tidal wave on which she had been swept along, having done its work, receded, leaving too little water for the Fiala's draft of thirty-seven feet. Four launches sent out in different directions to the south and east reported no sign of land, but immense quantities of floating vegetable matter, yellow dust, and the bodies of jackals, camels, zebras, and lions. The fifth launch after great hardships reached the seacoast through the new channel and arrived at Sfax after eight days.

The mean tide level of the Mediterranean sank fifteen inches, and the water showed marked discoloration for several months, while a volcanic haze hung over Northern Africa, Sicily, Malta, and Sardinia for an even longer period.

Though many persons must have lost their lives the records are incomplete in this respect; but there is a curious document in the mosque at Sfax touching the effect of the Lavender Ray. It appears that an Arab mussel-gatherer was in a small boat with his two brothers at the time the Ring appeared above the mountains. As they looked up toward the sky the Ray flashed over and illuminated their faces. They thought nothing of it at the time, for almost immediately the mountains were rent asunder and in the titanic upheaval that followed they were all cast upon the shore, as they thought, dead men. Reaching Sfax they reported their adventures and offered prayers in gratitude for their extraordinary escape; but five days later all three began to suffer excruciating torment from internal burns, the skin upon their heads and bodies began to peel off, and they died in agony within the week.

VIII

It was but a few days thereafter that the President of the United States received the official note from Count von Koenitz, on behalf of the Imperial German Commissioners, to the effect that Germany would join with the other Powers in an armistice looking toward peace and ultimately a universal disarmament. Similar notes had already been received by the President from France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Austria, Spain, and Slavia, and a multitude of the other smaller Powers who were engaged in the war, and there was no longer any reason for delaying the calling of an international council or diet for the purpose of bringing about what Pax demanded as a ransom for the safety of the globe.

In the files of the State Department at Washington there is secreted the only record of the diplomatic correspondence touching these momentous events, and a transcript of the messages exchanged between the President of the United States and the Arbitrator of Human Destiny. They are comparatively few in number, for Pax seemed to be satisfied to leave all details to the Powers themselves. In the interest of saving time, however, he made the simple suggestion that the present ambassadors should be given plenary powers to determine the terms and conditions upon which universal peace should be declared. All these proceedings and the reasons therefore were kept profoundly secret. It began to look as though the matter would be put through with characteristic Yankee promptness. Pax's suggestion was acceded to, and the ambassadors and ministers were given unrestricted latitude in
drawing the treaty that should abolish war forever.

Now that he had been won over no one was more indefatigable than Von Koenitz, none more fertile in suggestions. It was he who drafted with his own hand the forty pages devoted to the creation of the commission charged with the duty of destroying all arms, munitions, and implements of war; and he not only acted as chairman of the preliminary drafting committee, but was an active member of at least half a dozen other important subcommittees. The President daily communicated the progress of this conference of the Powers to Pax through Bill Hood, and received daily in return a hearty if laconic approval.

"I am satisfied of the sincerity of the Powers and with the progress made. PAX."

was the ordinary type of message received. Meantime word had been sent to all the governments that an indefinite armistice had been declared, to commence at the end of ten days, for it had been found necessary to allow for the time required to transmit the orders to the various fields of military operations throughout Europe. In the interim the war continued.

It was at this time that Count von Koenitz, who now was looked upon as the leading figure of the conference, arose and said: "Your Excellencies, this distinguished diet will, I doubt not, presently conclude its labours and receive not only the approval of the Powers represented but the gratitude of the nations of the world. I voice the sentiments of the Imperial Commissioners when I say that no Power looks forward with greater eagerness than Germany to the accomplishment of our purpose. But we should not forget that there is one menace to mankind greater than that of war—namely, the lurking danger from the power of this unknown possessor of superhuman knowledge of explosives. So far his influence has been a benign one, but who can say when it may become malignant? Will our labours please him? Perhaps not. Shall we agree? I hope so, but who can tell? Will our armies lay down their arms even after we have agreed? I believe all will go well; but is it wise for us to refrain from jointly taking steps to ascertain the identity of this unknown juggler with Nature, and the source of his power? It is my own opinion, since we cannot exert any influence or control upon this individual, that we should take whatever steps are within our grasp to safeguard ourselves in the event that he refuses to keep faith with us. To this end I suggest an international conference of scientific men from all the nations to be held here in Washington coincidently with our own meetings, with a view to determining these questions."

His remarks were greeted with approval by almost all the representatives present except Sir John Smith, who mildly hinted that such a course might be regarded as savouring a trifle of double dealing. Should Pax receive knowledge of the suggested conference he might question their sincerity and view all their doings with suspicion. In a word, Sir John believed in following a consistent course and treating Pax as a friend and ally and not as a possible enemy.

Sir John's speech, however, left the delegates unconvinced and with the feeling that his argument was over-refined. They felt that there could be no objection to endeavouring to ascertain the source of Pax's power--the law of self-preservation seemed to indicate such a course as necessary. And it had, in fact, already been discussed vaguely by several less conspicuous delegates. Accordingly it was voted, with but two dissenting voices,[2] to summon what was known as Conference No. 2, to be held as soon as possible, its proceedings to be conducted in secret under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences, with the president of the Academy acting as permanent chairman. To this conference the President appointed Thornton as one of the three delegates from the United States.

[Footnote 2: The President of the United States also voted in the negative.]

The council of the Powers having so voted, Count von Koenitz at once transmitted, by way of Sayville, a message which in code appeared to be addressed to a Herr Karl Heinweg, Notary, at 12\(^{BIS}\) Bundest Strasse, Strassburg, and related to a mortgage about to fall due upon some of Von Koenitz's properties in Thüringen. When decoded it read:

"To the Imperial Commissioners of the German Federated States:

"I have the honour to report that acting according to your distinguished instructions I have this day proposed an international conference to consider the scientific problems presented by certain recent phenomena and that my proposition was adopted. I believe that in this way the proceedings here may be delayed indefinitely and time thus secured to enable an expedition to be organized and dispatched for the purpose of destroying this unknown person or ascertaining the secret of his power, in accordance with my previous suggestion. It would be well to send as delegates to this Conference No. 2 several professors of physics who can by plausible arguments and ingenious theories so confuse the matter that no determination can be reached. I suggest Professors Gasgabelaus, of München, and Leybach, of the Hague.

"VON KOENITZ."

And having thus fulfilled his duty the count took a cab to the Metropolitan Club and there played a discreet game of billiards with Señor Tomasso Varilla, the ex-minister from Argentina.

Von Koenitz from the first had played his hand with a skill which from a diplomatic view left nothing to be
desired. The extraordinary natural phenomena which had occurred coincidentally with the first message of Pax to the President of the United States and the fall of Cleopatra's Needle had been immediately observed by the scientists attached to the Imperial and other universities throughout the German Federated States, and had no sooner been observed than their significance had been realized. These most industrious and thorough of all human investigators had instantly reported the facts and their preliminary conclusions to the Imperial Commissioners, with the recommendation that no stone be left unturned in attempting to locate and ascertain the causes of this disruption of the forces of nature. The Commissioners at once demanded an exhaustive report from the faculty of the Imperial German University, and notified Von Koenitz by cable that until further notice he must seek in every way to delay investigation by other nations and to belittle the importance of what had occurred, for these astute German scientists had at once jumped to the conclusion that the acceleration of the earth's motion had been due to some human agency possessed of a hitherto unsuspected power.

It was for this reason that at the first meeting at the White House the Ambassador had pooh-poohed the whole matter and talked of snowstorms in the Alps and showers of fish at Heidelberg, but with the rending of the northern coast of Africa and the well-attested appearances of "The Ring" he soon reached the conclusion that his wisest course was to cause such a delay on the part of the other Powers that the inevitable race for the secret would be won by the nation which he so astutely represented. He reasoned, quite accurately, that the scientists of England, Russia, and America would not remain idle in attempting to deduce the cause and place the origin of the phenomena and the habitat of the master of the Ring, and that the only effectual means to enable Germany to capture this, the greatest of all prizes of war, was to befuddle the representatives of the other nations while leaving his own unhampered in their efforts to accomplish that which would make his countrymen, almost without further effort, the masters of the world. Now the easiest way to befuddle the scientists of the world was to get them into one place and befuddle them all together, and this, after communicating with his superiors, he had proceeded to do. He was a clever man, trained in the devious ways of the Wilhelmstrasse, and when he set out to accomplish something he was almost inevitably successful. Yet in spite of the supposed alliance between Kaiser and Deity man proposes and God disposes, and sometimes the latter uses the humblest of human instruments in that disposition.

IX

The Imperial German Commissioner for War, General Hans von Helmuth, was a man of extraordinary decision and farsightedness. Sixty years of age, he had been a member of the general staff since he was forty. He had sat at the feet of Bismarck and Von Moltke, and during his active participation in the management of German military affairs he had seen but slight changes in their policy: Mass--overwhelming mass; sudden momentous onslaught, and, above all, an attack so quick that your adversary could not regain his feet. It worked nine times out of ten, and when it didn't it was usually better than taking the defensive. General von Helmuth having an approved system was to that extent relieved of anxiety, for all he had to do was to work out details. In this his highly efficient organization was almost automatic. He himself was a human compendium of knowledge, and he had but to press a button and emit a few gutturals and any information that he wanted lay typewritten before him. Now he sat in his office smoking a Bremen cigar and studying a huge Mercatorial projection of the Atlantic and adjacent countries, while with the fingers of his left hand he combed his heavy beard.

From the window he looked down upon the inner fortifications of Mainz--to which city the capital had been removed three months before--and upon the landing stage for the scouting planes which were constantly arriving or whirring off toward Holland or Strassburg. Across the river, under the concealed guns of a sunken battery, stood the huge hangars of the now useless dirigibles $Z^{51-57}$. The landing stage communicated directly by telephone with the adjutant's office, an enormous hall filled with maps, with which Von Helmuth's private room was connected. The adjutant himself, a worried-looking man with a bullet head and an iron-gray moustache, stood at a table in the centre of the hall addressing rapid-fire sentences to various persons who appeared in the doorway, saluted, and hurried off again. Several groups were gathered about the table and the adjutant carried on an interrupted conversation with all of them, pausing to read the telegrams and messages that shot out of the pneumatic tubes upon the table from the telegraph and telephone office on the floor below.

An elderly man in rather shabby clothes entered, looking about helplessly through the thick lenses of his double spectacles, and the adjutant turned at once from the officers about him with an "Excuse me, gentlemen."

"Good afternoon, Professor von Schwenitz; the general is waiting for you," said he. "This way, please."

He stalked across to the door of the inner office.

"Professor von Schwenitz is here," he announced, and immediately returned to take up the thread of his conversation in the centre of the hall.

The general turned gruffly to greet his visitor. "I have sent for you, Professor," said he, without removing his cigar, "in order that I may fully understand the method by which you say you have ascertained the place of origin of the wireless messages and electrical disturbances referred to in our communications of last week. This may be a
serious matter. The accuracy of your information is of vital importance."

The professor hesitated in embarrassment, and the general scowled.

"Well?" he demanded, biting off the chewed end of his cigar. "Well? This is not a lecture room. Time is short. Out with it."

"Your Excellency!" stammered the poor professor, "I--I----The observations are so--inadequate--one cannot determine----"

"What?" roared Von Helmuth. "But you said you had!"

"Only approximately, your Excellency. One cannot be positive, but within a reasonable distance----" He paused.

"What do you call a reasonable distance? I supposed your physics was an exact science!" retorted the general.

"But the data----"

"What do you call a reasonable distance?" bellowed the Imperial Commissioner.

"A hundred kilometres!" suddenly shouted the overwrought professor, losing control of himself. "I won't be talked to this way, do you hear? I won't! How can a man think? I'm a member of the faculty of the Imperial University. I've been decorated twice--twice!"

"Fiddlesticks!" returned the general, amused in spite of himself. "Don't be absurd. I merely wish you to hurry. Have a cigar?"

"Oh, your Excellency!" protested the professor, now both ashamed and frightened. "You must excuse me. The war has shattered my nerves. May I smoke? Thank you."

"Sit down. Take your time," said Von Helmuth, looking out and up at a monoplane descending toward the landing in slowly lessening spirals.

"You see, your Excellency," explained Von Schwenitz, "the data are fragmentary, but I used three methods, each checking the others."

"The first?" shot back the general. The monoplane had landed safely.

"I compared the records of all the seismographs that had registered the earthquake wave attendant on the electrical discharges accompanying the great yellow auroras of July. These shocks had been felt all over the globe, and I secured reports from Java, New Guinea, Lima, Tucson, Greenwich, Algeria, and Moscow. These showed the wave had originated somewhere in Eastern Labrador."

"Yes, yes. Go on!" ordered the general.

"In the second place, the violent magnetic storms produced by the helium aurora appear to have left their mark each time upon the earth in a permanent, if slight, deflection of the compass needle. The earth's normal magnetic field seems to have had superimposed upon it a new field comprised of lines of force nearly parallel to the equator. My computations show that these great circles of magnetism centre at approximately the same point in Labrador as that indicated by the seismographs--about fifty-five degrees north and seventy-five degrees west."

The general seemed struck with this.

"Permanent deflection, you say!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, apparently permanent. Finally the barometer records told the same story, although in less precise form. A compressional wave of air had been started in the far north and had spread out over the earth with the velocity of sound. Though the barographs themselves gave no indication whence this wave had come, the variation in its intensity at different meteorological observatories could be accounted for by the law of inverse squares on the supposition that the explosion which started the wave had occurred at fifty-five degrees north, seventy-five degrees west."

The professor paused and wiped his glasses. With a roar a Taube slid off the landing stage, shot over toward the hangars, and soared upward.

"Is that all?" inquired the general, turning again to the chart.

"That is all, your Excellency," answered Von Schwenitz.

"Then you may go!" muttered the Imperial Commissioner. "If we find the source of these disturbances where you predict you will receive the Black Eagle."

"Oh, your Excellency!" protested the professor, his face shining with satisfaction.

"And if we do not find it--there will be a vacancy on the faculty of the Imperial University!" he added grimly.

"Good afternoon."

He pressed a button and the departing scholar was met by an orderly and escorted from the War Bureau, while the adjutant joined Von Helmuth.

"He's got him! I'm satisfied!" remarked the Commissioner. "Now outline your plan."

The bullet-headed man took up the calipers and indicated a spot on the coast of Labrador:

"Our expedition will land, subject to your approval, at Hamilton Inlet, using the town of Rigolet as a base. By
availing ourselves of the Nascopee River and the lakes through which it flows, we can easily penetrate to the highland where the inventor of the Ring machine has located himself. The auxiliary brigantine Sea Fox is lying now under American colours at Amsterdam, and as she can steam fifteen knots an hour she should reach the Inlet in about ten days, passing to the north of the Orkneys."

"What force have you in mind?" inquired Von Helmuth, his cold gray eyes narrowing.

"Three full companies of sappers and miners, ten mountain howitzers, a field battery, fifty rapid-fire standing rifles, and a complete outfit for throwing lyddite. Of course we shall rely principally on high explosives if it becomes necessary to use force, but what we want is a hostage who may later become an ally."

"Yes, of course," said the general with a laugh. "This is a scientific, not a military, expedition."

"I have asked Lieutenant Münster to report upon the necessary equipment."

Von Helmuth nodded, and the adjutant stepped to the door and called out: "Lieutenant Münster!"

A trim young man in naval uniform appeared upon the threshold and saluted.

"State what you regard as necessary as equipment for the proposed expedition," said the general.

"Twenty motor boats, each capable of towing several flat-bottomed barges or native canoes, forty mules, a field telegraph, and also a high-powered wireless apparatus, axes, spades, wire cables and drums, windlasses, dynamite for blasting, and provisions for sixty days. We shall live off the country and secure artisans and bearers from among the natives."

"When will it be possible to start?" inquired the general.

"In twelve days if you give the order now," answered the young man.

"Very well, you may go. And good luck to you!" he added.

The young lieutenant saluted and turned abruptly on his heel.

Over the parade ground a biplane was hovering, darting this way and that, rising and falling with startling velocity.

"Who's that?" inquired the general approvingly.

"Schöningen," answered the adjutant.

The Imperial Commissioner felt in his breast-pocket for another cigar.

"Do you know, Ludwig," he remarked amiably as he struck a meditative match, "sometimes I more than half believe this 'Flying Ring' business is all rot!"

The adjutant looked pained.

"And yet," continued Von Helmuth, "if Bismarck could see one of those things," he waved his cigar toward the gyrating aeroplane, "he wouldn't believe it."

X

All day the International Assembly of Scientists, officially known as Conference No. 2, had been sitting, but not progressing, in the large lecture hall of the Smithsonian Institution, which probably had never before seen so motley a gathering. Each nation had sent three representatives, two professional scientists, and a lay delegate, the latter some writer or thinker renowned in his own country for his wide knowledge and powers of ratiocination. They had come together upon the appointed day, although the delegates from the remoter countries had not yet arrived, and the Committee on Credentials had already reported. Germany had sent Gasgabelaus, Leybach, and Wilhelm Lamszus; France--Sortell, Amand, and Buona Varilla; Great Britain--Sir William Crookes, Sir Francis Soddy, and Mr. H. G. Wells, celebrated for his "The War of the Worlds" and The "World Set Free," and hence supposedly just the man to unravel a scientific mystery such as that which confronted this galaxy of immortals.

The Committee on Data, of which Thornton was a member, having been actively at work for nearly two weeks through wireless communication with all the observatories--seismic, meteorological, astronomical, and otherwise--throughout the world, had reduced its findings to print, and this matter, translated into French, German, and Italian, had already been distributed among those present. Included in its pages was Quinn's letter to the State Department.

The roll having been called, the president of the National Academy of Sciences made a short speech in which he outlined briefly the purpose for which the committee had been summoned and commented to some extent upon the character of the phenomena it was required to analyze.

And then began an unending series of discussions and explanations in French, German, Dutch, Russian, and Italian, by goggle-eyed, bushy-whiskered, long-haired men who looked like anarchists or sociologists and apparently had never before had an unrestricted opportunity to air their views on anything.

Thornton, listening to this hodgepodge of technicalities, was dismayed and distrustful. These men spoke a language evidently familiar to them, which he, although a professional scientist, found a meaningless jargon. The whole thing seemed unreal, had a purely theoretic or literary quality about it that made him question even their premises. In the tainted air of the council room, listening to these little pot-bellied Professoren from Amsterdam and Münich, doubt assailed him, doubt even that the earth had changed its orbit, doubt even of his own established
formulæ and tables. Weren't they all just talking through their hats? Wasn't it merely a game in which an elaborate system of equivalents gave a semblance of actuality to what in fact was nothing but mind-play? Even Wells, whose literary style he admired as one of the beauties as well as one of the wonders of the world, had been a disappointment. He had seemed singularly halting and unconvincing.

"I wish I knew a practical man--I wish Bennie Hooker were here!" muttered Thornton to himself. He had not seen his classmate Hooker for twenty-six years; but that was one thing about Hooker: you knew he'd be exactly the same--only more so--as he was when you last saw him. In those years Bennie had become the Lawson Professor of Applied Physics at Harvard. Thornton had read his papers on induced radiation, thermic equilibrium, and had one of Bennie's famous Gem Home Cookers in his own little bachelor apartment. Hooker would know. And if he didn't he'd tell you so, without befogging the atmosphere with a lot of things he did know, but that wouldn't help you in the least. Thornton clutched at the thought of him like a falling aeronaut at a dangling rope. He'd be worth a thousand of these dreaming lecturers, these beer-drinking visionaries! But where could he be found? It was August, vacation time. Still, he might be in Cambridge giving a summer course or something.

At that moment Professor Gasgabelaus, the temporary chairman, a huge man, the periphery of whose abdomen rivalled the circumference of the "working terrestrial globe" at the other end of the platform, pounded perspiring with his gavel and announced that the conference would adjourn until the following Monday morning. It was Friday afternoon, so he had sixty hours in which to connect with Bennie, if Bennie could be discovered. A telegram of inquiry brought no response, and he took the midnight train to Boston, reaching Cambridge about two o'clock the following afternoon.

The air trembled with heat. Only by dodging from the shadow of one big elm to another did he manage to reach the Appian Way--the street given in the university catalogue as Bennie's habitat--alive. As he swung open the little wicket gate he realized with an odd feeling that it was the same house where Hooker had lived when a student, twenty-five years before.

"Board" was printed on a yellow, fly-blown card in the corner of the window beside the door.

Up there over the porch was the room Bennie had inhabited from '85 to '89. He recalled vividly the night he, Thornton, had put his foot through the lower pane. They had filled up the hole with an old golf stocking. His eyes searched curiously for the pane. There it was, still broken and still stuffed--it couldn't be!--with some colourless material strangely resembling disintegrating worsted. The sun smote him in the back of his neck and drove him to seek the relief of the porch. Had he ever left Cambridge? Wasn't it a dream about his becoming an astronomer and working at the Naval Observatory? And all this stuff about the earth going on the loose? If he opened the door wouldn't he find Bennie with a towel round his head cramming for the "exams"? For a moment he really imagined that he was an undergraduate. Then as he fanned himself with his straw hat he caught, on the silk band across the interior, the words: "Smith's Famous Headwear, Washington, D.C." No, he was really an astronomer.

He shuddered in spite of the heat as he pulled the bell knob. What ghosts would its jangle summon? The bell, however, gave no sound; in fact the knob came off in his hand, followed by a foot or so of copper wire. He laughed, gazing at it blankly. No one had ever used the bell in the old days. They had simply kicked open the door and halloed: "O-o-h, Bennie Hooker!"

Thornton laid the knob on the piazza and inspected the front of the house. The windows were thick with dust, the "yard" scrappingly with weeds. A piece of string held the latch of the gate together. Then automatically, and without intending to do so at all, Thornton turned the handle of the front door, assisting it coincidentally with a gentle kick from his right toe, and found himself in the narrow cabbage-scented hallway. The old, familiar, battered black-walnut hatrack of his student days leaned drunkenly against the wall--Thornton knew one of its back legs was missing--and on the imitation marble slab was a telegram addressed to "Professor Benjamin Hooker." And also, instinctively, Thornton lifted up his adult voice and yelled:

"O-o-h, ye-ay! Bennie Hooker!"

The volume of his own sound startled him. Instantly he saw the ridiculousness of it--he, the senior astronomer at the Naval Observatory, yelling like that----

"O-o-h, ye-ay!" came in smothered tones from above.

Thornton bounded up the stairs, two, three steps at a time, and pounded on the old door over the porch.

"Go away!" came back the voice of Bennie Hooker. "Don't want any lunch!"

Thornton continued to bang on the door while Professor Hooker wrathfully besought the intruder to depart before he took active measures. There was the cracking of glass.

"Oh, damn!" came from inside.

Thornton rattled the knob and kicked. Somebody haltingly crossed the room, the key turned, and Prof. Bennie Hooker opened the door.

"Well?" he demanded, scowling over his thick spectacles.
"Hello, Bennie!" said Thornton, holding out his hand.
"Hello, Buck!" returned Hooker. "Come in. I thought it was that confounded Ethiopian."

As far as Thornton could see, it was the same old room, only now crammed with books and pamphlets and crowded with tables of instruments. Hooker, clad in sneakers, white ducks, and an undershirt, was smoking a small "T. D." pipe.

"Where on earth did you come from?" he inquired good-naturedly.

"Washington," answered Thornton, and something told him that this was the real thing—the "goods"—that his journey would be repaid.

Hooker waved the "T. D." in a general sort of way toward some broken-down horsehair armchairs and an empty crate.

"Sit down, won't you?" he said, as if he had seen his guest only the day before. He looked vaguely about for something that Thornton might smoke, then seated himself on a cluttered bench holding a number of retorts, beside which flamed an oxyacetylene blowpipe. He was a wizened little chap, with scrappy neck and protruding Adam's apple. His long hair gave no evidence of the use of the comb, and his hands were the hands of Esau. He had an alertness that suggested a robin, but at the same time gave the impression that he looked through things rather than at them. On the mantel was a saucer containing the fast oxidizing cores of several apples and a half-eaten box of oatmeal biscuits.

"My Lord! This is an untidy hole! No more order than when you were an undergrad!" exclaimed Thornton, looking about him in amused horror.

"Order?" returned Bennie indignantly. "Everything's in perfect order! This chair is filled with the letters I have already answered; this chair with the letters I've not answered; and this chair with the letters I shall never answer!"

Thornton took a seat on the crate, laughing. It was the same old Bennie!

"You're an incorrigible!" he sighed despairingly.

"Well, you're a star gazer, aren't you?" inquired Hooker, relighting his pipe. "Some one told me so—I forget who. You must have a lot of interesting problems. They tell me that new planet of yours will smoke, then seated himself on a cluttered bench holding a number of retorts, beside which flamed an oxyacetylene blowpipe. He was a wizened little chap, with scrappy neck and protruding Adam's apple. His long hair gave no evidence of the use of the comb, and his hands were the hands of Esau. He had an alertness that suggested a robin, but at the same time gave the impression that he looked through things rather than at them. On the mantel was a saucer containing the fast oxidizing cores of several apples and a half-eaten box of oatmeal biscuits.

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"Well, you're a star gazer, aren't you?" inquired Hooker, relighting his pipe. "Some one told me so—I forget who. You must have a lot of interesting problems. They tell me that new planet of yours will be pulling stuff, you know."

"Yes, of course," answered Thornton. He wondered if Hooker ever saw a paper, how long since he had been out of the house. "By the way, did you know Berlin had been taken?" he asked.

"Berlin—in Germany, you mean?"

"Yes, by the Russians."

"No! Has it?" inquired Hooker with politeness. "Oh, I think some one did mention it."

Thornton fumbled for a cigarette and Bennie handed him a match. They seemed to have extraordinarily little to say for men who hadn't seen each other for twenty-six years.

"I suppose," went on the astronomer, "you think it's deuced funny my dropping in casually this way after all this time, but the fact is I came on purpose. I want to get some information from you straight."

"Go ahead!" said Bennie. "What's it about?"

"Well, in a word," answered Thornton, "the earth's nearly a quarter of an hour behind time."

Hooker received this announcement with a polite interest but no astonishment.

"That's a how-de-do!" he remarked. "What's done it?"

"That's what I want you to tell me," said Thornton sternly. "What could do it?"
Hooker unlaced his legs and strolled over to the mantel. "Have a cracker?" he asked, helping himself. Then he picked up a piece of wood and began whittling. "I suppose there's the devil to pay?" he suggested. "Things upset and so on? Atmospheric changes? When did it happen?"
"About three weeks ago. Then there's this Sahara business."
"What Sahara business?"
"Haven't you heard?"
"No," answered Hooker rather impatiently. "I haven't heard anything. I haven't any time to read the papers; I'm too busy. My thermic inductor transformers melted last week and I'm all in the air. What was it?"
"Oh, never mind now," said Thornton hurriedly, perceiving that Hooker's ignorance was an added asset. He'd get his science pure, uncontaminated by disturbing questions of fact. "How about the earth's losing that quarter of an hour?"
"Of course she's off her orbit," remarked Hooker in a detached way. "And you want to know what's done it? Don't blame you. I suppose you've gone into the possibilities of stellar attraction."
"Discount that!" ordered Thornton. "What I want to know is whether it could happen from the inside?"
"Why not?" inquired Hooker. "A general shift in the mass would do it. So would the mere application of force at the proper point."
"It never happened before."
"Of course not. Neither had seedless oranges until Burbank came along," said Hooker.
"Do you regard it as possible by any human agency?" inquired Thornton.
"Why not?" repeated Hooker. "All you need is the energy. And it's lying all round if you could only get at it. That's just what I'm working at now. Radium, uranium, thorium, actinium--all the radioactive elements--are, as everybody knows, continually disintegrating, discharging the enormous energy that is imprisoned in their molecules. It may take generations, epochs, centuries, for them to get rid of it and transform themselves into other substances, but they will inevitably do so eventually. They're doing with more or less of a rush what all the elements are doing at their leisure. A single ounce of uranium contains about the same amount of energy that could be produced by the combustion of ten tons of coal--but it won't let the energy go. Instead it holds on to it, and the energy leaks slowly, almost imperceptibly, away, like water from a big reservoir tapped only by a tiny pipe. 'Atomic energy' Rutherford calls it. Every element, every substance, has its ready to be touched off and put to use. The chap who can find out how to release that energy all at once will revolutionize the civilized world. It will be like the discovery that water could be turned into steam and made to work for us--multiplied a million times. If, instead of that energy just oozing away and the uranium disintegrating infinitesimally each year, it could be exploded at a given moment you could drive an ocean liner with a handful of it. You could make the old globe stagger round and turn upside down! Mankind could just lay off and take a holiday. But how?"
Bennie enthusiastically waved his pipe at Thornton.
"How! That's the question. Everybody's known about the possibilities, for Soddy wrote a book about it; but nobody's ever suggested where the key could be found to unlock that treasure-house of energy. Some chap made up a novel once and pretended it was done, but he didn't say how. But--and he lowered his voice passionately--'I'm working at it, and--and--I've nearly--nearly got it.'"
Thornton, infected by his friend's excitement, leaned forward in his chair. "Yes--nearly. If only my transformers hadn't melted! You see I got the idea from Savaroff, who noticed that the activity of radium and other elements wasn't constant, but varied with the degree of solar activity, reaching its maximum at the periods when the sun spots were most numerous. In other words, he's shown that the breakdown of the atoms of radium and the other radioactive elements isn't spontaneous, as Soddy and others had thought, but is due to the action of certain extremely penetrating rays given out by the sun. These particular rays are the result of the enormous temperature of the solar atmosphere, and their effect upon radioactive substances is analogous to that of the detonating cap upon dynamite. No one has been able to produce these rays in the laboratory, although Hempel has suspected sometimes that traces of them appeared in the radiations from powerful electric sparks. Everything came to a halt until Hiroshito discovered thermic induction, and we were able to elevate temperature almost indefinitely through a process similar to the induction of high electric potentials by means of transformers and the Ruhmkorff coil.
"Hiroshito wasn't looking for a detonating ray and didn't have time to bother with it, but I started a series of experiments with that end in view. I got close--I am close, but the trouble has been to control the forces set in motion, for the rapid rise in temperature has always destroyed the apparatus."
Thornton whistled. "And when you succeed?" he asked in a whisper.
Hooker's face was transfigured.
"When I succeed I shall control the world," he cried, and his voice trembled. "But the damn thing either melts or explodes," he added with a tinge of indignation.

"You know about Hiroshito's experiments, of course; he used a quartz bulb containing a mixture of neon gas and the vapour of mercury, placed at the centre of a coil of silver wire carrying a big oscillatory current. This induced a ring discharge in the bulb, and the temperature of the vapour mixture rose until the bulb melted. He calculated that the temperature of that part of the vapour which carried the current was over 6,000°. You see, the ring discharge is not in contact with the wall of the bulb, and can consequently be much hotter. It's like this." Here Bennie drew with a burnt match on the back of an envelope a diagram of something which resembled a doughnut in a chianti flask.

Thornton scratched his head. "Yes," he said, "but that's an old principle, isn't it? Why does Hiro--what's his name--call it--thermic induction?"

"Oriental imagination, probably," replied Bennie. "Hiroshito observed that a sudden increase in the temperature of the discharge occurred at the moment when the silver coil of his transformer became white hot, which he explained by some mysterious inductive action of the heat vibrations. I don't follow him at all. His theory's probably all wrong, but he delivered the goods. He gave me the right tip, even if I have got him lashed to the mast now. I use a tungsten spiral in a nitrogen atmosphere in my transformer and replace the quartz bulb with a capsule of zircorundum."

"A capsule of what?" asked Thornton, whose chemistry was mid-Victorian.

"Zircorundum," said Bennie, groping around in a drawer of his work table. "It's an absolute nonconductor of heat. Look here, just stick your finger in that." He held out to Thornton what appeared to be a small test tube of black glass. Thornton, with a slight moral hesitation, did as he was told, and Bennie, whistling, picked up the oxyacetylene blowpipe, regarding it somewhat as a dog fancier might gaze at an exceptionally fine pup. "Hold up your finger," said he to the astronomer. "That's right--like that!"

Thrusting the blowpipe forward, he allowed the hissing blue-white flame to wrap itself round the outer wall of the tube--a flame which Thornton knew could melt its way through a block of steel--but the astronomer felt no sensation of heat, although he not unnaturally expected the member to be incinerated.

"Queer, eh?" said Bennie. "Absolute insulation! Beats the thermos bottle, and requires no vacuum. It isn't quite what I want though, because the disintegrating rays which the ring discharge gives out break down the zirconium, which isn't an end-product of radioactivity. The pressure in the capsule rises, due to the liberation of helium, and it blows up, and the landlady or the police come up and bother me."

Thornton was scrutinizing Bennie's rough diagram. "This ring discharge," he meditated; "I wonder if it isn't something like a sunspot. You know the spots are electron vortices with strong magnetic fields. I'll bet you the Savaroff disintegrating rays come from the spots and not from the whole surface of the sun!"

"My word," said Bennie, with a grin of delight, "you occasionally have an illuminating idea, even if you are a musty astronomer. I always thought you were a sort of calculating machine, who slept on a logarithm table. I owe you two drinks for that suggestion, and to scare a thirst into you I'll show you an experiment that no living human being has ever seen before. I can't make very powerful disintegrating rays yet, but I can break down uranium, which is the easiest of all. Later on I'll be able to disintegrate anything, if I have luck--that is, anything except end-products. Then you'll see things fly. But, for the present, just this." He picked up a thin plate of white metal. "This is the metal we're going to attack, uranium--the parent of radium--and the whole radioactive series, ending with the end-product lead."

He hung the plate by two fine wires fastened to its corners, and adjusted a coil of wire opposite its centre, while within the coil he slipped a small black capsule.

"This is the best we can do now," he said. "The capsule is made of zircorundum, and we shall get only a trace of the disintegrating rays before it blows up. But you'll see 'em, or, rather, you'll see the lavender phosphorescence of the air through which they pass."

He arranged a thick slab of plate glass between Thornton and the thermic transformer, and stepping to the wall closed a switch. An oscillatory spark discharge started off with a roar in a closed box, and the coil of wire became white hot.

"Watch the plate!" shouted Bennie.

And Thornton watched.

For ten or fifteen seconds nothing happened, and then a faint beam of pale lavender light shot out from the capsule, and the metal plate swung away from the incandescent coil as if blown by a gentle breeze.

Almost instantly there was a loud report and a blinding flash of yellow light so brilliant that for the next instant or two to Thornton's eyes the room seemed dark. Slowly the afternoon light regained its normal quality. Bennie relit his pipe unconcernedly.
"That's the germ of the idea," he said between puffs. "That capsule contains a mixture of vapours that give out disintegrating rays when the temperature is raised by thermic induction above six thousand. Most of 'em are stopped by the zirconium atoms in the capsule, which break down and liberate helium; and the temperature rises in the capsule until it explodes, as you saw just now, with a flash of yellow helium light. The rays that get out strike the uranium plate and cause the surface layer of molecules to disintegrate, their products being driven off by the atomic explosions with a velocity about equal to that of light, and it's the recoil that deflects and swings the plate. The amount of uranium decomposed in this experiment couldn't be detected by the most delicate balance--small mass, but enormous velocity. See?"

"Yes, I understand," answered Thornton. "It's the old, 'momentum equals mass times velocity,' business we had in mechanics."

"Of course this is only a toy experiment," Bennie continued. "It is what the dancing pithballs of Franklin's time were to the multipolar, high-frequency dynamo. But if we could control this force and handle it on a large scale we could do anything with it--destroy the world, drive a car against gravity off into space, shift the axis of the earth perhaps!"

It came to Thornton as he sat there, cigarette in hand, that poor Bennie Hooker was going to receive the disappointment of his life. Within the next five minutes his dreams would be dashed to earth, for he would learn that another had stepped down to the pool of discovery before him. For how many years, he wondered, had Bennie toiled to produce his mysterious ray that should break down the atom and release the store of energy that the genii of Nature had concealed there. And now Thornton must tell him that all his efforts had gone for nothing!

"And you believe that any one who could generate a ray such as you describe could control the motion of the earth?" he asked.

"Of course, certainly," answered Hooker. "He could either disintegrate such huge quantities of matter that the mass of the earth would be shifted and its polar axis be changed, or if radioactive substances--pitchblende, for example--lay exposed upon the earth's surface he could cause them to discharge their helium and other products at such an enormous velocity that the recoil or reaction would accelerate or retard the motion of the globe. It would be quite feasible, quite simple--all one would need would be the disintegrating ray."

And then Thornton told Hooker of the flight of the giant Ring machine from the north and the destruction of the Mountains of Atlas through the apparent instrumentality of a ray of lavender light. Hooker's face turned slightly pale and his unshaven mouth tightened. Then a smile of exaltation illuminated his features.

"He's done it!" he cried joyously. "He's done it on an engineering scale. We pure-science dreamers turn up our noses at the engineers, but I tell you the improvements in the apparatus part of the game come when there is a big commercial demand for a thing and the engineering chaps take hold of it. But who is he and where is he? I must get to him. I don't suppose I can teach him much, but I've got a magnificent experiment that we can try together."

He turned to a littered writing-table and poked among the papers that lay there.

"You see," he explained excitedly, "if there is anything in the quantum theory----Oh! but you don't care about that. The point is where is the chap?"

And so Thornton had to begin at the beginning and tell Hooker all about the mysterious messages and the phenomena that accompanied them. He enlarged upon Pax's benignant intentions and the great problems presented by the proposed interference of the United States Government in Continental affairs, but Bennie swept them aside. The great thing, to his mind, was to find and get into communication with Pax.

"Ah! How he must feel! The greatest achievement of all time!" cried Hooker radiantly. "How ecstatically happy! Earth blossoming like the rose! Well-watered valleys where deserts were before. War abolished, poverty, disease! Who can it be? Curie? No; she's bottled in Paris. Posky, Langham, Varanelli--it can't be any one of those fellows. It beats me! Some Hindoo or Jap maybe, but never Hiroshito! Now we must get to him right away. So much to talk over." He walked round the room, blundering into things, dizzy with the thought that his great dream had come true. Suddenly he swept everything off the table on to the floor and kicked his heels in the air.

"Hooray!" he shouted, dancing round the room like a freshman. "Hooray! Now I can take a holiday. And come to think of it, I'm as hungry as a brontosaurus!"

That night Thornton returned to Washington and was at the White House by nine o'clock the following day.

"It's all straight," he told the President. "The honestest man in the United States has said so."

XI

The moon rose over sleeping Paris, silvering the silent reaches of the Seine, flooding the deserted streets with mellow light, yet gently retouching all the disfigurements of the siege. No lights illuminated the cafés, no taxis dashed along the boulevards, no crowds loitered in the Place de l'Opéra or the Place Vendôme. Yet save for these facts it might have been the Paris of old time, unvisited by hunger, misery, or death. The curfew had sounded. Every citizen had long since gone within, extinguished his lights, and locked his door. Safe in the knowledge that the
Germans' second advance had been finally met and effectually blocked sixty miles outside the walls, and that an armistice had been declared to go into effect at midnight, Paris slumbered peacefully.

Beyond the pellet-strewn fields and glacis of the second line of defence the invader, after a series of terrific onslaughts, had paused, retreated a few miles and intrenched himself, there to wait until the starving city should capitulate. For four months he had waited, yet Paris gave no sign of surrendering. On the contrary, it seemed to have some mysterious means of self-support, and the war office, in daily communication with London, reported that it could withstand the investment for an indefinite period. Meantime the Germans reintrenched themselves, built forts of their own upon which they mounted the siege guns intended for the walls, and constructed an impregnable line of entanglements, redoubts, and defences, which rendered it impossible for any army outside the city to come to its relief.

So rose the moon, turning white the millions of slate roofs, gilding the traceries of the towers of Notre Dame, dimming the searchlights which, like the antennae of gigantic fireflies, constantly played round the city from the summit of the Eiffel Tower. So slept Paris, confident that no crash of descending bombs would shatter the blue vault of the starlit sky or rend the habitations in which lay two millions of human beings, assured that the sun would rise through the gray mists of the Seine upon the ancient beauties of the Tuilleries and the Louvre unmarred by the enemy's projectiles, and that its citizens could pass freely along its boulevards without menace of death from flying missiles. For no shell could be hurled a distance of sixty miles, and an armistice had been declared.

* * * * *

Behind a small hill within the German fortifications a group of officers stood in the moonlight, examining what looked superficially like the hangar of a small dirigible. Nestling behind the hill it cast a black rectangular shadow upon the trampled sand of the redoubt. A score of artisans were busy filling a deep trench through which a huge pipe led off somewhere—a sort of deadly plumbing, for the house sheltered a monster cannon reënforced by jackets of lead and steel, the whole encased in a cooling apparatus of intricate manufacture. From the open end of the house the cylindrical barrel of the gigantic engine of war raised itself into the air at an angle of forty degrees, and from the muzzle to the ground below it was a drop of over eighty feet. On a track running off to the north rested the projectiles side by side, resembling in the dim light a row of steam boilers in the yard of a locomotive factory.

"Well," remarked one of the officers, turning to the only one of his companions not in uniform. "Thanatos' is ready."

The man addressed was Von Heckmann, the most famous inventor of military ordnance in the world, already four times decorated for his services to the Emperor.

"The labour of nine years!" he answered with emotion. "Nine long years of self-denial and unremitting study! But to-night I shall be repaid, repaid a thousand times."

The officers shook hands with him one after the other, and the group broke up; the men who were filling the trench completed their labours and departed; and Von Heckmann and the major-general of artillery alone remained, except for the sentries beside the gun. The night was balmy and the moon rode in a cloudless sky high above the hill. They crossed the enclosure, followed by the two sentinels, and entering a passage reached the outer wall of the redoubt, which was in turn closed and locked. Here the sentries remained, but Von Heckmann and the general continued on behind the fortifications for some distance.

"Well, shall we start the ball?" asked the general, laying his hand on Von Heckmann's shoulder. But the inventor found it so hard to master his emotion that he could only nod his head. Yet the ball to which the general alluded was the discharging of a fiendish war machine toward an unsuspecting and harmless city alive with sleeping people, and the emotion of the inventor was due to the fact that he had devised and completed the most atrocious engine of death ever conceived by the mind of man—the Relay Gun. Horrible as is the thought, this otherwise normal man had devoted nine whole years to the problem of how to destroy human life at a distance of a hundred kilometres, and at last he had been successful, and an emperor had placed with his own divinely appointed hands a ribbon over the spot beneath which his heart should have been.

The projectile of this diabolical invention was ninety-five centimetres in diameter, and was itself a rifled mortar, which in full flight, twenty miles from the gun and at the top of its trajectory, exploded in mid-air, hurling forward its contained projectile with an additional velocity of three thousand feet per second. This process repeated itself, the final or core bomb, weighing over three hundred pounds and filled with lyddite, reaching its mark one minute and thirty-five seconds after the firing of the gun. This crowning example of the human mind's destructive ingenuity had cost the German Government five million marks and had required three years for its construction, and by no means the least of its devilish capacities was that of automatically reloading and firing itself at the interval of every ten seconds, its muzzle rising, falling, or veering slightly from side to side with each discharge, thus causing the shells to fall at wide distances. The poisonous nature of the immense volumes of gas poured out by the mastodon when in action necessitated the withdrawal of its crew to a safe distance. But once set in motion it needed no
from his pocket. "Fifty-nine minutes past eleven," he announced. "At one minute past twelve Paris will be

His right hand trembled. He dashed the back of his left across his eyes. The general took out a large silver watch

turned toward the little brass switch with its button of black rubber that glistened so innocently in the candlelight.

Are you ready, gentlemen? I warn you that when 'Thanatos' snores the rafters will ring.

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slapped Von Heckmann upon the shoulder and drained his glass.

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drink your health! Officers of the First Artillery, I give you a toast--a toast which you will all remember to your

joke at which the officers laughed loudly, for the general was a martinet and had to be humoured.

"This is a great occasion for all of us! Give me that bottle." He seized a magnum of champagne from the orderly and

the window.

The orderly sprang forward and hastily commenced uncorking bottles, while Von Heckmann turned away to

Through the windows, at a distance of four hundred yards, the pounding of the machinery which flooded the

water jacket of the Relay Gun was distinctly audible in the stillness of the night. The pressure of a finger--a little

finger--upon that electric button was all that was necessary to start the torrent of iron and high explosives toward

Paris. By the time the first shell would reach its mark nine more would be on their way, stretched across the

midnight sky at intervals of less than eight miles. And once started the stream would continue uninterrupted for two

hours. The fascinated eyes of all the officers fastened themselves upon the key. None spoke.

"Well, well, gentlemen!" exclaimed the general brusquely, "what is the matter with you? You act as if you were

at a funeral! Hans," turning to the orderly, "open the champagne there. Fill the glasses. Bumpers all, gentlemen, for

the greatest inventor of all times, Herr von Heckmann, the inventor of the Relay Gun!"

The orderly sprang forward and hastily commenced uncorking bottles, while Von Heckmann turned away to

the window.

"Here, this won't do, Schelling! You must liven things up a bit!" continued the general to one of the officers. "This is a great occasion for all of us! Give me that bottle." He seized a magnum of champagne from the orderly and commenced pouring out the foaming liquid into the glasses beside the plates. Schelling made a feeble attempt at a

joke at which the officers laughed loudly, for the general was a martinet and had to be humoured.

"Now, then," called out the general as he glanced toward the window, "Herr von Heckmann, we are going to
drink your health! Officers of the First Artillery, I give you a toast--a toast which you will all remember to your
dying day! Bumpers, gentlemen! No heel taps! I give you the health of 'Thanatos'--the leviathan of artillery, the
winged bearer of death and destruction--and of its inventor, Herr von Heckmann. Bumpers, gentlemen!" The general
slapped Von Heckmann upon the shoulder and drained his glass.

"'Thanatos!' Von Heckmann!" shouted the officers. And with one accord they dashed their goblets to the stone
flagging upon which they stood.

"And now, my dear inventor," said the general, "to you belongs the honour of arousing 'Thanatos' into activity. Are you ready, gentlemen? I warn you that when 'Thanatos' snores the rafters will ring."

Von Heckmann had stood with bowed head while the officers had drunk his health, and he now hesitatingly
turned toward the little brass switch with its button of black rubber that glistened so innocently in the candlelight.
His right hand trembled. He dashed the back of his left across his eyes. The general took out a large silver watch
from his pocket. "Fifty-nine minutes past eleven," he announced. "At one minute past twelve Paris will be
disembowelled. Put your finger on the button, my friend. Let us start the ball rolling.”

Von Heckmann cast a glance almost of disquietude upon the faces of the officers who were leaning over the table in the intensity of their excitement. His elation, his exaltation, had passed from him. He seemed overwhelmed at the momentousness of the act which he was about to perform. Slowly his index finger crept toward the button and hovered half suspended over it. He pressed his lips together and was about to exert the pressure required to transmit the current of electricity to the discharging apparatus when unexpectedly there echoed through the night the sharp click of a horse's hoofs coming at a gallop down the village street. The group turned expectantly to the doorway.

An officer dressed in the uniform of an aide-de-camp of artillery entered abruptly, saluted, and produced from the inside pocket of his jacket a sealed envelope which he handed to the general. The interest of the officers suddenly centred upon the contents of the envelope. The general grumbled an oath at the interruption, tore open the missive, and held the single sheet which it contained to the candlelight.

"An armistice!” he cried disgustedly. His eye glanced rapidly over the page.

"To the Major-General commanding the First Division of Artillery, Army of the Meuse:

"An armistice has been declared, to commence at midnight, pending negotiations for peace. You will see that no acts of hostility occur until you receive notice that war is to be resumed.

"VON HELMUTH, "Imperial Commissioner for War."

The officers broke into exclamations of impatience as the general crumpled the missive in his hand and cast it upon the floor.

"Donnerwetter!” he shouted. "Why were we so slow? Curse the armistice!” He glanced at his watch. It already pointed to after midnight. His face turned red and the veins in his forehead swelled.

"To hell with peace!” he bellowed, turning back his watch until the minute hand pointed to five minutes to twelve. "To hell with peace, I say! Press the button, Von Heckmann!”

But in spite of the agony of disappointment which he now acutely experienced, Von Heckmann did not fire. Sixty years of German respect for orders held him in a viselike grip and paralyzed his arm.

"I can't," he muttered. "I can't."

The general seemed to have gone mad. Thrusting Von Heckmann out of the way, he threw himself into a chair at the end of the table and with a snarl pressed the black handle of the key.

The officers gasped. Hardened as they were to the necessities of war, no act of insubordination like the present had ever occurred within their experience. Yet they must all uphold the general; they must all swear that the gun was fired before midnight. The key clicked and a blue bead snapped at the switch. They held their breaths, looking through the window to the west.

At first the night remained still. Only the chirp of the crickets and the fretting of the aide-de-camp's horse outside the cottage could be heard. Then, like the grating of a coffee mill in a distant kitchen when one is just waking out of a sound sleep, they heard the faint, smothered whir of machinery, a sharper metallic ring of steel against steel followed by a gigantic detonation which shook the ground upon which the cottage stood and overturned every glass upon the table. With a roar like the fall of a skyscraper the first shell hurled itself into the night. Half terrified the officers gripped their chairs, waiting for the second discharge. The reverberation was still echoing among the hills when the second detonation occurred, shortly followed by the third and fourth. Then, in intervals between the crashing explosions, a distant rumbling growl, followed by a shuddering of the air, as if the night were frightened, came up out of the west toward Paris, showing that the projectiles were at the top of their flight and going into action. A lake of yellow smoke formed in the pocket behind the hill where lay the redoubt in which "Thanatos" was snoring.

On the great race track of Longchamps, in the Bois de Boulogne, the vast herd of cows, sheep, horses, and goats, collected together by the city government of Paris and attended by fifty or sixty shepherds especially imported from les Landes, had long since ceased to browse and had settled themselves down into the profound slumber of the animal world, broken only by an occasional bleating or the restless whinnying of a stallion. On the race course proper, in front of the grandstand and between it and the judge's box, four of these shepherds had built a small fire and by its light were throwing dice for coppers. They were having an easy time of it, these shepherds, for their flocks did not wander, and all that they had to do was to see that the animals were properly driven to such parts of the Bois as would afford proper nourishment.

"Well, mes enfants,” exclaimed old Adrian Bannalec, pulling a turnip-shaped watch from beneath his blouse and holding it up to the firelight, "it's twelve o'clock and time to turn in. But what do you say to a cup of chocolate first?"

The others greeted the suggestion with approval, and going somewhere underneath the grandstand, Bannalec produced a pot filled with water, which he suspended with much dexterity over the fire upon the end of a pointed stick. The water began to boil almost immediately, and they were on the point of breaking their chocolate into it
when, from what appeared to be an immense distance, through the air there came a curious rumble.

"What was that?" muttered Bannalec. The sound was followed within a few seconds by another, and after a similar interval by a third and fourth.

"There was going to be an armistice," suggested one of the younger herdsmen. He had hardly spoken before a much louder and apparently nearer detonation occurred.

"That must be one of our guns," said old Adrian proudly. "Do you hear how much louder it speaks than those of the Germans?"

Other discharges now followed in rapid succession, some fainter, some much louder. And then somewhere in the sky they saw a flash of flame, followed by a thunderous concussion which rattled the grandstand, and a great fiery serpent came soaring through the heavens toward Paris. Each moment it grew larger, until it seemed to be dropping straight toward them out of the sky, leaving a trail of sparks behind it.

"It's coming our way," chattered Adrian.

"God have mercy upon us!" murmured the others.

Rigid with fear, they stood staring with open mouths at the shell that seemed to have selected them for the object of its flight.

"God have mercy on our souls!" repeated Adrian after the others.

Then there came a light like that of a million suns....

Alas for the wives and children of the herdsmen! And alas for the herds! But better that the eight core bombs projected by "Thanatos" through the midnight sky toward Paris should have torn the foliage of the Bois, destroyed the grandstands of Auteuil and Longchamps, with sixteen hundred innocent sheep and cattle, than that they should have sought their victims among the crowded streets of the inner city. Lucky for Paris that the Relay Gun had been sighted so as to sweep the metropolis from the west to the east, and that though each shell approached nearer to the walls than its preceding brother, none reached the ramparts. For with the discharge of the eighth shell and the explosion of the first core bomb filled with lyddite among the sleeping animals huddled on the turf in front of the grandstands, something happened which the poor shepherds did not see.

The watchers in the Eiffel Tower, seeing the heavens with their searchlights for German planes and German dirigibles, saw the first core bomb bore through the sky from the direction of Verdun, followed by its seven comrades, and saw each bomb explode in the Bois below. But as the first shell shattered the stillness of the night and spread its sulphureous and death-dealing fumes among the helpless cattle, the watchers on the Tower saw a vast light burst skyward in the far-distant east.

* * * * *

Two miles up the road from the village of Champaubert, Karl Biedenkopf, a native of Hesse-Nassau and a private of artillery, was doing picket duty. The moonlight turned the broad highroad toward Épernay into a gleaming white boulevard down which he could see, it seemed to him, for miles. The air was soft and balmy, and filled with the odour of hay which the troopers had harvested "on behalf of the Kaiser." Across the road "Gretchen," Karl's mare, grazed ruminatively, while the picket himself sat on the stone wall by the roadside, smoking the Bremen cigar which his corporal had given him after dinner.

The night was thick with stars. They were all so bright that at first he did not notice the comet which sailed slowly toward him from the northwest, seemingly following the line of the German intrenchments from Amiens, St.-Quentin, and Laon toward Rheims and Épernay. But the comet was there, dropping a long yellow beam of light upon the sleeping hosts that were beleaguering the outer ring of the French fortifications. Suddenly the repose of Biedenkopf's retrospections was abruptly disconcerted by the distant pounding of hoofs far down the road from Verdun. He sprang off the wall, took up his rifle, crossed the road, hastily adjusted "Gretchen's" bridle, leaped into the saddle, and awaited the night rider, whoever he might be. At a distance of three hundred feet he cried: "Halt!" The rider drew rein, hastily gave the countersign, and Biedenkopf, recognizing the aide-de-camp, saluted and drew aside.

"There goes a lucky fellow," he said aloud. "Nothing to do but ride up and down the roads, stopping wherever he sees a pleasant inn or a pretty face, spending money like water, and never risking a hair of his head."

It never occurred to him that maybe his was the luck. And while the aide-de-camp galloped on and the sound of his horse's hoofs grew fainter and fainter down the road toward the village, the comet came sailing swiftly on overhead, deluging the fortifications with a blinding orange-yellow light. It could not have been more than a mile away when Biedenkopf saw it. Instantly his trained eye recognized the fact that this strange round object shooting through the air was no wandering celestial body.

"Ein Flieger!" he cried hoarsely, staring at it in astonishment, knowing full well that no dirigible or aeroplane of German manufacture bore any resemblance to this extraordinary voyager of the air.

A hundred yards down the road his field telephone was attached to a poplar, and casting one furtive look at the
Flying Ring he galloped to the tree and rang up the corporal of the guard. But at the very instant that his call was answered a series of terrific detonations shook the earth and set the wires roaring in the receiver, so that he could hear nothing. One--two--three--four of them, followed by a distant answering boom in the west.

And then the whole sky seemed full of fire. He was hurled backward upon the road and lay half-stunned, while the earth discharged itself into the air with a roar like that of ten thousand shells exploding all together. The ground shook, groaned, grumbled, grated, and showers of boards, earth, branches, rocks, vegetables, tiles, and all sorts of unrecognizable and grotesque objects fell from the sky all about him. It was like a gigantic and never-ending mine, or series of mines, in continuous explosion, a volcano pouring itself upward out of the bowels of an incandescent earth. Above the ear-splitting thunder of the eruption he heard shrill cries and raucous shoutings. Mounted men dashed past him down the road, singly and in squadrons. A molten globe dropped through the branches of the poplar, and striking the hard surface of the road at a distance of fifty yards scattered itself like a huge ingot dropped from a blast furnace. Great clouds of dust descended and choked him. A withering heat enveloped him....

It was noon next day when Karl Biedenkopf raised his head and looked about him. He thought first there had been a battle. But the sight that met his eyes bore no resemblance to a field of carnage. Over his head he noticed that the uppermost branches of the poplar had been seared as by fire. The road looked as if the countryside had been traversed by a hurricane. All sorts of débris filled the fields and everywhere there seemed to be a thick deposit of blackened earth. Vaguely realizing that he must report for duty, he crawled, in spite of his bursting head and aching limbs, on all fours down the road toward the village.

But he could not find the village. There was no village there; and soon he came to what seemed to be the edge of a gigantic crater, where the earth had been uprooted and tossed aside as if by some huge convulsion of nature. Here and there masses of inflammable material smoked and flickered with red flames. His eyes sought the familiar outlines of the redoubts and fortifications, but found them not. And where the village had been there was a great cavern in the earth, and the deepest part of the cavern, or so it seemed to his half-blinded sight, was at about the point where the cottage had stood which his general had used as his headquarters, the spot where the night before that general had raised his glass of bubbling wine and toasted "Thanatos," the personification of death, and called his officers to witness that this was the greatest moment in the history of warfare, a moment that they would all remember to their dying day.

XII

The shabby-genteel little houses of the Appian Way, in Cambridge, whose window-eyes with their blue-green lids had watched Bennie Hooker come and go, trudging back and forth to lectures and recitations, first as boy and then as man, for thirty years, must have blinked with amazement at the sight of the little professor as he started on the afterward famous Hooker Expedition to Labrador in search of the Flying Ring.

For the five days following Thornton's unexpected visit Bennie, existing without sleep and almost without food save for his staple of ready-to-serve chocolate, was the centre of a whirl of books, logarithms, and calculations in the University Library, and constituted himself an unmitigated, if respected, pest at the Cambridge Observatory. Moreover--and this was the most iconoclastic spectacle of all to his conservative pedagogical neighbours in the Appian Way--telegraph boys on bicycles kept rushing to and fro in a stream between the Hooker boarding-house and Harvard Square at all hours of the day and night.

For Bennie had lost no time and had instantly started in upon the same series of experiments to locate the origin of the phenomena which had shaken the globe as had been made use of by Professor von Schwenitz at the direction of General von Helmuth, the Imperial German Commissioner for War, at Mainz. The result had been approximately identical, and Hooker had satisfied himself that somewhere in the centre of Labrador his fellow-scientist--the discoverer of the Lavender Ray--was conducting the operations that had resulted in the dislocation of the earth's axis and retardation of its motion. Filled with a pure and unselfish scientific joy, it became his sole and immediate ambition to find the man who had done these things, to shake him by the hand, and to compare notes with him upon the now solved problems of thermic induction and of atomic disintegration.

But how to get there? How to reach him? For Prof. Bennie Hooker had never been a hundred miles from Cambridge in his life, and a journey to Labrador seemed almost as difficult as an attempt to reach the pole. Off again then to the University Library, with pale but polite young ladies hastening to fetch him atlases, charts, guidebooks, and works dealing with sport and travel, until at last the great scheme unfolded itself to his mind--the scheme that was to result in the perpetuation of atomic disintegration for the uses of mankind and the subsequent alteration of civilization, both political and economic. Innocently, ingeniously, ingenuously, he mapped it all out. No one must know what he was about. Oh, no! He must steal away, in disguise if need be, and reach Pax alone. Three would be a crowd in that communion of scientific thought! He must take with him the notes of his own experiments, the diagrams of his apparatus, and his precious zirconium; and he must return with the great secret of atomic disintegration in his breast, ready, with the discoverer's permission, to give it to the dry and thirsty world. And then,
indeed, the earth would blossom like the rose!

A strange sight, the start of the Hooker Expedition!

Doctor Jelly's coloured housemaid had just thrown a pail of blue-gray suds over his front steps--it was 6:30 A.M.--and was on the point of resolutely kneeling and swabbing up the doctor's porch, when she saw the door of the professor's residence open cautiously and a curious human exhibit, the like of which had ne'er before been seen on sea or land, surreptitiously emerge. It was Prof. Bennie Hooker--disguised as a salmon fisherman!

Over a brand-new sportsman's knickerbocker suit of screaming yellow check he had donned an English mackintosh. On his legs were gaiters, and on his head a helmetlike affair of cloth with a visor in front and another behind, with eartabs fastened at the crown with a piece of black ribbon--in other words a "Glengarry." The suit had been manufactured in Harvard Square, and was a triumph of sartorial art on the part of one who had never been nearer to a real fisherman than a coloured fashion plate. However, it did suggest a sportsman of the variety usually portrayed in the comic supplements, and, to complete the picture, in Professor Hooker's hands and under his arms were yellow pigskin bags and rod cases, so that he looked like the show window of a harness store.

"Fo' de land sakes!" exclaimed the Jellys' coloured maid, oblivious of her suds. "Fo' de Lawd! Am dat Perfesser Hookey?"

It was! But a new and glorified professor, with a soul thrilling to the joy of discovery and romance, with a flash in his eyes, and the savings of ten years in a large roll in his left-hand knickerbocker pocket.

Thus started the Hooker Expedition, which discovered the Flying Ring and made the famous report to the Smithsonian Institution after the disarmament of the nations. But could the nations have seen the expedition as it emerged from its boarding-house that September morning they would have rubbed their eyes.

With the utmost difficulty Prof. Bennie Hooker negotiated his bags and rod cases as far as Harvard Square, where, through the assistance of a friendly conductor with a sense of humour, he was enabled to board an electric surface car to the North Station.

Beyond the start up the River Moisie his imagination refused to carry him. But he had a faith that approximated certainty that over the Height of Land--just over the edge--he would find Pax and the Flying Ring. During all the period required for his experiments and preparations he had never once glanced at a newspaper or inquired as to the progress of the war that was rapidly exterminating the inhabitants of the globe. Thermic induction, atomic disintegration, the Lavender Ray, these were the Alpha, the Sigma, the Omega of his existence.

But meantime[3] the war had gone on with all its concomitant horror, suffering, and loss of life, and the representatives of the nations assembled at Washington had been feverishly attempting to unite upon the terms of a universal treaty that should end militarism and war forever. And thereafter, also, although Professor Hooker was sublimely unconscious of the fact, the celebrated conclave, known as Conference No. 2, composed of the best-known scientific men from every laud, was sitting, perspiring, in the great lecture hall of the Smithsonian Institution, its members shouting at one another in a dozen different languages, telling each other what they did and didn't know, and becoming more and more confused and entangled in an underbrush of contradictory facts and observations and irreconcilable theories until they were making no progress whatever--which was precisely what the astute and plausible Count von Koentitz, the German Ambassador, had planned and intended.

[Footnote 3: Up to the date of the armistice.]

The Flying Ring did not again appear, and in spite of the uncontroversed testimony of Acting-Consul Quinn, Mohammed Ben Ali el Bad, and a thousand others who had actually seen the Lavender Ray, people began gradually, almost unconsciously, to assume that the destruction of the Atlas Mountains had been the work of an unsuspected volcano and that the presence of the Flying Ring had been a coincidence and not the cause of the disruption. So the incident passed by and public attention refocused itself upon the conflict on the plains of Châlons-sur-Marne. Only Bill Hood, Thornton, and a few others in the secret, together with the President, the Cabinet, and the members of Conference No. 1 and of Conference No. 2, truly apprehended the significance of what had occurred, and realized that either war or the human race must pass away forever. And no one at all, save only the German Ambassador and the Imperial German Commissioners, suspected that one of the nations had conceived and was putting into execution a plan designed to result in the acquirement of the secret of how the earth could be rocked and in the capture of the discoverer. For the Sea Fox, bearing the German expeditionary force, had sailed from Amsterdam twelve days after the conference held at Mainz between Professor von Schwenitz and General von Helmuth, and having safely rounded the Orkneys was now already well on its course toward Labrador. Bennie Hooker, however, was ignorant of all these things. Like an immigrant with a tag on his arm, he sat on the train which bore him toward Quebec, his ticket stuck into the band on his hat, dreaming of a transformer that wouldn't--couldn't--melt at only six thousand degrees.

When Professor Hooker awoke in his room at the hotel in Quebec the morning after his arrival there, he ate a leisurely breakfast, and having smoked a pipe on the terrace, strolled down to the wharves along the river front. Here
to his disgust he learned that the Labrador steamer, the Druro, would not sail until the following Thursday—a three days' wait. Apparently Labrador was a less-frequented locality than he had supposed. He mastered his impatience, however, and discovering a library presided over by a highly intelligent graduate of Edinburgh, he became so interested in various profound treatises on physics which he discovered that he almost missed his boat.

Assisted by the head porter, and staggering under the weight of his new rod cases and other impedimenta, Bennie boarded the Druro on Thursday morning, engaged a stateroom, and purchased a ticket for Seven Islands, which is the nearest harbour to the mouth of the River Moisie. She was a large and comfortable river steamer of about eight hundred and fifty tons, and from her appearance belied the fact that she was the connecting link between civilization and the desolate and ice-clad wastes of the Far North, as in fact she was. The captain regarded Bennie with indifference, if not disrespect, grunted, and ascending to the pilot house blew the whistle. Quebec, with its teeming wharves and crowded shipping, overlooked by the cliffs that made Wolfe famous, slowly fell behind. Off their leeward bow the Isle of Orleans swung nearer and swept past, its neat homesteads inviting the weary traveller to pastoral repose. The river cleared. Low, farm-clad shores began to slip by. The few tourists and returning habitans settled themselves in the bow and made ready for their voyage.

There would have been much to interest the ordinary American traveller in this comparatively unfrequented corner of his native continent; but our salmon fisherman, having conveniently disposed of his baggage, immediately retired to his stateroom and, intent on saving time, proceeded, wholly oblivious of the Druro, to read passionately several exceedingly uninviting looking books which he produced from his valise. The Druro, quite as oblivious to Professor Hooker, proceeded on her accustomed way, passed by Tadousac, and made her first stop at the Godbout. Bennie, finding the boat no longer in motion, reappeared on deck under the mistaken impression that they had reached the end of the voyage, for he was unfamiliar with the topography of the St. Lawrence, and in fact had very vague ideas as to distances and the time required to traverse them by rail or boat.

At the Godbout the Druro dropped a habitan or two, a few boatloads of steel rods, crates of crockery and tobacco, and then thrust her bow out into the stream and steered down river, rounding at length the Pointe des Monts and winding in behind the Isles des Oeufs to the River Pentecoute, where she deposited some more habitans, including a priest in a black soutane, who somewhat incongruously was smoking a large cigar. Then, nosing through a fog bank and breaking out at last into sunlight again, she steamed across and put in past the Carousel, that picturesque and rocky headland, into Seven Islands Bay. Here she anchored, and, having discharged cargo, steamed out by the Grand Boule, where eighteen miles beyond the islands Bennie saw the pilot house of the old St. Olaf, of unhappy memory, just lifting above the water.

He had emerged from the retirement of his stateroom only on being asked by the steward for his ticket and learning that the Druro was nearing the end of her journey. For nearly two days he had been submerged in Soddy on The Interpretation of Radium. The Druro was running along a sandy, low-lying beach about half a mile offshore. They were nearing the mouth of a wide river. The volume of black fresh water from the Moisie rushed out into the St. Lawrence until it met the green sea water, causing a sharp demarcation of colour and a no less pronounced conflict of natural forces. For, owing to the pressure of the tide against the solid mass of the fresh stream, acres of water unexpectedly boiled on all sides, throwing geysers of foam twenty feet or more into the air, and then subsided. Off the point the engine bell rang twice, and the Druro came to a pause.

Bennie, standing in the bow, in his sportsman's cap and waterproof, hugging his rod cases to his breast, watched while a heterogeneous fleet of canoes, skiffs, and sailboats came racing out from shore, for the steamer does not land here, but hangs in the offing and lighters its cargo ashore. Leading the lot was a sort of whaleboat propelled by two oars on one side and one on the other, and in the sternsheets sat a rosy-cheeked, good-natured looking man with a smooth-shaven face who Bennie knew must be Malcolm Holliday.

"Hello, Cap!" shouted Holliday. "Any passengers?"

"Howdy!" said Holliday. "What do you want? What can I do for you?"

"I thought I'd try a little salmon fishing," shrieked Bennie back at him.


[Footnote 4: Along the St. Lawrence and the Labrador coast a salmon fisherman is always spoken of by natives and local residents as an "officer," the reason being that most of the sportsmen who visit these waters are English army officers. Hence salmon fishermen are universally termed "officers," and a habitan will describe the sportsmen who have rented a certain river as "les officiers de la Moisie" or "les officiers de la Romaine."]

"Oh!" answered Bennie ruefully. "I didn't know. I supposed I could fish anywhere."

"Well, you can't!" snapped Holliday, puzzled by the little man's curious appearance.

"I suppose I can go ashore, can't I?" insisted Bennie somewhat indignantly. "I'll just take a camping trip then. I'd like to see the big salmon cache up at the forks if I can't do anything else."
Instantly Holliday scented something. "Another fellow after gold," he muttered to himself.

Just at that moment, the tide being at the ebb, a hundred acres of green water off the Druro's bow broke into whirling waves and jets of foam again. All about them, and a mile to seaward, these merry men danced by the score. Bennie thrilled at the beauty of it. The whaleboat containing Holliday was now right under the ship's bows.

"I want to look round anyhow," expostulated Bennie. "I've come all the way from Boston." He felt himself treated like a criminal, felt the suspicion in Holliday's eye.

The factor laughed. "In that case you certainly deserve sympathy." Then he hesitated. "Oh, well, come along," he said finally. "We'll see what we can do for you."

A rope ladder had been thrown over the side and one of the sailors now lowered Bennie's luggage into the boat. The professor followed, avoiding with difficulty stepping on his mackintosh as he climbed down the slippery rounds. Holliday grasped his hand and yanked him to a seat in the stern.

"Yes," he repeated, "if you've come all the way from Boston I guess we'll have to put you up for a few days anyway."

A crate of canned goods, a parcel of mail, and a huge bundle of newspapers were deposited in the bow. Holliday waved his hand. The Druro churned the water and swung out into midstream again. Bennie looked curiously after her. To the north lay a sandy shore dotted by a scraggy forest of dwarf spruce and birch. A few fishing huts and a mass of wooden shanties fringed the forest. To the east, seaward, many miles down that great stretch of treacherous, sullen river waited a gray bank of fog. But overhead the air was crystalline with that sparkling, scratchy brilliance that is found only in northern climes. Nature seemed hard, relentless. With his feet entangled in rod cases Professor Hooker wondered for a moment what on earth he was there for, landing on this inhospitable coast. Then his eyes sought the genial face of Malcolm Holliday and hope sprang up anew. For there is that about this genial frontiersman that draws all men to him alike, be they Scotch or English, Canadian habitans or Montagnais, and he is the king of the coast, as his father was before him, or as was old Peter McKenzie, the head factor, who incidentally cast the best salmon fly ever thrown east of Montreal or south of Ungava. Bennie found comfort in Holliday's smile, and felt toward him as a child does toward its mother.

They neared shore and ran alongside a ramshackle pier, up the slippery pales of which Bennie was instructed to clamber. Then, dodging rotten boards and treacherous places, he gained the sand of the beach and stood at last on Labrador. A group of Montagnais picked up the professor's luggage and, headed by Holliday, they started for the latter's house. It was a strange and amusing landing of an expedition the results of which have revolutionized the life of the inhabitants of the entire globe. No such inconspicuous event has ever had so momentous a conclusion. And now when Malcolm Holliday makes his yearly trip home to Quebec, to report to the firm of Holliday Brothers, who own all the nets far east of Anticosti, he spends hours at the Club des Voyageurs, recounting in detail all the circumstances surrounding the arrival of Professor Hooker and how he took him for a gold hunter.

"Anyhow," he finishes, "I knew he wasn't a salmon fisherman in spite of his rods and cases, for he didn't know a Black Dose from a Thunder and Lightning or a Jock Scott, and he thought you could catch salmon with a worm!"

It was true wholly. Bennie did suppose one killed the king of game fish as he had caught minnows in his childhood, and his geologic researches in the Harvard Library had not taught him otherwise. Neither had his tailor.

"My dear fellow," said Holliday as they smoked their pipes on the narrow board piazza at the Post, "of course I'll help you all I can, but you've come at a bad season of the year all round. In the first place, you'll be eaten alive by black flies, gnats, and mosquitoes." He slapped vigorously as he spoke. "And you'll have the devil of a job getting canoe men. You see all the Montagnais are down here at the settlement 'making their mass.' Once a year they leave the hunting grounds up by the Divide and beyond and come down river to 'faire la messe'--it's a sacred duty with 'em. They're very religious, as you probably know--a fine lot, too, take 'em altogether, gentle, obedient, industrious, polite, cheerful, and fair to middling honest. They have a good deal of French blood--a bit diluted, but it's there."

"Can't I get a few to go along with me?" asked Bennie anxiously.

"That's a question," answered the factor meditatively. "You know how the birds--how caribou--migrate every year. Well, these Montagnais are just like them. They have a regular routine. Each man has a line of traps of his own, the whole line up to the Height of Land. They all go up river in the autumn with their winter's supply of pork, flour, tea, powder, lead, axes, files, rosin to mend their canoes, and castoreum--made out of beaver glands, you know--to take away the smell of their hands from the baited traps. They go up in families, six or seven canoe men together, and as each man reaches his own territory his canoe drops out of the procession and he makes a camp for his wife and babies. Then he spends the winter--six or seven months--in the woods following his line of traps. By and by the ice goes out and he begins to want some society. He hasn't seen a priest for ten months or so, and he's afraid of the loup-garou, for all I know. So he comes down river, takes his Newport season here at Moisie, and goes to mass and staves off the loup-garou. They're all here now. Maybe you can get a couple to go up river and maybe you can't."
Then observing Bennie's crestfallen expression, he added:

"But we'll see. Perhaps you can get Marc St. Ange and Edouard Moreau, both good fellows. They've made their mass and they know the country from here to Ungava. There's Marc now--Venez ici, Marc St. Ange." A swarthy, lithe Montagnais was coming down the road, and Holliday addressed him rapidly in habitant French: "This gentleman wishes to go up river to the forks to see the big cache. Will you go with him?"

The Montagnais bowed to Professor Hooker and pondered the suggestion. Then he gesticulated toward the north and seemed to Bennie to be telling a long story.

Holliday laughed again. "Marc says he will go," he commented shortly. "But he says also that if the Great Father of the Marionettes is angry he will come back."

"What does he mean by that?" asked Bennie.

"Why, when the aurora borealis--Northern Lights--plays in the sky the Indians always say that the 'marionettes are dancing.' About four weeks ago we had some electrical disturbances up here and a kind of an earthquake. It scared these Indians silly. There was a tremendous display, almost like a volcano. It beat anything I ever saw, and I've been here fifteen years. The Indians said the Father of the Marionettes was angry because they didn't dance enough to suit him, and that he was making them dance. Then some of them caught a glimpse of a shooting star, or a comet, or something, and called it the Father of the Marionettes. They had quite a time--held masses, and so on--and were really cut up. But the thing is over now, except for the regular, ordinary display."

"When can they be ready?" inquired Bennie eagerly.

"To-morrow morning," replied Holliday. "Marc will engage his uncle. They're all right. Now how about an outfit? But don't talk any more about salmon. I know what you're after--it's gold!"

* * * * *

The moon was still hanging low over the firs at four o'clock the next morning when three black and silent shadows emerged from the factor's house and made their way, cautiously and with difficulty, across the sand to where a canoe had been run into the riffles of the beach. Marc came first, carrying a sheet-iron stove with a collapsible funnel; then his Uncle Edouard, shouldering a bundle consisting of a tent and a couple of sacks of flour and pork; and lastly Professor Hooker with his mackintosh and rifle, entirely unaware of the fact that his careful guides had removed all the cartridges from his luggage lest he should shoot too many caribou and so spoil the winter's food supply. It was cold, almost frosty. In the black flood of the river the stars burned with a chill, wavering light. Bennie put on his mackintosh with a shiver. The two guides quietly piled the luggage in the centre of the canoe, arranged a seat for their passenger, picked up their paddles, shoved off, and took their places in bow and stern.

No lights gleamed in the windows of Moisie. The lap of the ripples against the birch side of the canoe, the gurgle of the water round the paddle blades, and the rush of the bow as, after it had paused on the withdraw, it leaped forward on the stroke, were the only sounds that broke the deathlike silence of the semi-arctic night. Bennie struck a match, and it flared red against the black water as he lit his pipe, but he felt a great stirring within his little breast, a great courage to dare, to do, for he was off, really off, on his great hunt, his search for the secret that would remake the world. With the current whispering against its sides the canoe swept in a wide circle to midstream. The moon was now partially obscured behind the treetops. To the east a faint glow made the horizon seem blacker than ever. Ahead the wide waste of the dark river seemed like an engulfing chasm. Drowsiness enwrapped Professor Hooker, a drowsiness intensified by the rythmic swinging of the paddles and the pile of bedding against which he reclined. He closed his eyes, content to be driven onward toward the region of his hopes, content almost to fall asleep.

"Hi!" suddenly whispered Marc St. Ange. "Voilà! Le père des marionettes!"

Bennie awoke with a start that almost upset the canoe. The blood rushed to his face and sang in his ears.

"Where?" he cried. "Where?"

"Au nord," answered Marc. "Mais il descend!"

Professor Hooker stared in the direction of Marc's uplifted paddle. Was he deceived? Was the wish father to the thought? Or did he really see at an immeasurable distance upon the horizon a quickly dying trail of orange-yellow light? He rubbed his eyes--his heart beating wildly under his sportsman's suiting. But the north was black beyond the coming dawn.

Old Edouard grunted.

"Vous êtes fou!" he muttered to his nephew, and drove his paddle deep into the water.

Day broke with staccato emphasis. The sun swung up out of Europe and burned down upon the canoe with a heat so equatorial in quality that Bennie discarded both his mackintosh and his sporting jacket. All signs of human life had disappeared from the distant banks of the river and the bow of the canoe faced a gray-blue flood emerging from a wilderness of scrubby trees. A few gulls flopped their way coast-ward, and at rare intervals a salmon leaped
and slashed the slow-moving surface into a boiling circle; but for the rest their surroundings were as set, as
immoveable, as the painted scenery of a stage, save where the current swept the scattered promontories of the shore.
But they moved steadily north. So weary was Bennie with the unaccustomed light and fresh air that by ten o'clock
he felt the day must be over, although the sun had not yet reached the zenith. Unexpectedly Marc and Edouard
turned the canoe quietly into a shallow, and beached her on a spit of white sand. In three minutes Edouard had a
small fire snapping, and handed Bennie a cup of tea. How wonderful it seemed—a genuine elixir! And then he felt
the stab of a mosquito, and putting up his hand found it blotched with blood. And the black flies came also. Soon the
professor was tramping up and down, waving his handkerchief and clutching wildly at the air. Then they pushed off
again.

The sun dropped westward as they turned bend after bend, disclosing ever the same view beyond. Shadows of
rocks and trees began to jut across the eddies. A great heron, as big as an ostrich, or so he seemed, arose awkwardly
and flapped off, trailing yards of legs behind him. Then Bennie put on first his jacket and then his mackintosh. He
realized that his hands were numb. The sun was now only a foot or so above the sky line.

This time it was Marc who grunted and thrust the canoe toward the river's edge with a sideways push. It
grounded on a belt of sand and they dragged it ashore. Bennie, who had been looking forward to the night with vivid
apprehension, now discovered to his great happiness that the chill was keeping away the black flies. Joyfully he
assisted in gathering dry sticks, driving tent pegs, and picking reindeer moss for bedding. Then as darkness fell
Edouard fried eggs and bacon, and with their boots off and their stockinged feet toasting to the blaze the three men
ate as becomes men who have laboured fifteen hours in the open air. They drank tin cups of scalding tea, a pint at a
time, and found it good; and they smoked their pipes with their backs propped against the tree trunks and found it
heaven. Then as the stars came out and the woods behind them snapped with strange noises, Edouard took his pipe
from his mouth.

"It's getting cold," said he. "The marionettes will dance to-night."

Bennie heard him as if across a great, yawning gulf. Even the firelight seemed hundreds of yards away. The
little professor was "all in," and he sat with his chin dropped again to his chest, until he heard Marc exclaim:

"Voilà! Elles dansent!"

He raised his eyes. Just across the black, silent sweep of the river three giant prismatic searchlights were
playing high toward the polestar, such searchlights as the gods might be using in some monstrous game. They
wavered here and there, shifting and dodging, faded and sprang up again, till Bennie, dizzy, closed his eyes. The
lights were still dancing in the north as he stumbled to his couch of moss.

"Toujours les marionettes!" whispered Marc gently, as he might to a child. "Bon soir, monsieur."

The tent was hot and dazzling white above his head when low voices, footsteps, and the clink of tin against iron
aroused the professor from a profound coma. The guides had already loaded the canoe and were waiting for him.
The sun was high. Apologetically he pulled on his boots, and stepping to the sand dashed the icy water into his face.
His muscles groaned and rasped. His neck refused to respond to his desires with its accustomed elasticity. But he
drank his tea and downed his scrambled eggs with an enthusiasm unknown in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Marc gave
him a hand into the canoe and they were off. The day had begun.

The river narrowed somewhat and the shores grew more rocky. At noon they lunched on another sand-spit. At
sunset they saw a caribou. Night came. "Always the marionettes." Thus passed nine days—like a dream to Bennie;
and then came the first adventure.

It was about four o'clock on the afternoon of the tenth day of their trip up the Moisie when Marc suddenly
stopped paddling and gazed intently shoreward. After a moment he said something in a low tone to Edouard, and
they turned the canoe and drove it rapidly toward a small cove half hidden by rocks. Bennie, straining his eyes,
could see nothing at first, but when the canoe was but ten yards from shore he caught sight of the motionless figure
of a man, lying on his face with his head nearly in the water. Marc turned him over gently, but the limbs fell limp,
one leg at a grotesque angle to the knee. Bennie saw instantly that it was broken. The Indian's face was white and
immobile, as the painted scenery of a stage, save where the current swept the scattered promontories of the shore.

Thus they found Nichicun, without whom Bennie might never have accomplished the object of his quest. It
took three days to nurse the half-dead and altogether starved Montagnais back to life, but he received the tenderest
care. Marc shot a young caribou and gave him the blood to drink, and made a ragout to put the flesh back on his
bones. Meanwhile the professor slept long hours on the moss and took a much-needed rest; and by degrees they
learned from Nichicun the story of his misfortune—the story that forms a part of the chronicle of the expedition,
which can be read at the Smithsonian Institution.

He was a Montagnais, he said, with a line of traps to the northeast of the Height of Land, and last winter he had had very bad luck indeed. There had been less and less in his traps and he had seen no caribou. So he had taken his wife, who was sick, and had gone over into the Nascopee country for food, and there his wife had died. He had made up his mind very late in the season to come down to Moisie and make his mass and get a new wife, and start a fresh line of traps in the autumn. All the other Montagnais had descended the river in their canoes long before, so he was alone. His provisions had given out and he saw no caribou. He began to think he would surely starve to death. And then one evening, on the point just above their present camp, he had seen a caribou and shot it, but he had been too weak to take good aim and had only broken its shoulder. It lay kicking among the boulders, pushing itself along by its hind legs, and he had feared that it would escape. In his haste to reach it he had slipped on a wet rock and fallen and broken his leg. In spite of the pain he had crawled on, and then had taken place a wild, terrible fight for life between the dying man and the dying beast.

He could not remember all that had occurred--he had been kicked, gored, and bitten; but finally he had got a grip on its throat and slashed it with his knife. Then, lying there on the ground beside it, he drank its blood and cut off the raw flesh in strips for food. Finally one day he had crawled to the river for water and had fainted.

The professor and his guides made for the Indian a hut of rocks and bark, and threw a great pile of moss into the corner of it for him to lie on. They carved a splint for his leg and bound it up, and cut a huge heap of firewood for him, smoking caribou meat and hanging it up in the hut. Somebody would come up river and find him, or if not, the three men would pick him up on their return. For this was right and the law of the woods. But never a word of particular interest to Prof. Bennie Hooker did Nichicun speak until the night before their departure, although the reason and manner of his speaking were natural enough. It happened as follows: but first it should be said that the Nascopees are an ignorant and barbarous tribe, dirty and treacherous, upon whom the Montagnais look down with contempt and scorn. They do not even wear civilized clothes, and their ways are not the ways of les bons sauvages. They have no priests; they do not come to the coast; and the Montagnais will not mingle with them. Thus it bespoke the hunger of Nichicun that he was willing to go into their country.

As he sat round the fire with Marc and Edouard on that last night, Nichicun spoke his mind of the Nascopees, and Marc translated freely for Bennie's edification.

No, the injured Montagnais told them, the Nascopees were not nice; they were dirty. They ate decayed food and they never went to mass. Moreover, they were half-witted. While he was there they were all planning to migrate for the most absurd reason--what do you suppose? Magic! They claimed the end of the world was coming! Of course it was coming some time. But they said now, right away. But why? Because the marionettes were dancing so much. And they had seen the Father of the Marionettes floating in the sky and making thunder! Fools! But the strangest thing of all, they said they could hunt no longer, for they were afraid to cross something--an iron serpent that stung with fire if you touched it, and killed you! What foolishness! An iron serpent! But he had asked them and they had sworn on the holy cross that it was true.

Bennie listened with a chill creeping up his spine. But it would never do to hint what this disclosure meant to him. Between puffs of his pipe he asked casual, careless questions of Nichicun. These Nascopees, for instance, how far off might their land be? And where did they assert this extraordinary serpent of iron to be? Were there rivers in the Nascopee country? Did white men ever go there? All these things the wounded Montagnais told him. It appeared, moreover, that the Rassini River was near the Nascopee territory, and that it flowed into the Moisie only seven miles above the camp. All that night the marionettes danced in Bennie's brain.

Next morning they propped Nichicun on his bed of moss, laid a rifle and a box of matches beside him, and bade him farewell. At the mouth of the Rassini River Prof. Bennie Hooker held up his hand and announced that he was going to the Nascopee country. The canoe halted abruptly. Old Edouard declared that they had been engaged only to go to the big cache, and that their present trip was merely by way of a little excursion to see the river. They had no supplies for such a journey, no proper amount of ammunition. No, they would deposit the professor on the nearest sandbar if he wished, but they were going back. Bennie arose unsteadily in the canoe and dug into his pocket, producing a roll of gold coin. Two hundred and fifty dollars he promised them if they would take him to the nearest tribe of Nascopees; five hundred if they could find the Iron Serpent.

"Bien!" exclaimed both Indians without a moment's hesitation, and the canoe plunged forward up the Rassini.

Once more a dreamlike succession of brilliant, frosty days; once more the star-studded sky in which always the marionettes danced. And then at last the great falls of the Rassini, beyond which no white man had gone. They hid the canoe in the bushes and placed beneath it the iron stove and half their supply of food. Then they plunged into the brush, eastward. Bennie had never known such grueling work and heartbreaking fatigue; and the clouds of flies pursued them venomously and with unrelenting persistence. At first they had to cut their way through acres of brush,
and then the land rose and they saw before them miles of swamp and barren land dotted with dwarf trees and lichen
grown rocks. Here it was easier and they made better time; but the professor's legs ached and his rifle wore a red
bruise on his shoulder. And then after five days of torment they came upon the Iron Rail. It ran in almost a direct
line from northwest to southwest, with hardly a waver, straight over the barrens and through the forests of scrub,
with a five-foot clearing upon either side. At intervals it was elevated to a height of eight or ten inches upon
insulated iron braces. Both Marc and Edouard stared at in wonder, while Bennie made them a little speech.

It was, he said, a thing called a "monorail," made by a man who possessed strange secrets concerning the earth
and the properties of matter. That man lived over the Height of Land toward Ungava. He was a good man and would
not harm other good men. But he was a great magician—if you believed in magic. On the rail undoubtedly he ran
something called a gyroscopic engine, and carried his stores and machinery into the wilderness. The Nascopees were
not such fools after all, for here was the something they feared to cross—the iron serpent that bit and killed. Let them
watch while he made it bite. He allowed his rifle to fall against the rail, and instantly a shower of blue sparks flashed
from it as the current leaped into the earth.

Bennie counted out twenty-five golden eagles and handed them to Edouard. If they followed the rail to its
source he would, he promised, on their return to civilization give them as much again. Without more ado the Indians
lifted their packs and swung off to the northwest along the line of the rail. The stock of Prof. Bennie Hooker had
risen in their estimation. On they ploughed across the barrens, through swamps, over the quaking muskeg, into the
patches of scrub growth where the short branches slapped their faces, but always they kept in sight of the rail.

* * * * *

The extraordinary announcement, transmitted from various European news agencies, that an attempt had been
made by the general commanding the First Artillery Division of the German Army of the Meuse to violate the
armistice, had caused a profound sensation, particularly as the attempt to destroy Paris had been prevented only by
the sudden appearance of the same mysterious Flying Ring that had shortly before caused the destruction of the
Atlas Mountains and the flooding of the Sahara Desert by the Mediterranean Sea.

The advent of the Flying Ring on this second occasion had been noted by several hundred thousand persons,
both soldiers and non-combatants. At about the hour of midnight, as if to observe whether the warring nations
intended sincerely to live up to their agreement and bring about an actual cessation of hostilities, the Ring had
appeared out of the north and, floating through the sky, had followed the lines of the belligerents from Brussels to
Verdun and southward. The blinding yellow light that it had projected toward the earth had roused the soldiers
sleeping in their intrenchments and caused great consternation all along the line of fortifications, as it was
universally supposed that the director of its flight intended to annihilate the combined armies of France, England,
Germany, and Belgium. But the Ring had sailed peacefully along, three thousand feet aloft, deluging the countryside
with its dazzling light, sending its beams into the casemates of the huge fortresses of the Rhine and the outer line of
the French fortifications, searching the redoubts and trenches, but doing no harm to the sleeping armies that lay
beneath it; until at last the silence of the night had been broken by the thunder of "Thanatos," and in the twinkling of
an eye the Lavender Ray had descended, to turn the village of Champaubert into the smoking crater of a dying
volcano. The entire division of artillery had been annihilated, with the exception of a few stragglers, and of the
Relay Gun naught remained but a distorted puddle of steel and iron.

Long before the news of the horrible retribution visited by the master of the Ring upon Treitschke, the major-
general of artillery, and the inventor, Von Heckmann, had reached the United States, Bill Hood, sitting in the
wireless receiving station of the Naval Observatory at Georgetown, had received through the ether a message from
his mysterious correspondent in the north that sent him hurrying to the White House. Pax had called the Naval
Observatory and had transmitted the following ultimatum, repeating it, as was his custom, three times:

"To the President of the United States and to All Mankind:

"I have put the nations to the test and found them wanting. The solemn treaty entered into by the ambassadors
of the belligerent nations at Washington has been violated. My attempt by harmless means to compel the cessation
of hostilities and the abolition of war has failed. I cannot trust the nations of the earth. Their selfishness, their
bloodthirstiness, and greed, will inevitably prevent their fulfilling their agreements with me or keeping the terms of
their treaties with one another, which they regard, as they themselves declare, merely as 'scraps of paper.' The time
has come for me to compel peace. I am the dictator of human destiny and my will is law. War shall cease. On the
10th day of September I shall shift the axis of the earth until the North Pole shall be in the region of Strassburg and
the South Pole in New Zealand. The habitable zone of the earth will be hereafter in South Africa, South and Central
America, and regions now unfrequented by man. The nations must migrate and a new life in which war is unknown
must begin upon the globe. This is my last message to the human race.

"PAX."

The conference of ambassadors summoned by the President to the White House that afternoon exhibited a
character in striking contrast with the first, at which Von Koenitz and the ambassadors from France, Russia, and England had had their memorable disagreement. It was a serious, apprehensive, and subdued group of gentlemen that gathered round the great mahogany table in the Cabinet chamber to debate what course of action the nations should pursue to avert the impending calamity to mankind. For that Pax could shift the axis of the earth, or blow the globe clean out of its orbit into space, if he chose to do so, no one doubted any longer.

And first it fell as the task of the ambassador representing the Imperial German Commissioners to assure his distinguished colleagues that his nation disavowed and denied all responsibility for the conduct of General Treitschke in bombarding Paris after the hour set for the armistice. It was unjust and contrary to the dictates of reason, he argued, to hold the government of a nation comprising sixty-five millions of human beings and five millions of armed men accountable for the actions of a single individual. He spoke passionately, eloquently, persuasively, and at the conclusion of his speech the ambassadors present were forced to acknowledge that what he said was true, and to accept without reservation his plausible assurances that the Imperial German Commissioners had no thought but to cooperate with the other governments in bringing about a lasting peace such as Pax demanded.

But the immediate question was, had not the time for this gone by? Was it not too late to convince the master of the Flying Ring that his orders would be obeyed? Could anything be done to avert the calamity he threatened to bring upon the earth—to prevent the conversion of Europe into a barren waste of ice fields? For Pax had announced that he had spoken for the last time and that the fate of Europe was sealed. All the ambassadors agreed that a general European immigration was practically impossible; and as a last resort it was finally decided to transmit to Pax, through the Georgetown station, a wireless message signed by all the ambassadors of the belligerent nations, solemnly agreeing within one week to disband their armies and to destroy all their munitions and implements of war. This message was delivered to Hood, with instructions for its immediate delivery. All that afternoon and evening the operator sat in the observatory, calling over and over again the three letters that marked mankind's only communication with the controller of its destiny:

"PAX--PAX--PAX!"

But no answer came. For long, weary hours Hood waited, his ears glued to the receivers. An impenetrable silence surrounded the master of the Ring. Pax had spoken. He would say no more. Late that night Hood reluctantly returned to the White House and informed the President that he was unable to deliver the message of the nations.

And meantime Prof. Bennie Hooker, with Marc and Edouard, struggled across the wilderness of Labrador, following the Iron Rail that led to the hiding-place of the master of the world.

* * * *

The terrible fate of the German expeditionary force is too well known to require comment. As has been already told, the Sea Fox had sailed from Amsterdam twelve days after the conference in the War Office at Mainz between General von Helmuth and Professor von Schwenitz. Once north of the Orkneys it had encountered fair weather, and it had reached Hamilton Inlet in ten days without mishap, and with the men and animals in the best of condition. At Rigolet the men had disembarked and loaded their howitzers, mules, and supplies upon the flat-bottomed barges brought with them for that purpose. Thirty French and Indian guides had been engaged, and five days later the expedition, towed by the powerful motor launches, had started up the river toward the chain of lakes lying northwest toward Ungava. Every one was in the best of spirits and everything moved with customary German precision like clockwork. Nothing had been forgotten, not even the pungent invention of a Berlin chemist to discourage mosquitoes. Without labour, without anxiety, the fourteen barges bored through the swift currents and at last reached a great lake that lay like a silver mirror for miles about them. The moon rose and turned the boats into weird shapes as they ploughed through the gray mists—a strange and terrible sight for the Nascopees lurking in the underbrush along the shore. And while the men smoked and sang "Die Wacht am Rhein," listening to the trill of the ripples against the bows, the foremost motorboat grounded.

The momentum of the barge immediately following could not be checked, and she in turn drove into what seemed to be a mud bank. At about the same instant the other barges struck bottom. Intense excitement and confusion prevailed among the members of the expedition, since they were almost out of sight of land and the draft of the motorboats was only nineteen inches. But no efforts could move the barges from where they were. All night long the propellers churned the gleaming water of the lake to foam, but without result. Each and every barge and boat was hard and fast aground, and when the gray daylight came stealing across the lake there was no lake to be seen, only a reeking marsh, covered for miles with a welter of green slime and decaying vegetable matter across which it would seem no human being or animal could flounder. As far as the eye could reach lay only a blackish ooze. And with the sun came millions of mosquitoes and flies, and drove the men and mules frantic with their stings.

Only one man, Ludwig Helmer, a gun driver from Potsdam, survived. Half mad with the flies and nearly naked, he found his way somehow across the quaking bog, after all his comrades had died of thirst, and reached a tribe of Nascopees, who took him to the coast. A great explosion, they told him, had torn the River Nascopee from its bed
and diverted its course. The lakes that it fed had all dried up.

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Blinded by perspiration, sweltering under the heavy burden of their outfit, goaded almost to frenzy by the black flies and mosquitoes, Hooker and Marc and Edouard staggered through the brush, following the monorail. They had already reached the summit of the Height of Land and where now working down the northern slope in the direction of Ungava. The land was barren beyond the imagination of the unimaginative Bennie. Small dwarfed trees struggled for a footing amid the lichen-covered outcroppings and sun-dried moss of the hollows. The slightest rise showed mile upon mile of great waste undulating interminably in every direction. The heat shimmering off the rocks was almost suffocating. At noon on September 10th they threw themselves into the shade of a narrow ledge, boiled some tea, and smoked their pipes, wildly fanning the air to drive away the swarms of insects that attacked them.

Hooker was half drunk from lack of sleep and water. Already once or twice he had caught himself wandering when talking to Marc and Edouard. The whole thing was like a horrible, disgusting nightmare. And then he suddenly became aware that the two Indians were staring intently through the clouds of mosquitoes over the tree tops to the eastward. Through the sweat that trickled into his eyes he tried to make out what they could see. But he could discern nothing except mosquitoes. And then he thought he saw a mosquito larger than all the others. He waved at it, but it remained where it was. A slight breeze momentarily wafted the swarm away, and he still saw the big mosquito hovering over the horizon. Then he heard Marc cry out:

"Quelque chose vol en l'air!"

He rubbed the moisture out of his eyes and stared at the mosquito, which was growing bigger every minute. With the velocity of a projectile, this monstrous insect, or whatever it was, came sweeping up behind them from the Height of Land, soaring into the zenith in a great parabola, until with a shiver of excitement Bennie recognized that it was the Flying Ring.

"Il retourne chez lui," said Marc.

And then Bennie, without offering any explanation, found himself dancing up and down upon the rocks in the dizzying sun, waving his hat and shouting to the Father of the Marionettes. What he shouted he never knew. And Marc and Edouard both shouted, too. But the master of the Ring heard them not, or if he heard he paid them no attention. Nearer and nearer came the Ring, until Bennie could see the gleaming cylinder of its great steel circle. At a distance of about two miles it swept through the air over a low ridge, and settled toward the earth in the direction of Ungava.

"Un petit bout de chemin. We get there to-night."

On they struggled beside the Rail, but now hope ran high. Bennie sang and whistled, unmindful of the mosquitoes and black flies that renewed their attacks with unremitting ferocity. The sun lowered itself into the pine trees, shooting dazzling shafts through the low branches, and then sank in a welter of crimson-yellow light. The sky turned gray in the east; faint stars twinkled through the quivering waves that still shook from the overheated rocks. It turned cold and the mosquitoes departed. Hugging the Rail, they staggered on, now over shaking muskeg, now through thickets of tangled brush, now on great ledges of barren rock, and then across caribou barrens knee-deep in dry and cracking moss. Darkness fell and prudent dictated that they should make camp. But in their excitement they trudged on, until presently a pale glow behind the dwarfed trees showed that the moon was rising. They boiled the water, made tea, and cooked some biscuits. Soon they could see to pursue their way.

"Most there now," encouraged Marc.

Presently, instead of descending, they found the land was rising again, and forcing their way through the undergrowth they struggled up a rocky hillside, perhaps three hundred feet in height. Marc was in the lead, with Bennie a few feet behind him. As they reached the crest the Indian turned and pointed to something in front of him that Bennie was unable to distinguish.

"Nous sommes arrivees," he announced.

With his heart thumping from the exertion of the climb, Bennie crawled up beside his guide and found himself confronted by a strong barbed-wire entanglement affixed to iron stanchions firmly imbedded in the rocks. They were on the top of a ridge that dropped away abruptly at their feet into a valley, perhaps a mile in width, terminating on the other side in perpendicular cliffs, estimated by Bennie to be about eight hundred or a thousand feet in height. Although the entanglement was by no means impassable, it was a distinct obstacle and one they preferred to tackle by daylight. Moreover, it indicated that their company was undesired. They were in the presence of an unknown quantity, the master of the Flying Ring. Whether he was a malign or a benevolent influence, this Father of the Marionettes, they could not tell.
With his back propped against a small spruce Bennie focused his glasses upon dim shapes barely discernible in the midst of the valley. He was thrilled by a deep excitement, a strange fear. What would he see? What mysteries would those vague forms disclose? The shadows cast by the cliffs and a light mist gathering in the low ground made it difficult to see; and then, even as he looked, the moon rose higher and shone through something in the middle of the valley that looked like a tall, grisly skeleton. It seemed to have legs and arms, an odd mushroom-shaped head, and endless ribs. Below and at its feet were other and vaguer shapes--flat domes or cupolas, bombproofs perhaps, buildings of some sort--Pax's home beyond peradventure.

As he looked through the glasses at the skeleton-like tower Bennie had an extraordinary feeling of having seen it all before somewhere. As in a long-forgotten dream he remembered Tesla's tower near Smithtown, on Long Island. And this was Tesla's tower, naught else! It is a strange thing, how at great crises of our lives come feelings of anticipatory knowledge. There is, indeed, nothing new under the sun; else had Bennie been more afraid. As it was, he saw only Tesla's Smithtown tower with its head like a young mushroom. And at the same time there flashed into his memory: "Childe Harold to the Dark Tower Came." Over and over he repeated it mechanically, feeling that he might be one of those of whom the poet had sung. Yet he had not read the lines for years:

"Burningly it came on me all at once, This was the place!... What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?

His eyes searched the shadows round the base of the tower, for his ears had already caught a faint, almost inaudible throbbing that seemed to grow from moment to moment. There certainly was a dull vibration in the air, a vibration like the distant hum of machinery. Suddenly old Edouard touched Bennie upon the shoulder.

"Regardez!" he whispered.

Some transformation was happening in the hood of the tower. From a black opaque object it began to turn a dull red and to diffuse a subdued glow, while the hum turned into a distinct whir.

Bennie became almost hysterical with excitement.

Soon the hood of the tower had turned white and the glow had increased until the whole valley was lit up with a suffused and gentle light. The Ring could be distinctly seen about half a mile away, resting upon a huge circular support.

"C'est le feu!" grunted Marc. "C'est ainsi que l'on fait danser les marionettes!"

There was no doubt that the hood of the tower was in fact white hot, for the perpendicular cliffs of the mountain across the valley sharply reflected the light that it disseminated. The humming whir of the great alternator rose gradually into a scream like the outcry of some angry thing. And then unexpectedly a shaft of pale lavender light shot out from the glowing hood and lost itself in the blackness of the midnight sky. Now appeared a wonderful and beautiful spectacle: immediately above the point where the rays disappeared into the ether hundreds of points of yellow fire suddenly sprang into being in the sky, darting hither and thither like fireflies, some moving slowly and others with such speed they appeared as even, luminous lines.

"Les marionettes! Les marionettes!" Marc cried trembling.

"Not at all! Not at all! They are meteorites!" answered Bennie, entirely engrossed in the scientific phase of the matter and forgetting that he did not speak the other's language. "Space is jammed full of meteoric dust. The larger particles, which strike our atmosphere and which ignite by friction, form shooting stars. The Ray--the Lavender Ray--reaching out into the most distant regions of space meets them in countless numbers and disintegrates them, surrounding them with glowing atmospheres. By George, though, if he starts in playing the Ray upon that cliff we've got to stand from under! Look here, boys," he shouted, "stuff something in your ears." He seized his handkerchief, tore it apart, and, making two plugs, thrust them into the openings of his ears as far as the drums. The others in wonderment followed his example.

"He's going to rock the earth!" cried Bennie Hooker. "He's going to rock the earth again!"

Slowly the Lavender Ray swung through the ether, followed by its millions of meteorites, dipping downward toward the northern side of the valley and sinking ever lower and lower toward the cliff. Bennie threw himself flat on his stomach upon the ridge, pressing his hands to his ears, and the others, feeling that something terrible was going to happen, followed his example. Nearer and nearer toward the ridge dropped the Ray. Bennie held his breath. Another instant and there came a blinding splash of yellow light, a crash like thunder, and a roar that seemed to tear the mountain from its base. The earth shook. Into the zenith sprang a flame of incandescent vapour a mile in height. The tumult increased. Vivid blue flashes of lightning shot out from the spot upon which the Ray played. The air was filled with thunderings, and the ground beneath them rose and fell and swung from side to side. Then came a mighty wind, nay, a cyclone, and gravel and broken branches fell upon them, and suffocating clouds of dust filled their eyes and shut out from time to time what was occurring in the valley. The face of the cliff glowed like the interior of a furnace, and the blazing yellow blast of glowing helium shot over their heads and off into space, making the night sky light as day.

For a moment they all lay stunned and sightless. Then the discharge appeared to diminish both in volume and
in intensity. The air cleared somewhat and the ground no longer trembled. The burst of flame slowly subsided, like a fountain that is being gradually turned off. Either the Ring man wasn't going to rock the earth or he had lost control of his machinery.

Something was clearly going wrong. Showers of sparks fell from the hood and occasionally huge glowing masses of molten metal dropped from it. And now the Lavender Ray began slowly to sweep down the face of the cliff; and the yellow blast of helium gradually faded away until it was scarcely visible. The roar of the alternator died down, first to a hum and then to a purr.

"Something's busted," thought Bennie, 'and he's shut it off."

The Ray had now reached the bottom of the cliff and was sweeping across the ground toward the base of the tower, its path being marked by a small travelling volcano that hurled its smoke and steam high into the air. It was evident to Bennie that the hood of the tower was slowly turning over, and that the now fast-fading Ray would presently play upon its base and the adjacent cupola in which the master of the Ring was probably attempting to control his recalcitrant machinery.

And then Bennie lost consciousness.

* * * * *

A splash of rain. He awoke, and found himself lying by the barbed-wire fence in the graying light of dawn. His muscles were stiff and sore, but he felt a strange sense of exhilaration. A mist was driving across the valley and enshrouding the scene of the night's debacle. Through the rain gusts he could see, still standing, the wreck of the tower, with a fragment of melted inductor drooping from its apex--and a long way off the Ring. The base of the tower and its surroundings were lost in mist. He crawled to his knees and looked about him for Marc and Edouard, but they had disappeared. His field glasses lay beside him, and he picked them up and raised himself to his feet. Like stout Cortés, silent upon his peak in Darien, he surveyed the Pacific of his dreams. For the Ring was still there! Pax might be annihilated, his machinery destroyed, but the secret remained--and it was his, Bennie Hooker's, of Appian Way, Cambridge, Massachusetts! In his excitement, in getting over the fence he tore a jagged hole in what was left of his sporting suit, but in a moment more he was scrambling down the ridge into the ravine.

He found it no easy task to climb down the jagged face of the cliff, but twenty minutes of stiff work landed him in the valley and within a thousand yards of the stark remains of the tower. Between where he stood and the devastation caused by the culminating explosion of the night before, the surface of the earth showed the customary ledges of barren rock, the scraggy scattering of firs, and stretches of moss with which he had become so familiar. Behind him the monorail, springing into space from the crest of the hill, ended in the dangling wreckage of a trestle which evidently had terminated in a station, now vanished, near the tower. From his point of observation little of the results of the upheaval was noticeable except the débris, which lay in a film of shattered rock and gravel over the surface of the ground, but as he ran toward the tower the damage caused by the Ray quickly became apparent.

At the distance of two hundred yards from the base he paused astounded. Why anything of the tower remained at all was a mystery, explicable only by reason of the skeleton-like character of its construction. All about it the surface had been rent as by an earthquake, and save for a fragment of the dome or bombproof all trace of buildings had disappeared. A glistening lake of leperous-like molten lead lay in the centre of the crater, strangely iridescent. A surface had been rent as by an earthquake, and save for a fragment of the dome or bombproof all trace of buildings had disappeared. A glistening lake of leperous-like molten lead lay in the centre of the crater, strangely iridescent. A broad path of destruction, fifty yards or so in width, led from the scene of the disruption to the precipice against which the Ray had played. The face of the cliff itself seemed covered with a white coating or powder which gave it a ghostly sheen. Moreover, the rain had turned to snow and already the entire aspect of the valley had changed.

Bennie stood wonderingly on the edge of this inferno. He was cold, famished, horror-stricken. Like a flash in a pan the mechanism which had rocked the earth and dislocated its axis had blown out; and there was now nothing left to tell the story, for its inventor had flashed out with it into eternity. At his very feet a conscious human being, only twelve short hours before, had by virtue of his stupendous brain been able to generate and control a force capable of destroying the planet itself, and now----! He was gone! It was all gone! Unless somewhere hard by was hovering the Ring, with a fragment of melted inductor drooping from its apex--and a long way off the Ring. The base of the tower, its path being marked by a small travelling volcano that hurled its smoke and steam high into the air. It was evident to Bennie that the hood of the tower was slowly turning over, and that the now fast-fading Ray would presently play upon its base and the adjacent cupola in which the master of the Ring was probably attempting to control his recalcitrant machinery.

And then Bennie lost consciousness.

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Fifty feet above the ground, supported upon a cylindrical trestle of steel girders, rested the body of the car,
constructed of aluminum plates in the form of an anchor ring some seventy-five feet in diameter, while over the circular structure of the Ring itself rose a skeleton tower like a tripod, carrying at its summit a huge metal device shaped like a thimble, the open mouth of which pointed downward through the open centre of the machine. Obviously this must be the tractor or radiant engine. There, too, swung far out from the side of the ring on a framework of steel, was the thermic inductor which had played the disintegrating Ray upon the Atlas Mountains and the great cannon of Von Heckmann. The whole affair resembled nothing which he had ever conceived of either in the air, the earth, or the waters under the earth, the bizarre invention of a superhuman mind. It seemed as firmly anchored and as immovable as the Eiffel Tower, and yet Bennie knew that the thing could lift itself into the air and sail off like a ball of thistledown before a breeze. He knew that it could do it, for he had seen it with his own eyes.

A few steps more brought him into the centre of the circle of steel girders which supported the landing stage. Here the surface of the earth at his feet had been completely denuded and the underlying rock exposed, evidently by some artificial action, the downward blast of gas from the tractor. Even the rock itself had been seared by the discharge; little furrows worn smooth as if by a mountain torrent radiating in all directions from the central point. More than anything it reminded Bennie of the surface of a meteorite, polished and scarred by its rush through the atmosphere. He paused, filled with a kind of awe. The most wonderful engine of all time waited his inspection. The great secret was his alone. The inventor and his associates had been wiped out of existence in a flash, and the Flying Ring was his by every right of treasure trove. In the heart of the Labrador wilderness Prof. Benjamin Hooker of Cambridge, Massachusetts, gave an exultant shout, threw off his coat, and swarmed up the steel ladder leading to the landing stage.

He had ascended about halfway when a voice echoed among the girders. A red face was peering down at him over the edge of the platform.

"Hello!" said the face. "I'm all right, I guess."

Bennie gripped tight hold of the ladder, stiff with fear. He thought first of jumping down, changed his mind, and, shutting his eyes, continued automatically climbing up the ladder.

Then a hand gripped him under the arm and gave him a lift on to the level floor of the platform. He steadied himself and opened his eyes. Before him stood a man in blue overalls, under whose forehead, burned bright red by the Labrador sun, a pair of blue eyes looked out vaguely. The man appeared to be waiting for the visitor to make the next move. "Good morning," said Bennie, sparring for time. "Well"--he hesitated--"where were you when it happened?"

The man looked at him stupidly. "What?" he mumbled. "I--I don't seem to remember. You see--I was in--the condenser room building up the charge--for to-morrow--I mean to-day--sixty thousand volts at the terminals, and the fluid clearing up. I guess I looked out of the window a minute--to see--the fireworks--and then--somehow--I was out on the platform." He shaded his eyes and looked off down the valley at the half-shattered, wrecked tower. "The wind and the smoke!" he muttered. "The wind and the smoke--and the dust in my eyes--and now it's all gone to hell! But I guess everything's all right now, if you want to fly." He touched his cap automatically. "We can start whenever you are ready, sir. You see I thought you were gone, too! That would have been a mess! I'm sure you can handle the balancer without Perkins. Poor old Perk! And Hoskins--and the others. All gone, by God! All wiped out! Only me and you left, sir!" He laughed hysterically.

"Bats in his belfry!" thought Bennie. "Something hit him!"

Slowly it came over him that the half-stunned creature thought that he, Bennie Hooker, was Pax, the Master of the World!

He took the fellow by the arm. "Come on inside," he said. A plan had already formulated itself in his brain. Even as he was the man might be able to go through his customary duties in handling the Ring. It was not impossible. He had heard of such things, and the thought of the long marches over the frozen barrens and the perilous canoe trip down the coast, contrasted with a swift rush for an hour or two through the sunlit air, gave the professor the courage which might not have availed him otherwise. At the top of a short ladder a trapdoor opened inward, and Bennie found himself in a small compartment scarcely large enough to turn around in, from which a second door opened into the body of the Ring proper.

"It's all right--to-day," said the man hesitatingly. "I fixed--the air-lock--yesterday, sir. The leak--was here--at the hinge--but it's quite tight--now." He pointed at the door.

"Good," remarked Bennie. "I'll look around and see how things are."

This seemed to him to be eminently safe--and allowing for a program of investigation absolutely essential at the moment. Once he could master the secret of the Ring and be sure that the part of the fellow's brain which controlled the performance of his customary duties had not been injured by the shock of the night before, it might be possible to carry out the daring project which had suggested itself.

Passing through the inner door of the air-lock he entered the chart room of the Ring, followed stumblingly by
his companion. It was warm and cozy; the first warmth Hooker had experienced for nearly a month. It made him feel faint, and he dropped into an armchair and pulled off his Glengarry. The survivor of the explosion, standing awkwardly at his side, fumbled with his cap. Ever and anon he rubbed his head.

Bennie sank back into the cushions and looked about him. On the opposite wall hung a map of the world on Mercator's Projection, and from a spot in Northern Labrador red lines radiated in all directions, which formed great curved loops, returning to the starting-point.

"The flights of the Ring," thought Bennie. "There's the one where they busted the Atlas Mountains," following with his eyes the crimson thread which ran diagonally across the Atlantic, traversed Spain and the Mediterranean, and circling in a narrow loop over the coast of Northern Africa turned back into its original track. Visions came to him of guiding the car for an afternoon jaunt across the Sahara, the gloomy forests of the Congo, into the Antarctic, and thence at home in time for afternoon tea, via the Easter Islands, Hawaii, and Alaska. But why stop there? What was to prevent a trip to the moon? Or Mars? Or for that matter into the unknown realms outside the solar system--the fourth dimension, perhaps--or even the fifth dimension----

"Excuse me," said the machinist suddenly, "I just forgot--whether you take--cigars or cigarettes. You see I only acted as--table orderly--once--when Smith had that sprain." His hands moved uncertainly on the shelves, beyond the map. The heart of Professor Hooker leaped.

"Cigars!" he almost shouted.

The man found a box of Havanas and struck a match.

The bliss of it! And if there was tobacco there must be food and drink as well. He began to feel strangely exhilarated. But how to handle the man beside him? Pax would certainly never ask the questions that he wished to ask. He smoked rapidly, thinking hard. Of course he might pretend that he, too, had forgotten things. And at first this seemed to be the only way out of the difficulty. Then he had an inspiration.

"Look here," he remarked, rather severely. "Something's happened to you. You say you've forgotten what occurred yesterday? How do I know but you have forgotten everything you ever knew? You remember your name?"

"My name, sir?" The man laughed in a foolish fashion. "Why--of course I remember--my name. I wouldn't--be likely--to forget--that: Atterbury--I'm Atterbury--electrician of the Chimaera." And he drew himself up.

"That's all right," said Bennie, "but what were we doing yesterday? What is the very last thing that you can go back to?"

The man wrinkled his forehead. "The last thing? Why, sir, you told us you were going--to turn over the pole a bit--and freeze up Europe. I was up here--loading the condenser--when you cut me off from the alternator. I opened the switch--and put on the electrometer to see--if we had enough. Next--everything was clouded, and I went--over to the window to see--what was going on."

"Yes," commented Bennie approvingly, "all right so far. What happened then?"

"Why, after that, sir, after that, there was the Ray of course, and er--I don't seem to remember--oh, yes, a short circuit--and I ran--out on the platform--forgot all about the danger! After that, everything's confused. It's like a dream. Your coming up--the ladder--seemed--to wake me up." The machinist smiled sheepishly.

The plan was working well. Professor Hooker was learning things fast.

"Do you think that the two of us can fly the Chimaera south again?" he asked, inspecting the map.

"Why not?" answered Atterbury. "The balancer is working--better now--and--doesn't take--much attention--and you can lay the course--and manage--the landing. I was going to put a fresh uranium cylinder in the tractor this morning--but I--forgot."

"There you go, forgetting again!" growled Bennie, realizing that his only excuse for asking questions hung on this fiction. And there were many, many more questions that he must ask before he would be able to fly. "You don't seem quite right in your coco this morning, Atterbury," he said. "I think we'll look things over a bit--the condenser first."

"Very well, sir." Atterbury turned and groped his way through a doorway, and they passed first into what appeared to be a storage-battery room. Huge glass tanks filled with amber-coloured fluid, in which numerous parallel plates were supported, lined the walls from floor to ceiling.

An ammeter on the wall caught Bennie's attention. "Weston Direct Reading A. C. Ammeter," he read on the dial. Alternate current! What were they doing with an alternating current in the storage-battery room? His eyes followed the wires along the wall. Yes, they ran to the terminals of the battery. It dawned upon him that there might be something here undreamed of in electrical engineering--a storage battery for an alternating current!

The electrician closed a row of switches, brought the two polished brass spheres of the discharger within striking distance, and instantly a blinding current of sparks roared between the terminals. He had been right. This battery not only was charged by an alternating current, but delivered one of high potential. He peered into the cells, racking his brain for an explanation.
"Atterbury," said he meditatively, "did I ever tell you why they do that?"

"Yes," answered the man. "You--told me--once. The two metals--in the electrolyte--come down--on the plates--in alternate films--as--the current changes direction. But you never told me--what the electrolyte was--I don't suppose--you--would be willing to now, would you?"

"H'm," said Bennie, "some time, maybe."

But this cue was all that he required. A clever scheme! Pax had formed layers of molecular thickness of two different metals in alternation by the to-and-fro swing of his charging current. When the battery discharged the metals went into solution, each plate becoming alternately positive and negative. He wondered what Pax had used for an electrolyte that enabled him to get a metallic deposit at each electrode. And he wondered also why the metals did not alloy. But it would not do for him to linger too long over a mere detail of equipment. And he turned away to continue his tour of inspection, a tour which occupied most of the morning, and during which he found a well-stocked gallery and made himself a cup of coffee.[5]

[Footnote 5: He even climbed with Atterbury to the very summit of the tractor, where he discovered that his original guess had been correct and that the car rose from the earth rocket fashion, due to the back pressure of the radiant discharge from a massive cylinder of uranium contained in the tractor. Against this block played a disintegrating ray from a small thermic inductor, the inner construction of which he was not able to determine, although it was obviously different from his own, and the coils were wound in a curious manner which he did not understand. There might be something in Hiroshito's theory after all. The cylinder of the tractor pointed directly downward so that the blast was discharged through the very centre of the Ring, but it could be swung through a small angle in any direction, and by means of this slight deflection the horizontal motion of the machine secured. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the mechanism was that the Ring appeared to have automatic stability, for the angle of the direction in which the tractor was pointed was controlled not only by a pair of gyroscopes which kept the Ring on an even keel, but also by a manometric valve causing it to fly at a fixed height above the earth's surface. Should it start to rise, the diminished pressure of the atmosphere operating on the valve swung the tractor more to one side, and the horizontal acceleration was thus increased at the expense of the vertical.]

But the more he learned about the mechanism of the Ring the greater became his misgivings about undertaking the return journey alone with Atterbury through the air. If they were to go, the start must be made within a few days, for the condenser held its charge but a comparatively short time, and its energy was necessary for starting the Ring. When freshly charged it supplied current for the thermic inductor for nearly three minutes, but the metallic films, deposited on the plates, dissolved slowly in the fluid, and after three or four days there remained only enough for a thirty-second run, hardly enough to lift the Ring from the earth. Once in the air, the downward blast from the tractor operated a turbine alternator mounted on a skeleton framework at the centre of the Ring, and the current supplied by this machine enabled the Ring to continue its flight indefinitely, or until the cylinder of uranium was completely disintegrated.

Yet to trek back over the route by which he had come appeared to be equally impossible. There was little likelihood that the two Indians would return; they were probably already thirty miles on their way back to the coast. If only he could get word to Thornton or some of those chaps at Washington they might send a relief expedition! But a ship would be weeks in getting to the coast, and how could he live in the meantime? There were provisions for only a few days in the Ring, and the storehouse in the valley had been wiped out of existence. Only an aeroplane could do the trick. And then he thought of Burke, his classmate--Burke who had devoted his life to heavier-than-air machines, and who, since his memorable flight across the Atlantic in the Stormy Petrol, had been a national hero. Burke could reach him in ten hours, but how could he reach Burke? In the heart of the frozen wilderness of Labrador he might as well be on another planet, as far as communication with the civilized world was concerned.

A burst of sunlight shot through the window and formed an oval patch on the floor at his feet. The weather was clearing. He went out upon the platform. Patches of blue sky appeared overhead. As he gazed disconsolately across the valley toward the tower, his eye caught the glisten of something high in the air. From the top of the wreckage five thin shining lines ran parallel across the sky and disappeared in a small cloud which hung low over the face of the cliff.

"The antennæ!" exclaimed Bennie. "A wireless to Burke." Burke would come; he knew Burke. A thousand miles overland was nothing to him. Hadn't he wagered five thousand dollars at the club that he would fly to the pole and bring back Peary's flag--with no takers? Why, Burke would take him home with as little trouble as a taxicab. And then, aghast, he remembered the complete destruction in the valley. The wireless plant had gone with the rest. He ran back into the chart room and called Atterbury.

"Can we get off a message to Washington?" he demanded. "The wires are still up, and we have the condenser."

"We might, sir, if it's not--a long one, though you've always said there was danger in running the engine with the car bolted down. We did it the time the big machine burnt out a coil. I can throw--a wire--over the antennæ with
a rocket—and join up—with the turbine machine. It will increase—our wave length, but they ought to pick us up."

"We'll try it, anyway," announced Bennie.

He inspected the chart and measured the distance in an airline from Boston to the point where the red lines converged. It was a trifle less than the distance between Boston and Chicago. Burke had done that in nine hours on the trial trip of his trans-Atlantic monoplane. If the machine was in order and Burke started in the morning he would be with them by sunset, if he didn't get lost. But Bennie knew that Burke could drive his machine by dead reckoning and strike within a few leagues of a target a thousand miles away.

A muffled roar outside interrupted his musings, and running out on the platform again he found Atterbury attaching the cord of the aluminum ribbon, which the rocket had carried up and over the antennæ, to one of the brush bars of the alternator.

"Nearly ready, sir," he said. "We'd best—lock the storm bolts—to hold her down—in case we have—to crowd on the power. We've got to use—pretty near the full lift—to get the alternator up—to the proper speed."

A chill ran down Bennie's spine. They were going to start the engine! In a moment he would be within twenty feet of a blast of disintegration products capable of lifting the whole machine into the air, and it was to be started at his command, after he had worked and pottered for two years with a thermic inductor the size of a thimble! He felt as he used to feel before taking a high dive, or as he imagined a soldier feels when about to go under fire for the first time. How would it turn out? Was he taking too much responsibility, and was Atterbury counting on him for the management of details? He felt singularly helpless as he reëntered the chart room to compose his message.

He turned on the electric lamp which hung over the desk, for in the fast-gathering dusk the interior of the Ring was in almost total darkness. How should his message read? It must be brief: it must tell the story, and, above all, it must be compelling.

He was joined by the electrician.

"I think—we are all—ready now," stammered the latter. "What will you send, sir?"

Bennie handed him a scrap of yellow paper, and Atterbury put on a pair of dark amber glasses, to protect his eyes from the light of the spark.

"Thornton, Naval Observatory, Washington:

"Stranded fifty-four thirty-eight north, seventy-four eighteen west. Have the Ring machine. Ask Burke come immediately. Life and death matter."

"B. HOOKER."

Atterbury read the message and then gazed blankly at Hooker.

"I--don't--understand," he said.

"Never mind, send it. I'll explain later." Together they went into the condenser room.

Atterbury mechanically pushed the brass balls in contact, shoved a bundle of iron wires halfway through the core of a great coil, and closed a switch. A humming sound filled the air, and a few seconds later a glow of yellow light came in through the window. A cone of luminous vapour was shooting downward through the centre of the Ring from the tractor. At first it was soft and nebulous, but it increased rapidly in brilliancy, and a dull roar, like that of a waterfall, added itself to the hum of the alternating current in the wires. And now a third sound came to his ears, the note of the turbine, low at first, but gradually rising like the scream of a siren, and the floor of the Ring beneath his feet throbbéd with the vibration.

Bennie forgot the dynamometer, forgot his message to Burke, was conscious only that he had wakened a sleeping volcano. Then came the crack of the sparks, and the room seemed filled with the glare of the blue lightning, for Atterbury, with his telephones at his ears, staring through his yellow glasses, was sending out the call for the Naval Observatory.

"NAA--NAA--P--A--X."

Over and over again he sent the call, while in the meantime the condenser built up its charge from the overflow of current from the turbine generator. Then the electrician opened a switch, and the roar outside diminished and finally ceased.

"We can't listen—with the tractor running," he fretted. "The static—from the discharge—would tear—our detector—to pieces." He threw in the receiving instrument. For a few moments the telephones spoke only the whisperings of the arctic aurora, and then suddenly the faint cry of the answering spark was heard. Bennie watched the words as the electrician's pencil scrawled along on the paper.

"Waiting for you. Why don't you send? N.A.A."

"They must have—called us before—while the discharge—was running down," muttered Atterbury. "I think we can send—with the condenser—now."

He picked up the scrap of yellow paper, read it over, and threw out into space the message which he did not understand.

Two hours later came a second message:

"P--A--X. Burke starts at daybreak. Expects reach you by nine P. M. Asks you to show large beacon fire if possible.

"THORNTON, N. A. A."

"Hurrah!" cried Bennie. "Good for Burke! Atterbury, we're saved--saved, do you hear! Go to bed now and don't ask any questions. And say, before you go see if you can find me a glass of brandy."

* * * * *

It was decided that Burke must land on the plateau above the cliff, and here the material for the fire was collected. There was little enough of it and it was hard work carrying the oil up the steep trail. At times Bennie was almost in despair.

"It won't burn half an hour," said he, surveying the pile. "And we ought to be able to keep it going all night. There's plenty of stuff in the valley, but we can't have him come down there, with the tower, the antennae, and all the rest of the mess."

"We might--show him--the big Ray," ventured Atterbury. "The thing--can be pointed up--and I can--keep the turbine running. You can start--the fire--as soon as you--hear his motors--and I'll shut down--as soon as I see your fire."

"Good idea!" agreed Bennie. "Only don't run continuously. Show the Ray for a minute every quarter of an hour, and on no account start up after you see the fire. If he thought the vertical beam was a searchlight and flew through it----" Bennie shuddered at the thought of Burke driving his aeroplane through the Ray that had shattered the Atlas Mountains.

So it was arranged. Half an hour after sunset Atterbury shut himself up in the Ring, and while Bennie climbed the trail leading to his post on the plateau, he heard the creaking of the great inductor as it slowly turned on its trunions.

It was pitch dark by the time he reached the pitifully small pile of brush which they had collected, and he poured some of the oil over it and sat down, drawing a blanket around his shoulders. He felt very much alone. Suppose the inductor failed to work? Suppose Atterbury turned the Ray on him? Suppose.... But his musings were shattered by a noise from the valley, a sound like that of escaping steam, and a moment later the Lavender Ray shot up toward the zenith. Bennie lay on his back and watched it, mindful of the night before the last when he had watched the Ray from the tower descending upon the cliff. He wondered if he should see any meteorites kindle in its path, but nothing appeared and the Ray died down, leaving everything in darkness again. Fifteen minutes passed and again the ghostly beam shot up into the night sky. Bennie looked at his watch. It was nearly half-past eight. The cold made him sleepy. He drew the blanket about him....

Two hours later through his half-dreams he caught the faint sound for which he had been listening. At first he was not sure. It might be the turbine alternator of the Ring running by its own inertia for some time after the discharge had ceased. But no, it was growing louder momentarily, and appeared to come from high up in the air. Now it died away to nothingness, and now it swelled in volume, and again died away. But at each subsequent recurrence it was louder than before. There was no longer any doubt. Burke was coming! It was time to start the brush pile. He lit match after match, only for the wind to blow them out. Yet all the time the machine in the air was coming nearer, the roar of its twin engines beating on the stillness of the Labrador night. In despair Bennie threw himself flat on his face by the brush pile and made a tent of the blanket, under which he at last succeeded in starting a blaze among the oil-soaked twigs. Then he pushed the half-empty keg into the fire, arose and stared up at the sky.

The machine was somewhere directly above him--just where he could not say. Presently the motors stopped. He shouted feebly, running up and down with his eyes turned skyward, and several times nearly fell into the fire. He wondered why it didn't appear. It seemed hours since the motors stopped! Then unexpectedly against the black background of the sky the great wings of the machine appeared, illuminated on their underside by the light of the fire. Silently it swung around on its descending spiral, instantly to be swallowed up in the darkness again, a moment later reappearing from the opposite direction, this time low down and headed straight for him. He jumped hastily to one side and fell flat. The machine grounded, rose once or twice as it ran along the ground, and came to a stop twenty yards from the fire. A man climbed out, slowly removed his goggles, and shook himself. Bennie scrambled to his feet and ran forward waving his hat.

"Well, Hooker!" remarked the man. "What th' hell are you doing here? You sure have some searchlight!"

* * * * *

How Hooker and Burke, under the guidance of Atterbury, who gradually regained his normal mental status, explored and charted the valley of the Ring is strictly no part of this tale which deals solely with the end of War upon the Earth. But next day, after several hours of excavation among the debris of the smelter, where Pax had
extracted his uranium from the pitch blend mined at the cliff, they uncovered eight cylinders of the precious metal weighing about one hundred pounds apiece—the fuel of the Flying Ring. Now they were safe. Nay, more: universal space was theirs to traffic in.

Curious as to the reason why Pax had isolated himself in this frozen wilderness, they next examined the high cliffs which shut in the valley on the west and against the almost perpendicular walls of which he had played the Lavender Ray. These cliffs proved, as Bennie had already suspected, to be a gigantic outcrop of pitchblende or black oxide of uranium. He estimated that nature had stored more uranium in but one of the abutments of this cliff than in all the known mines of the entire world. This radioactive mountain was the fulcrum by which this modern Archimedes had moved the earth. The vast amount of matter disintegrated by the Ray and thrown off into space with a velocity a thousandfold greater than the blast of a siege gun produced a back pressure or recoil against the face of the cliff, which thus became the "thrust block" of the force which had slowed down the period of the earth's rotation.

* * * * *

The day of the start dawned with a blazing sun. From the landing stage of the Ring Bennie could see stretching away to the east, west, and south, the interminable plains, dotted with firs, which had formed the natural barrier to the previous discovery of Pax's secret. Overhead the dome of the sky fitted the horizon like an enormous shell—a shell which, with a thrill, he realized that he could crack and escape from, like a fledgling ready for its first flight. And yet in this moment of triumph little Bennie Hooker felt the qualm which must inevitably come to those who take their lives in their hands. An hour and he would be either soaring Phoebus-like toward the south, or lying crushed and mangled within a tangled mass of wreckage. Even here in this desolate waste life seemed sweet, and he had much, so much to do. Wasn't it, after all, a crazy thing to try to navigate the complicated mechanism back to civilization? Yet something told him that unless he put his fate to the test now he would never return. He had the utmost confidence in Burke—he might never be able to secure his services again—no, it was now or never. He entered the air-lock, closing and bolting the door, and passed on into the chart room.

At all events, he thought, they were no worse off than Pax when he had made his first trial flight, and they were working with a proven machine, tuned to its fullest efficiency, and one which apparently possessed automatic stability. Atterbury had gone to the condenser room and was waiting for the order to start, while Burke was making the final adjustment of the gyroscopes which would put the Ring on its predetermined course. He came through the door and joined Bennie.

"Hooker," he said, "we're sure going to have some experience. If I can keep her from turning over, I think I can manage her. The trouble will come when we slant the tractor. I'm not sure how much depends on the atmospheric valve, and how much on me. Things may happen quickly. If we turn over we're done for."

He held out his hand to Bennie, who gripped it tremulously.

"Well," remarked the aviator, tossing away his cigarette, "we might as well die now as any time!"

He walked swiftly over to the speaking-tube which communicated with the condenser room and blew sharply into it.

"Let her go, Gallagher!" he directed.

"My God!" ejaculated Bennie. "Wait a second, can't you?"

But it was too late. He grabbed the rail, trembling. A humming sound filled the air, and the gyroscopes slowly began to rotate. He looked up through the window at the tractor, from which shot streaks of pale vapour with a noise like escaping steam. Somehow it seemed alive.

The Ring was throbbing as if it, too, was impregnated with life. The discharge of the tractor had risen to a muffled roar. Shaking all over, Bennie crossed to the inside window and looked across the inner space of the Ring. As yet the yellow glow of the discharge was scarcely visible, but the steel sides of the Ring danced and quivered, undulating in waves, and, as the intensity of the blast increased and the turbine commenced to revolve, everything outside went suddenly blurred and indistinct.

Dropping to his knees, Bennie looked down through the observation window in the floor. A blinding cloud of yellow dust was driving out and away from the base of the landing stage in the form of a gigantic ring. The earth at their feet was hidden in whirls of vapour; and ripples of light and shade chased each other outward in all directions, like shadows on the bottom of a sandy pond rippled by a breeze. It made him dizzy to look down there, and he arose from the window. Burke stood grimly at the control, unmindful of his associate. Bennie crossed to the other side, and as he passed the gyroscopes, the air from the swiftly spinning discs blew back his hair. He could see nothing through the tumult that roared down through the centre of the Ring, like a Niagara of hot steam shot through with a pale yellow phosphorescent light. The floor quivered under his feet, and ominous creaking and snapping sounds reverberated through the outer shell, as the steel girders of the landing stage were gradually relieved of its weight. Just as it seemed to him that everything was going to pieces, suddenly there was silence, save for the purr of the machinery, and Bennie felt his knees sink under him.
"We're off!" cried Burke. "Watch out!"

The floor swayed as the Ring, lifted by the tractor, swung to and fro like a pendulum. Bennie threw himself upon his stomach. The earth was dropping away from them like a stone. He felt a sickening sensation.

"Two thousand feet already," gasped Burke. "The atmospheric valve is set for five thousand. I'll make it ten! It will give us more room to recover in—if anything—goes wrong!"

He gave the knob another half turn and laid his hand lightly on the lever which controlled the movements of the tractor. Bennie, flattened against the wall, gazed below. The great dust ring showed indistinctly through a blue haze no longer directly beneath them, but a quarter of a mile to the north. Evidently they were not rising vertically.

The valley of the Ring looked like a black crack in a greenish-gray desert of rock and moss, the landing stage like a tiny bird's nest. The floor of the car moved slightly from side to side. Burke's face had gone gray, and he crouched unsteadily, one hand gripping a steel bracket on the wall.

"My Lord!" he mumbled with dry lips. "My Lord!"

Bennie, momentarily expecting annihilation, crawled on all fours to Burke's side.

The needle of the manometer indicated nine thousand five hundred feet, and was rapidly nearing the next division. Suddenly Burke felt the lever move slowly under his hand as though operated by some outside intelligence, and at the same moment the axis of one gyroscope swung slowly in a horizontal plane through an angle of nearly ninety degrees, while that of the other dipped slightly from the vertical. Both men had a ghastly feeling that the ghost of Pax had somehow returned and assumed control of the car. Bennie rotated the map under the gyroscope until the fine black line on the dial again lay across their destination. Then he crept back to his window again. The earth, far below and dimly visible, was sliding slowly northward, and the dust ring which marked their starting-point now lay as a flattened ellipse on the distant horizon. Beneath and behind them in their flight trailed a thin streak of pale bluish fog—the wake of the Flying Ring.

They were now searing the atmosphere at a height of nearly two miles, and the car was flying on a firm and even keel. There was no sound save the dull roar of the tractor and a slight humming from the vibration of the light steel cables. Bennie no longer felt any disagreeable sensation. A strange detachment possessed him. Dark forests, lakes, and a mighty river appeared to the south—the Moisie—and they followed it as a fishhawk might have done, until the wilderness broke away before them and they saw the broad reach of the St. Lawrence streaked with the smoke of ocean liners.

And then he lost control of himself for the first time and sobbed like a woman—not from fear, nor weariness, nor excitement, but for joy—the joy of the true scientist who has sought the truth and found it, has achieved that for mankind which but for him it would have lacked, perchance, forever. And he looked up at Burke and smiled.

The latter nodded.

"Yes," he remarked prosaically, "this is sure a little bit of all right! All to the good!"

EPilogue

Meanwhile, during the weeks that Hooker had been engaged in finding the valley of the Ring, unbelievable things had happened in world politics. In spite of the fact that Pax, having decreed the shifting of the Pole and the transformation of Central Europe into the Arctic zone, had refused further communication with mankind, all the nations—and none more zealously than the German Republic—had proceeded immediately to withdraw their armies within their own borders, and under the personal supervision of a General Commission to destroy all their armaments and munitions of war. The lyddite bombs, manufactured in vast quantities by the Krupps for the Relay Gun and all other high explosives, were used to demolish the fortresses upon every frontier of Europe. The contents of every arsenal was loaded upon barges and sunk in mid-Atlantic. And every form of military organization, rank, service, and even uniform, was abolished throughout the world.

A coalition of nations was formed under a single general government, known as the United States of Europe, which in cooperation with the United States of North and South America, of Asia, and of Africa, arranged for an annual world congress at The Hague, and which enforced its decrees by means of an International Police. In effect all the inhabitants of the globe came under a single control, as far as language and geographical boundaries would permit. Each state enforced local laws, but all were obedient to the higher law—the Law of Humanity—which was uniform through the earth. If an individual offended against the law of one nation, he was held to have offended against all, and was dealt with as such. The international police needed no treaties of extradition. The New York embezzler who fled to Nairobi was sent back as a matter of course without delay.

Any man was free to go and live where he chose, to manufacture, buy, and sell as he saw fit. And, because the fear and shadow of war were removed, the nations grew rich beyond the imagination of men; great hospitals and research laboratories, universities, schools, and kindergartens, opera houses, theatres, and gardens of every sort sprang up everywhere, paid for no one quite knew how. The nations ceased to build dreadnoughts, and instead used the money to send great troops of children with the teachers travelling over the world. It was against the law to own
or manufacture any weapon that could be used to take human life. And because the nations had nothing to fear from one another, and because there were no scheming diplomatists and bureaucrats to make a living out of imaginary antagonisms, people forgot that they were French or German or Russian or English, just as the people of the United States of America had long before practically disregarded the fact that they came from Ohio or Oregon or Connecticut or Nevada. Russians with weak throats went to live in Italy as a matter of course, and Spaniards who liked German cooking settled in München.

All this, of course, did not happen at once, but came about quite naturally after the abolition of war. And after it had been done, everybody wondered why it had not been done ten centuries before; and people became so interested in destroying all the relics of that despicable employment, warfare, that they almost forgot that the Man Who Rocked the Earth had threatened that he would shift the axis of the globe. So that when the day fixed by him came and everything remained just as it always had been--and everybody still wore linen-mesh underwear in Strassburg and flannels in Archangel--nobody thought very much about it, or commented on the fact that the Flying Ring was no longer to be seen. And the only real difference was that you could take a P. & O. steamer at Marseilles and buy a through ticket to Tasili Ahaggar--if you wanted to go there--and that the shores of the Sahara became the Riviera of the world, crowded with health resorts and watering-places--so that Pax had not lived in vain, nor Thornton, nor Bill Hood, nor Bennie Hooker, nor any of them.

The whole thing is a matter of record, as it should be. The deliberations of Conference No. 2 broke up in a hubbub, just as Von Helmuth and Von Koenitz had intended, and the transcripts of their discussions proved to be of the slightest scientific value. But in the files of the old War Department--now called the Department for the Alleviation of Poverty and Human Suffering--can be read the messages interchanged between The Dictator of Human Destiny and the President of the United States, together with all the reports and observations relating thereto, including Professor Hooker's Report to the Smithsonian Institute of his journey to the valley of the Ring and what he found there. Only the secret of the Ring--of thermic induction and atomic disintegration--in short, of the Lavender Ray, is his by right of discovery, or treasure trove, or what you will, and so is his patent on Hooker's Space-Navigating Car, in which he afterward explored the solar system and the uttermost regions of the sidereal ether. But that shall be told hereafter.

THE END
WANTED-- 7 FEARLESS ENGINEERS!
By Frederick Orlin Tremaine

A great civilization’s fate lay in Dick Barrow's hands as he led his courageous fellow engineers into a strange and unknown land. None of them knew what lay ahead--what dangers awaited them--or what rewards. But they did not hesitate because the first question asked them had been: “Are you a brave man?”

CHAPTER I
Opportunity

From where Dick Barrow sat, hundreds of men were visible, occupying benches in every manner of position. Some stretched at full length, sleeping in the morning sun after a night in the park. Others sat with heads hanging; thinking thoughts of their own.

Depression or recession, it meant the same to all of them. Some didn't care, but others tried to find any kind of work that would fill their stomachs with food.

For three days Dick hadn't eaten a good meal, and felt almost as low as the derelicts whom he had for companions. He would have enjoyed a smoke, but turned away as two men dove for a cigarette-butt; discarded by a passerby.

Anyone who could afford to buy a newspaper was an aristocrat, and Dick watched until he saw one discarded. For three days he had been reading them secondhand, but the only jobs were too far to walk and apply for.

His eyes stopped at one item in the column and a puzzled frown slowly puckered his forehead.

Wanted: An Engineer. Young man with love for electrical and mechanical work, who is not afraid of isolation. Have some knowledge of engineering, but general experience more desirable than specialized training. Must be willing to leave country, never to return; for which he will be well remunerated. Have no close family ties, and willing to submit to certain amount of danger. Will be isolated with few members of own race, but will have great opportunity to develop mastery of huge machines. Come prepared to leave for post immediately, without preparation. Every want will be taken care of by employers. This position is for lifetime, without opportunity of turning back after having accepted responsibility. GREAT OPPORTUNITY! Room 36, 18 W. Morgan Ave., City.

For a long time Dick Barrow gazed at the ad, mentally comparing his own qualifications for the position--and they seemed to fit! He was not a graduate engineer, being forced to quit school after two years of study. Three years later his father died, then Dick lost the job that had kept them eating regularly. His love of mechanics remained insatiable, and he constantly hoped for work which would allow him to use his knowledge and ability.

He had no relations, and the only girl had forgotten him, when he left school. He heard that she married a classmate!

Dick was twenty-seven. Five years had slipped by since he quit school, and he couldn't remember where they had gone. It was only six months after his father died that he lost his last regular job. He tried selling and was a failure. He had been carpenter's helper, plumber's helper, porter, counter-man and busboy as the months passed, but nothing steady. For the past two months he had been hunting for work, while his few dollars dwindled to where he no longer had room rent. Then it was the park.

His feet were sore and blistered from holes in his shoes, and he limped with every step. It took so long to reach the address that there was little chance of finding the job still open. It was not the first time he had missed--for the same reason.

He found that 18 Morgan Avenue was a dreary structure, appearing as if it had been standing twenty years too long. The wooden stairs creaked as he rested his weight on first one sore foot and then the other. Room 36 was at the top of the five-story building, and it seemed ages before he reached the doorway. The only sign of furnishing in the room was a hard bench, occupied by three men. Dick had to stand while his feet tortured him, but it was hopeful to see men waiting--the job wasn't filled!

Suddenly a door at the opposite side of the room jerked open and a man dashed through.

“Get out of here! The man’s insane!”

Two of the men followed, but the man who remained on the bench glanced at Dick, grinned, shrugged his shoulders and entered the door. A moment later his booming voice could be heard through the thin partition, although his words were not clear.
An hour passed while Dick waited. When the man came out, with a smile on his face, he wished Dick luck and headed for the stairway.

Barrow felt a queer sensation as he stepped through the inner doorway. A man faced him in a huge leather chair across the room. At least Dick thought he was a man. Grotesque in every way, his body was small while his head was twice as large as normal. He was light complexioned, with almost white hair thinly covering the top of his enormous head. His features were finely cut, with large aquiline nose. He was not repulsive, and smiled in welcome as Dick hesitated at the threshold. When he spoke his tone was soft and musical.

"Welcome, stranger. You have come in answer to my advertisement and I will explain without wasting time. But first tell me about yourself."

Going over his complete life history, including the two years in college, Dick came to the lean years when his father died. He hesitated slightly not proud of this period.

"Go on, Mr. Barrow. It is not important to have been a success in business, and I will not consider that in your applications. It isn't what you have done, but what you want to do, that interests me."

He spoke with a strange accent, that Dick didn't recognize. But he was pleasant and made it easy to talk.

When Barrow finished, by relating the finding of the newspaper and the long walk to the office, the queer man was smiling.

"I like your frankness and will tell you about the position, although I can't reveal the location of your work. It is not on any map, and you will work among a race such as myself, with no opportunity of leaving after reaching the destination.

"You will be given every comfort and advantage among my people, and be required to work hard in return. There are several machines out of commission which must be repaired and put to work again. After a few months your work will be easier, although you must constantly watch all machinery to see that it is in perfect condition, and does not stop work for even a moment.

"My people use mechanics of greater size and development than anything you have ever seen, and our lives depend on its perfect operation. In order to accept this position you must be married. Your wife must come with you, and be willing to accept the same living conditions which are offered to you."

* * * * *

"The man who left this office as you entered has a fiancee and has gone to talk it over with her. In your instance I must select your wife! You will be the leader of the workmen whom I take back. There will be only a few people such as yourself, and you can never again see others of your race.

"You will have power and wealth among my people, and every type of entertainment that you desire. But remember that you leave your race forever, with no possibility of return! If you accept my offer you must trust entirely in what I say about the future."

When the man finished speaking Dick was quiet for a long time. Everything seemed so unreal, so different from what he had expected. He must be willing to leave everything that he had always known--to enter an existence which he didn't understand--without chance of return! Yet he believed every word this man spoke, impossible as it seemed. But marriage ... with a girl he had never seen!

The man spoke again. "You hesitate about marrying; I can see it in your eyes. But remember that she must accept without knowing you, and is taking just as great a chance. This I can say. She will be brilliant, and I could not trust you to pick out a brilliant woman for your wife. Love would come first in your eyes. Other things would seem unimportant. I know that you and the girl I select are apt to fall in love, as I shall choose a girl suitable to your temperament."

Dick answered slowly, "I don't know what to say. I will have to live with her all of my life, and if we are not happy anything you could offer would mean nothing."

The smile spread over the strange man's face again. "I wouldn't worry too much. I believe you could stand a greater chance of happiness if I do the choosing than if you do it yourself as I can see more of the future. If you are mutually likable and willing to understand each other; if you are mentally on the same level, there is little chance of not falling in love. My race mates in this way, and it works out better than your haphazard mating."

When he realized that Dick still hesitated, he was slightly upset. Then reaching into a leather bag, hung from a strap around his neck, he stretched forth a handful of bills.

"Go and get yourself a good meal. It is now morning. When two more mornings have passed come again. Don't be afraid to use the money for anything that you desire. This does not mean that I expect you to accept the offer, but it will allow you to think it over carefully--without thinking of your stomach. Buy clothes, a room to sleep in, anything else that you want. Be comfortable and do not worry about what you spend. If you refuse my terms, I will be disappointed, but will not expect to be repaid."
As Dick reached the street he shook his head. It all seemed so fantastic. But the money in his hand was real money—and there was a lot of it! Suddenly he realized that people were staring at the handful of bills, and he hurriedly stuffed them in a pocket. When he was alone for a moment he stepped into a vacant doorway to count it.

There were 14 twenties, 10 fifties, and three ten dollar bills in the lot. Twenty-seven bills in all, representing eight hundred and ten dollars. Folding the money carefully and placing it in a safe pocket, he noticed a sign across the street. "SHOES," it said. He glanced at his own, then limped slowly across when the traffic lights changed. For a moment he looked in the window, then stepped inside.

While the shoe clerk was busy he carefully slipped a twenty from the other bills. It would seem strange if he had too much money with his feet in such shape.

The next stop was a restaurant. Then followed a trip to a clothing store—and he left his old suit behind. With new clothes, shoes, and a meal beneath his belt, he began to think the offer of the stranger was far from fantastic. What if he did have to marry a strange girl? At least they would both have comfort and companionship, wherever they went.

Barrow's first appointment was on Tuesday morning, and Friday found him climbing the same stairs. He watched the papers but there had been no repetition of the advertisement. Evidently the strange man had all the applicants he wanted.

The outer office was empty, but when he opened the inner door, the queer man was smiling just as Dick remembered him.

"Come in, Mr. Barrow. I'm glad to see you. I was surprised to hear of your use of the money, but was pleased rather than disappointed. You did well."

For a moment Dick was taken back, then he smiled sheepishly. "I don't know just what to say, Sir, I did so many things. But I didn't know I was being watched."

"Every move you made was watched carefully, and reported to me. I know where you spent every hour since you left here the other morning. I wanted to know how you would act with money enough to do as you pleased for a few days. You acted wisely, and I'm glad that you spent so much of it on men who need it. You bought twenty-two pairs of shoes, thirty-six shirts and forty-five suits of underwear. You also bought cheap suits for nine men and several odd and end accessories as well.

"Out of the total sum you spent less than one hundred dollars for yourself, and yet you have only forty-two dollars of the sum I handed you. The remainder you used for meals and cheap lodging for the men you have taken care of in the past three days. You have gone through a lot of money since you were here."

Dick stammered as he spoke, "I'm sorry, sir, but I thought—"

"You thought just right! I did give you the money to use as you pleased and I'm proud of the way you spent it. But I want to know the answer. You must have decided by this time. If the answer is yes, you will bind yourself to a lifetime of work. If it is no, we will say goodbye."

"The answer is yes. I am proud to leave my future in your hands—even to my marriage. I made up my mind to do as you desire, and am prepared to leave any time you are ready. I hope you have hired every one you need and that we will all enjoy our new work."

"You're a brave man, Dick Barrow." There was admiration in the voice of the stranger. "If you remained here I believe you would make your mark in life, but you will have even greater opportunity where you are going. I believe your decision will prove to be a happy one."

"You must stay at a good hotel. Reasonable if you want, although it is not important. I will send the girl to you within a few days. You will be married as soon as possible after you meet her."

"She will bring a letter and will do exactly as you say. I will allow time for you to get acquainted before I have further orders. From that time you will obey my orders explicitly and follow every instruction without question. Every member of the party will take orders from you, and you must give them!"

Once more Dick was handed a handful of bills as he prepared to leave, and knew there was even more than the first time. But he would live in constant dread of meeting the girl he was to marry. As he started to open the door, the man spoke again.

"Use the money as you desire. It will be your last chance of spending any and I want you to enjoy yourself as much as possible during the time remaining. Do what you like for the men in the park or any others you wish to help. If you need more money send a messenger to this room, but don't come yourself. Don't contact me again until my orders require it. Have a good time."

Dick felt that he was living a dream, but a very pleasant one. Just one thought disturbed him. Who the girl would be—and what she would be like?

CHAPTER II
Out to Sea
The following morning an advertisement appeared in the papers, under the heading of help wanted: woman. It was the same address on Morgan Avenue. His heart sank! The man was advertising for a wife! Now Barrow knew he was in for a tough streak of luck. He read it carefully.

Opportunity for young lady. Must be of age, single, brilliant, with good family background. Higher education not necessary. Must be willing to travel long distance. Must not be averse to marriage with brilliant young man; give up all former associations, with no possibility of return; live life in small community of own race, with no possibility of communication with former home. Must be without close family ties, or relationship. Opportunity to live life of luxury and ease, with amiable group far from present home and civilization. Young lady who fits qualifications will not regret applying for position. Honor, love and security will be her reward. OPPORTUNITY! Room 36, 18 West Morgan Avenue, City.

* * * * *

While Dick was eating dinner on Tuesday evening, a young lady fell headlong in front of his table. A moment later she was seated in the chair opposite his own. Ten minutes later he was ordering her dinner.

Afterward, as they walked toward a movie, Dick felt as if he was committing a crime. He was supposed to meet his future wife--and instead was entertaining this young lady who had fallen into his life. When he learned that she was staying at the same hotel, they made a date for breakfast the next morning.

Dolores Dunbar was good company, and seemed willing to spend most of her time in Dick's company. He learned that she was as friendless as himself, and wondered why they couldn't have met before he made the strange bargain. But as the third day drew to a close she appeared apprehensive.

When she kept glancing around, as if expecting someone, Dick became curious, and felt rather hurt to think she was looking for someone else. Finally she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Dick, that I've made use of you the way I have, but I was ordered to do it. You see, my employer told me to meet you and spend every possible moment in your company. He also said that I would become acquainted with someone through you, and that you would know who he was, when I said I came from the large-headed man on Morgan Avenue--with a letter."

For a moment Dick was stunned. Then he laughed, a sickly, half-hearted laugh. When he found his voice it squeaked.

"I think we had better go to my room. We have some very private things to say."

The queer man had succeeded in their being together for three days before either knew they were the central figures in the drama. Now they felt farther apart than at any moment since they had met, but nervously admitted they had fared better than they expected.

* * * * *

They were married in the morning, to keep the agreement, but didn't consider it part of the bargain to live as man and wife.

Dick found only one order in the letter, to be at the office at ten o'clock on Tuesday morning. That left five days to enjoy themselves.

In spite of the stiffness between them Dick noticed how the light caught in Dolores' dark hair, and how her brown eyes sparkled at each new sight. Her head reached just above his shoulder, and he had never danced with a better partner. She enjoyed his company, and admitted to herself that he was a perfect gentleman.

During the five days they saw every good show, and visited every popular night club. Things they had always wanted to do were packed into the short time to themselves. Dick hired a car, and they drove for hours through the country. When Tuesday morning came they were tired, and it was hard to get up in time to keep the appointment.

When they opened the door, the big-headed man laughed at their yawns. "I see that you've either been enjoying yourselves, or have been trying mighty hard. You can make up your sleep from now on, as it will be a long time before we reach our destination. How do you like each other for permanent companions?"

Their faces grew crimson. Finally Dick found his voice. "I'm perfectly satisfied, Sir. I think Dolores is very pretty, and is very good company!"

He looked the other way to hide his embarrassment, as the girl spoke.

"I feel the same way. We have enjoyed being together, and perhaps when we are better acquainted the stiffness will disappear. We both feel odd, because we were required to marry!"

The strange man laughed out loud at this. "In other words you might have fallen in love, if you had been allowed time to do it. But having to marry creates an entirely different feeling. I believe it will work out well, even though you feel cheated at the moment. But we haven't any time to lose. Everyone is at the dock and we sail in two hours.

"Here are your instructions, Dick. From now on you give the orders, and I remain in the background. They will all feel more comfortable under the command of one of their own race. Study everything carefully on the way to the
dock, then give them as your own orders."

Dick had little time for anything except to look through the sheaf of papers. On one sheet was a list of seven couples, with stateroom numbers beside each. His own was on the top, with number three room. This he dropped in a side pocket where it would be easy to find. The remainder was in connection with sailing.

Dick, Dolores and the big-headed man occupied one cab, while the baggage followed in another. Dolores had obtained quite a wardrobe, much to the amusement of her employer. But the man spoke only once during the trip.

"Everyone in the party must consider that they work for you, Dick. You must hear all complaints and settle all differences. They must not approach me for any reason. I am known as Morquil, of section one, which you will understand when we reach our destination."

The crew was hurrying back and forth on the deck of the small ship, taking care of last-minute details. A group of people were gathered beside a huge stack of baggage, and Dick walked toward them without waiting for the others.

Dolores went up the gangplank beside Morquil, helping him slightly. He seemed to have difficulty in supporting his enormous head with the slight body.

As Dick reached the group, he read the names from the list in his hand. "Mr. and Mrs. John McCarthy. You are in stateroom number seven. Take what baggage you can carry, the rest will be put on board." He called each name and stateroom; they headed for the ship. John McCarthy he found was the man he had met in the office, and he still had his perpetual grin. Evidently his fiancee had agreed to the pact for they were now man and wife.

When Dick started toward the ship, after watching the baggage put on board, he was stopped by a tap on the shoulder. The cab drivers were still waiting for their money. Morquil had left everything in his hands, even to paying for the motor trip to the dock.

It was a strange departure, with only a few people on the dock to say goodbye. Even they were just neighbors of the passengers. Most of the women on board were crying as the Primrose nosed out through the harbor toward the open sea.

Dick was still at the rail when the captain approached. "I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Barrow, but I must know our destination so I can set the course."

The young leader's day dreaming was cut short, to jerk him back to his duties. He felt that the lives and hopes of everyone on the ship had been thrust into his hands.

Even the captain didn't know where they were going. The ship had been chartered for a voyage of several months, to an unknown destination. He and the crew were well paid, and didn't care where they went.

Dick drew a sealed envelope from his pocket, detached a slip of paper and handed it to the captain. He read the note, then repeated it. "You are to keep the destination to yourself. No one on the ship is to know where we are going, and you will not mention it to me again. I hope that we have good weather, Captain, and a fast trip."

Barrow felt like a fool. Repeating messages as if they were his own--without the slightest knowledge of what they were about. He was supposedly charting the course--and didn't have the slightest idea where they were going.

When Dick reached his stateroom (after answering questions from everyone on board--and telling them nothing) he found Dolores sobbing. She had kept her smile until the boat sailed. Now she was crying her eyes out. It was not a new sight, as every woman on the ship seemed occupied in the same way, with the men trying to comfort them.

As Dick sat down beside her, he could feel the thrub of the diesel motor. It seemed to carry the rhythm of adventure through the walls of the cabin, giving the feeling of the unknown. For a long time there was silence while Dolores held one of Dick's hands for protection.

"Dick! We only have one cabin! I'm supposed to stay here with you--and I hardly know you! Morquil told me that I must stay here, there are no extra rooms."

"I'm sorry, Dolores. We will just have to put up with things as they are. We've got into this and will have to see it through. After all, we are man and wife, and the people on board would think it strange if we didn't occupy the same room. There are two bunks, so I won't have to sleep on the floor. It will be a long trip, and we might as well enjoy it as much as possible."

Days changed into weeks as the ship plowed steadily south. They stopped at one port for a few hours to refuel, but there was little to see. The ship was slow and it felt good to walk on land again. But no one spoke enough English to answer questions.

It was the only time they sighted land until just before the end of the trip, when small islands began to slide by. Some within a few hundred feet, others just visible in the distance. Morquil hadn't appeared on deck during the entire trip, but now he approached the rail.

His face lighted with an ethereal glow as he gazed across the blue water. He looked like a man who was
sighting his home after many years of absence. Dick couldn't help but feel glad for him, while cold chills of misgiving crept up and down his own spine. Their voyage was ending at a far different place that he had pictured in his mind, and quite the opposite of the description which Morquil had given of gigantic mechanical development.

They were passing by small south-sea islands, where mechanical equipment was out of the question. They hardly appeared habitable!

When the captain approached Dick, Morquil joined the conversation. "I'll give you the directions, Captain. Mr. Barrow is not feeling well, and I can do it for him.

"In about an hour we will reach the island, and I will point out the entrance to the harbor. It is well protected and there is no need to worry about any storm while we unload."

Every inch of space in the ship was packed with supplies. There were crates of books as well as pieces of machinery. Considerable radio equipment included assembled sets as well as parts. There were rifles and even one small cannon. Several crates of chickens and turkeys joined the other things on the beach. Then to the amazement of the party, a crate of pigs appeared.

It required three days to empty the ship, and with each passing hour the little party grew more apprehensive. It seemed as if they had been transferred to an island to start a new civilization, instead of a place where mechanical development was far advanced. Because Dick was the leader of the party, the others began to look at him with hatred; Morquil was almost forgotten.

When the last piece of equipment was covered with heavy tarpaulins, they constructed a shelter against one side of the pile. It was almost dark when everything was finished, and the captain decided to wait until the next day to sail. Everyone was invited on board the Primrose, for a farewell party.

Dick was forced to call a meeting in the main cabin, to forestall danger of the party deserting with the ship. Morquil had instructed him carefully.

"Friends, we are facing a great adventure. I'm in no different position than you, except that as leader I am responsible for whatever happens. I must take all blame for whatever comes, yet know that it will eventually work out as we expected.

"You all know that it is forbidden to talk about this trip, or to surmise our destination. I can assure you that it is done for your benefit, and later you will appreciate the fact that you did not know the future. I can't say what the next few days will bring to all of us, but be assured that everything you have been promised will be fulfilled.

"At the moment it seems impossible that things can turn out as we expected, but they will! You must simply be patient, and do not lose faith in this great adventure."

As Dick finished his speech, Morquil smiled, well satisfied. Dolores even smiled faintly, although it required effort to overcome her feeling of disaster.

The following morning everyone went ashore, and John McCarthy went around trying to aid Barrow in cheering up the party. He lied like a trooper, whispering to everyone that he had discovered something that satisfied him about the marvelous civilization they would reach before long.

Word of this reached Morquil, and he hurriedly called Dick and John out of sound of the others. He appeared almost frightened, and the moment they were alone, he spoke.

"What have you learned? I wanted you to know nothing, and it is better if you are ignorant. Whatever you learned is too much, and may upset the future."

John started to laugh, then seeing the expression of agony on the face of Morquil, he stopped short. "Don't worry. I haven't learned anything! I simply tried to help Dick keep the people satisfied. They were getting so restless they needed something. In my home town I was known as a famous liar, and thought my ability might come in handy."

Slowly the agony disappeared from Morquil's face. "Someday you will understand how much you have done for me, John. You will never regret it!"

The McCarthys remained jovial, and tried to keep up the spirits of the others as the days of loneliness passed.

Philip Jones and his wife were quiet, and waited patiently. Andrew and Emma Smith had taken over the cooking, and served the meals. George and Mary Martin were the youngest couple, and Dick doubted whether either of them was past twenty-one. The others were all nearer thirty. They spent their time side by side, gazing over the sea, perfectly happy in each other's company.

Jerold Brown and Peter Yarbro were constantly fishing, from the collapsible boat, while their wives played cards.

One night they were awakened by brilliant flashes of light. Running to the beach, they watched in amazement. They appeared like big guns firing just above the surface of the water, a few miles away. While they watched
they gradually faded out. It was like a terrific electric storm, and the little party drew close together for comfort.

When the lights faded out entirely, Morquil told them to get some sleep. They would have to move equipment aboard a new ship the following day.

With the first streak of dawn Dick was back at the edge of the beach, straining his eyes into the gloom, but it was almost an hour before any object was visible.

After breakfast the ship was much plainer. They could see a rounded hull, like the top of a huge submarine, above the water. One of the women remarked that she would stay on the island before she'd enter an undersea ship. The trip on the Primrose was bad enough, but it wasn't below the surface.

Morquil called them within the canvas shelter, as if to make a speech. He held a small ball in one hand, and while they waited for instructions it landed in their midst.

A cloud of yellow vapor burst from the object, and everyone in the party slowly sank to the ground. Morquil joined the others in unconscious stupor, a victim of his own gas.

CHAPTER III
Strange Destination

When Dick opened his eyes, there was a feeling of motion to the bed. The strangeness of the ceiling overhead drew his attention. It was not canvas, but shiny metal, almost purple in tint.

Suddenly he sat up. Dolores lay beside him. As his eyes cleared of the lingering mist, objects in the room became plainer. They were in a luxuriously equipped cabin.

Dolores slowly opened her eyes. A moment later she sat up beside him. Glancing through the porthole, beyond the bed, she turned away with a groan.

"We are under water! And deep! I can't see a thing but strange blue light."

When Dick joined her, his forehead puckered in a frown. "No, Dolores. It doesn't look like water, it looks more like--No! It can't be!"

For several minutes there was silence while he gazed through the opening. Dolores had lost interest in the outside and was examining the fittings of the cabin. It had everything that could be desired in a first class hotel room, and many little toilet articles besides.

Suddenly Dick turned away. "It's true! We're in the air--or above it! Dolores, this ship is an aircraft!"

"Never mind, Dick, this room is beautiful! Whether we're flying or swimming, this is the nicest room I ever had. It has everything, and look at the dressing table!"

Dick sat down in amazement, a smile slowly spreading over his face. Dolores was happy--wherever they were. The room was all that mattered. But he couldn't understand why Morquil had gassed them, and put them on board unconscious. He would have enjoyed seeing the new ship.

When a knock sounded at the door, Dolores was unpacking her clothes for the first time since they left the Primrose. Turning the knob, Morquil stepped in.

"I'm sorry, Dick, that I had to use gas, but I knew the people would be afraid of boarding this ship. John McCarthy is down in the power room already, examining the machines, but some of the others are upset about the transfer from the island. I hope you don't feel resentful?"

"No, Morquil. We're satisfied. If you don't believe it--look at Dolores. She decided to like this room the minute she saw it, and is unpacking already."

The worried expression disappeared from the strange man's face. "I had the cabins equipped for women, as I know they are particular about such things."

"Would you like to see the ship? It will be your home for a long time, and you might as well get acquainted. I'm sorry that no one but myself understands English, but you will have ample time to learn our language during the voyage. You must speak it fluently by the time we arrive."

As they started out, Dolores dropped the dress she was holding, to join them. Curiosity overcame the desire to straighten out her clothes.

Entering a wide passage, they turned to the right. It ended abruptly in a room with several comfortable chairs. Three tables occupied the center in uneven positions, the underparts filled with metal-covered books. Two men of Morquil's race looked up at their approach.

Dick returned their friendly smile. When Dolores smiled they appeared embarrassed; but truly greatly pleased. Barrow noticed that one of them was examining a book in English; the illustrations seemed to fascinate him.

A narrow passage, beyond the main cabin, led to the control room where three men sat in swivel chairs. The instrument board was a marvel to Dick, and he watched for several minutes. It would require months to understand even a small portion of the gauges.

The ship was built with two decks, and a large hold beneath the lower floor which contained the machinery. The strange men were quartered on the lower level, with the exception of Morquil. His cabin was next to the one
occupied by the Barrows. The McCarthys were on the opposite side of the passage, in a room slightly smaller than
the one allotted to Dick and his wife.

The quarters of the remainder of the party were smaller, but still quite comfortable; all located farther back on
the same passage.

Morquil was proud of the ship, and displayed each section with pride. He opened every cupboard door, and
showed them through all of the cabins. They were stopped for a while, when they met Mrs. Yarbro, trying to dispel
her fear of the strange craft. The others appeared to be taking their new quarters for granted, and settling down for
the trip.

The main cabin was toward the front of the ship, while the dining room was at the rear; the staterooms on the
passage between. One stairway led to the lower level, from just back of the control room, another from the dining
saloon. A ramp beneath the rear stairway led to the hold of the ship. When they started down, Dolores returned to
her cabin. Her interest ended on the upper decks.

Dick spotted John, bending over one of the machines, so engrossed that he didn't hear their approach. One of
the crew stood nearby, watching.

When McCarthy saw Barrow, he nearly burst with enthusiasm. "This is the greatest thing I've ever seen! Why,
it almost talks! Do you know, this little machine actually picks up the orders from the control room, and adjusts
every machine down here! Darned if I don't think it's got a brain!"

When Morquil led the way toward the front of the hold, John was still engrossed in the apparatus. "He will be a
valuable man to you, Dick, and can solve many problems that you would otherwise have to do yourself. He will
make an able assistant."

Passing by the heavy machinery, they approached an enclosed section, which appeared to be of recent
installation. Stepping through the doorway, Morquil threw a switch which lighted every corner, then watched
expectantly as Dick examined the strange objects. It appeared to be a colony of metal beehives, with covered
passages between.

"It is our home, Dick. This room contains everything in miniature that you will see when we arrive. Each of the
smaller domes house thirty thousand people, the large one three times that number. We are born, live our lives, and
die beneath these metal ceilings. It will be your job to care for them.

"Everything beneath these domes is exactly as it is in our cities, except that the machines are dummies. This
model room was installed so you could study our civilization during the trip. When you arrive you will be ready to
start work.

"You, and you only will have a key. You may bring any member of your party here that you desire, but it is not
necessary for them to understand the entire civilization. There are only six cities, including the large one, where you
and John McCarthy will be located. The other men will each have one dome under their control.

"It is easy to travel back and forth, and you may gather together at any time, although each of you will have
duties in different sections. While you are overseeing the work in the smaller cities John can look after the capital.
Upon your arrival in Yorpun you will take complete charge of all mechanical work. It will be your responsibility
from then on."

As Dick slipped the key in his pocket, he felt the weight of a country settle slowly on his shoulders. Two
hundred and ten thousand people--entirely dependent upon his control of the machines.

Where could this settlement be? They had sailed darn near to the end of the world in the Primrose, and now
they were going even farther. From the way the metal domes covered the cities, it might be at the south pole, and
still be habitable.

By the time they returned to the main cabin, it was dinner time. It was past mid-day when he regained
consciousness, and Dick was hungry.

Mrs. McCarthy was knitting a sweater for her husband, while three of the strange men watched in amazement.
Her knitting needles seemed to hold them spellbound. The other members of Dick's party were sitting around trying
to decide what to do. But the sound of the dinner gong, made them forget their worries.

Dick had to go down to the hold and call John, who was still watching the master machine. If he hadn't been
dragged away, he would have spent the night examining the strange device.

The meal was simple, but they all enjoyed it. It seemed to dispel the gloom from the party, and they appreciated
McCarthy's jokes. There were fifteen of Morquil's race in the crew, and all but the men at the controls joined them.

Knives and forks stood at the places set for the passengers, brought from the supplies on the Primrose, but the
crew ate with long narrow spoons. Table silver was evidently unknown to this race of people.

After dinner Morquil called them to the main cabin, and for the first time told about the destination. All that
had kept them from losing hope long before, was his promise of greater comfort and luxury than they could hope for
in their native land.

"I know that some of you resent the fact that you were unconscious while put aboard this ship. But I know you would hesitate to come of your own accord. One woman said that she wouldn't go on an undersea ship, and she would be more afraid of this.

"You will be amazed to know that we are now leaving the atmosphere of the earth that you have always known. Our destination is on a different planet!"

CHAPTER IV
Morquil's Story

For a long time there was silence, then Mrs. Jones fainted. McCarthy took it without flinching, and his wife was satisfied if he was. Dick had suspected something almost as strange, and did not seem surprised. Dolores looked at him for guidance. He nodded reassuringly. The others shut their lips tight, feeling that they had been taken prisoner without hope of escape.

After a pause, Morquil continued. Mrs. Jones had recovered her composure and was staring at him with undisguised dislike. "I'm sorry it had to happen this way, but I would not have been able to take sufficient people if you had known where we were going. Some of you might have come, but I treated every one alike.

"I also was unconscious from the gas, but the crew revived me. I had to look after the loading of the supplies, and have the cabins prepared for you. It was much nicer that way than if you had resisted, and were put on board by force.

"I shall start at the beginning of my story, and let you judge for yourselves as to whether we have done wrong.

"The existence of my world depends on the perfect operation of machines. Even our atmosphere is manufactured and kept at proper temperature within sealed domes, to protect us from the natural gases of the planet. We live on this planet through necessity--not desire!

"Our race landed there very long ago after escaping from a planet that was falling into the sun. Their space ship ran short of fuel within the gravity pull of our present habitation. It was difficult, but they succeeded in constructing gas-proof shelters, and slowly improved conditions for living.

"We never knew what happened to the other space ships from our original planet, but they may be distributed throughout the universe. Your own ancestors may be of the same origin as ours. The similarity of our forms tends to prove it.

"Eventually metal domes were built, and the race prospered within. But our lives depend on their being kept in perfect repair. Machines were built which do practically all of the work in caring for our wants, and from the first we have adjusted our own gravity; to live normally under the gigantic pull of the new planet, which to you is Jupiter.

"Through the ages our lives became easier, and required less manual work. Machinery did everything we desired. Most of them were automatically repaired and serviced, while the permanent machines ran on through the ages without care. As generation after generation lived and died, under these conditions, we lost most of our former knowledge.

"When one of the atmospheric machines ceased to operate--we could not repair it! Instead, one of the other machines had to be speeded up, and the atmosphere pumped into the extra dome.

"At the height of our mechanical development this space ship was built. Then the race lost interest and were content to live in ease, without attempting to reach another planet. Three generations ago our people discovered the danger. Even our bodies had deteriorated until we could not stand hard work. The machines had begun to break down--we were headed for extinction!

"When I was a young man they succeeded in finishing the equipment on this ship. Three generations had been required to create enough fuel for only two voyages!

"I was selected as the man to explore the strange world, which we had been studying with the instruments of our ancestors. We had determined your exact mechanical development, and knew that you were capable of furnishing the engineers which meant life or death to our race.

"It is twenty years since I was left on the small island, and the ship returned to Jupiter. At that time we decided the date for this trip, to bring me back. In the meantime I traveled half way around the world in a small metal boat, before being picked up by a tramp steamer, as I dared not land near any civilized country. After I reached a settlement I had to learn your customs and language, and many other things about a completely alien people.

"I was furnished with an ample supply of gold, as we knew it was the metal that you valued highest. This purchased many things that would otherwise have been impossible to obtain, and also brought me a great deal of trouble. I was robbed of most of the wealth before I had been in civilization a year. The fact that a great deal was left on the small island is all that made my venture possible.

"I spent three years in an institution before they decided that I was a normal human being, and could take care
of myself. I dared not tell them that I came from a different planet, or I would have failed in every way. I learned many things about the people of your world, but mainly that gold could buy almost anything.

"I lived for several years, by working at anything that I could obtain, trying to find someone who would finance an expedition to the island. No one would believe me when I said that I knew of a great fortune in gold. I finally found a man who did believe me, and he received one half of the gold as reward. It was not until then that I could begin the work that I started out to do, and nearly ten years had passed.

"I planned for several years before I dared try to obtain the people I needed. I studied everything I could about your engineering, and found that it was not of the same type as our own. For this reason I did not want a graduate engineer, as he would have to learn everything all over again in my cities.

"When I advertised for men, and told you of the wonderful mechanical development, it was the truth. I did mislead you to a small extent, in obtaining your promise to come with me, but the existence of my race depended on your work. My people will give you anything you desire if you will help them.

"When we left our cities, we didn't know whether we could even escape from the planet in this ship. There was no opportunity of testing it, until we started on the journey. Even the men at the controls had never handled it. All of their knowledge was obtained by years of practice, sitting in a stationary ship.

"When they left me on the island and returned to the planet, they hoped I could accomplish my purpose, but the chance of success was pitifully small.

"I have never enjoyed the comforts of other members of my race, but have spent my life in an alien universe, carrying around my big head; without friends or companionship. The gravity within our enclosed cities is lower than on your planet, making it easy for us to walk.

"After several years of study and planning, I knew there was only one way of accomplishing what I went after. It is the way I have done it. No one would have believed that I came from a strange planet; they would have thought me out of my mind. If I had persuaded them, I could have found no recruits for the work, no matter what I offered. I know how anyone feels about leaving their own planet, where they were born and brought up.

"You will find that the machines need work badly. Some of them are running only because we use several times the normal power to turn them. Our mining machines have not worked for more than a generation, and the mines remain idle. The metal supply is running short.

"The equipment which overcomes gravity, also furnishes us with power. When weights are lifted, with gravity almost eliminated, then allowed to sink with the full pull of Jupiter, it creates enormous amounts of energy for every use.

"It will be months before we reach our cities, and I hope that by that time you will feel satisfied with your forced migration. To my race, it was the only course which would avoid annihilation within a few generations.

"At first it will seem terrible to be shut in beneath a metal cover. But when you become accustomed to it, that feeling disappears. You depend just as much on a ship at sea or a plane in the air, but never think of it in the same way. We must trust you, as we will not know whether you are repairing or destroying our machines until we see the results.

"You will be given complete power and can draw upon my people for all of the help you need. You will be even more powerful than the rulers of the domes. My people decided that you deserved this position, long before we attempted to reach the earth and bring you back.

"I came to your country because the mechanical development is greater than in any other nation. You have greater love for engineering, and more of you are employed that way.

"I have told you everything about my home and my people, and leave it up to you as to the way you will act. We have only done what was necessary for the survival of our race, and hope that you will forgive us for stealing you from your own planet.

"You have complete freedom of the ship, to come and go as you please at any time. You are now considered part of our own population, and we both have the same interests. We hope you enjoy it."

* * * * *

For a moment Morquil gazed into the faces of the small gathering of people, then slowly walked from the room. There was complete silence, broken occasionally by a sigh as some thought of home exerted itself. An hour passed and they still had not moved. Each seemed to be waiting for one of the others to break the silence.

Finally Dick got to his feet. His words came slow, as if carefully weighed before using; the others listened intently.

"I know what each of you must be thinking; because I've been thinking the same thoughts. We are all in the same boat, without chance of leaving--headed for Jupiter! We have seen the last of the world where we were born. Either we take up our lives in this new existence, or die out here in space--destroying Morquil's race as well as ourselves.
"He says they cannot survive without our aid. Our own world did not need us, or give us much for our efforts. If it had we would not be on this strange space ship. Morquil hired only people who were willing to leave their homes and friends--and we applied for the work. There really is not much that we can complain about.

"For one, I intend to do all that I can to make our future home the greatest civilization in the universe. Perhaps in the future years it will be possible for us to pay a short visit to our former planet. Perhaps our children will follow in our footsteps; enjoying greater honor, comfort, and luxury than they could possibly have had in our own world. I received little from my fellow men, and have already received more from Morquil than I ever had before."

As Dick sat down, John McCarthy's voice boomed out. "I'll follow Dick! He's the boss of this party, and if he's satisfied, I am. Boy! We sure do go places when we get started!"

The general laugh broke the tension, and each one spoke after a little hesitation. Each man slowly grasped the gigantic task that was facing them, and felt honored as a result.

It was a new world, farther advanced than their former habitation--which needed them to care for it. It was a big bite to chew--but they would do it!

Dick remained in his chair long after the others had gone to their cabins. His mind dwelled on the complete happiness and satisfaction that lighted Morquil's face, when informed of their decision. In that moment he was repaid for a lifetime in a strange world, amongst alien people. His return to Jupiter would be triumphal, with the earth people as his friends; come to save his race from extinction!

Barrow's mind wandered on, to the gigantic task that faced them. His would be the greatest responsibility, as head of all the domes. The other men would have a single city to care for. The thought of McCarthy as his assistant was comforting; he would be a great help.

The strange race of beings were putting every trust in the earthmen--putting themselves at the mercy of the seven strangers--and Dick knew the men would earn that faith!

He jumped when a hand touched his shoulder.

"Dick, won't you take your wife to her room--she feels sleepy!"

CHAPTER V
Voyaging to Another World

During each waking period, Barrow spent many hours in the room with the miniature domes. They were beautiful models, which could be opened or moved as desired, by small levers on the foundation. Wires as fine as hairs were strung from one spot to another, while metal the size of thread represented heavy cables.

Slowly, an understanding of the strange civilization formed in Dick's mind, and he drew sectional maps of the location of all mechanical equipment. Other maps pictured the streets, so that it would be easy to reach any desired destination. When this was done, Morquil sent one of his men down to make as many copies as desired. Each engineer was to have a complete set.

The earthmen had learned to keep track of the time according to the system on the ship. Each "lix" included the time spent in sleep as well as one waking period. It was twenty-seven hours in length, but they all thought of it as a day.

Each lix was divided into thirty-six "migs." Each mig being just forty-five minutes in length. They were able to keep track of each mig, by their watches, although the time pieces were useless for any other purpose.

One lix, Dick returned the friendly smile of a member of the crew, and to his amazement the man spoke. "Chickiboo." For a moment Barrow was stumped, then realized that it must be a greeting.

When he was greeted the same way, by a second and then a third man, he tried to imitate the words. The man from Jupiter was so pleased that he almost danced, then spoke again. "Gootmording."

Dick's jaw almost dropped open; the man was trying to speak English!

Suddenly Barrow laughed. Morquil had been instructing his crew in the strange language, as well as telling them to greet the earthmen in their own tongue. He must speak about holding classes to learn the language. They would have to understand it, and the sooner they started the easier it would be.

The following lix, Dick stopped on the ramp to the machinery hold to listen. McCarthy was humming the tune of a song that had been the rage at home, but the words were "chicki-boo--chicki-boo--chicki-boo."

Barrow smiled as he approached, but the big Irishman didn't realize the reason. He was almost bursting with news.

"I've got it, Dick! I've found the key! Don't laugh, but I've discovered the working principle of this little machine, and it will lead to the secret of all others. In a month I'll know how this crate runs."

"Don't worry, I'm not laughing, John. I think it's great that you've got this far. I only wish the others would show as much interest. Not one of them has been down here for more than a few minutes, and they know little more than when we started."

"Aw! Don't take it that way, Dick. It isn't their fault. Didn't you ever see their wives? Those women won't let
the men out of their sight for three minutes. Your wife and mine are different—they trust us! If we tell 'em the ship's okay, it's okay; but them—say, they can't tell their wives anything. The women in their families do all of the talking."

Dick laughed, but knew that it was close to the truth. The other men in the party were tied to their wives' apron strings. Aside from Dolores and Eileen McCarthy, none of the women trusted the space ship. They were afraid it might fly to pieces at any moment, although they had overcome their fear enough to find means of entertainment.

Small devices in the cabin showed miniature movies, with words in the tongue of the dome cities. Discovering this created desire to understand the language, and they eagerly attended the classes.

One lix Dick found Jerold Brown examining a piece of machinery. A few lix later Andrew Smith had joined him. Soon every earthman was spending his time in the machinery hold, with McCarthy acting as instructor. He would accept no excuse for being late at his classes—and they all arrived on time!

* * * * *

Weeks slipped by as the ship drove on through space. The earthmen learned to admire the men from Jupiter for their constant good-nature, although they were slightly childish.

The crew of engineers were slowly learning the rudiments of Jupiter's science. Barrow through his study of the domes, and McCarthy through study of the machines, far surpassed the others. At times both men spent hours in the model room, at others Dick examined the machines beside the Irishman. They compared notes until each knew the other's findings.

Dick took all the men into the model room once every third lix, and spent four hours instructing them in the civilization. Each man had his own set of maps, and marked down facts about his future location. Dick copied their notes on a large map, that covered all the cities. They used numbers to signify different mechanisms, to make it easier to describe equipment that was duplicated in more than one dome.

In a month they were able to carry on light conversation, and from then on mastery of the language was faster. The women far surpassed the men, due to desire for entertainment.

When he was able to question the crew, Dick received a terrible shock. They knew less about the ship's operation than his own men! They didn't understand their own equipment!

The people of the domes were content to enjoy the mechanical wonders of their ancestors—without bothering about how they ran. They used equipment for every purpose, without the slightest interest in why it worked. The earthmen suddenly realized what a gigantic task they faced. Seven men—to rebuild a civilization!

The men at the controls knew what reaction would take place by movement of a lever, but didn't understand why! Dick became slightly worried about reaching their destination—it was beyond all reason. Earthmen wouldn't have attempted to operate equipment they knew nothing about, by movement of controls to obtain the proper action.

It was no wonder these people had found it necessary to find engineers to run their machines!

Months slipped by as the ship moved steadily toward the giant planet. Every piece of equipment seemed to be the answer to perfection. This voyage had taught them more about mechanics than was covered in a complete engineering course on earth. It was of a far different kind, with gravity the basis of all operation. Even the space ship employed some of the same power, drawn from the nearest heavy body, then amplified until it reached enormous proportions.[1]

Peter Yarbro was a practical chemist, and spent many hours trying to analyze the fuel. It was highly inflammable, yet could stand terrific compression without effect. When it was allowed to expand again, it reached the flash point immediately, creating enormous amounts of heavy gas. He believed it might be duplicated from crude oil, properly refined.

When Dick learned that there was a history of the space ship, in the metal books, his curiosity was aroused. He could read the language of the domes slightly, but not enough to study the intricate explanations. It was through these books that the dome men had learned to control the ship, and set the course for any desired planet.

Morquil's aid was enlisted, to translate the text, and he learned some amazing facts. A description of the fuel was given, but the base for manufacture was unknown, being of natural origin on Jupiter. As Morquil read farther and explained sections that Dick couldn't understand, the earthman felt uneasy.

The crew had abandoned all hope of returning to their home planet, the first time they started from the earth. They didn't understand what it meant to feel responsible for equipment. They manufactured enough fuel for two trips, according to the rating of consumption in the books—but Dick wondered?

The tanks were filled to capacity before the first trip, and hadn't been tested since. The happy dome people didn't consider that their ancestors might have been mistaken, or that actual operation might vary from the original plan.

* * * * *

For the first time in twenty years, the gauges were examined. Barrow and McCarthy crawled through the dust-coated passage beneath the floor of the machinery hold. They found a light switch, but the bulbs were so dust-coated
that only a faint glow shed on the surrounding metal. They sneezed and coughed, as the dust-laden air filled their lungs.

"Darned if you don't get the craziest ideas, Dick. What good will it do to know how much 'ship juice' there is, anyway? We can't make it! This hole wasn't built for self-respecting men to crawl through."

"I don't know, John, but this trip may not be as easy as it appears. They've been driving at full force for months, when it seems to me that less power might carry us when we're not within the pull of some planet. I want to make sure that there's plenty of fuel. According to the books, the designers didn't expect the ship to be driven this hard."

John did a little cussing when they located the gauges, and found them so thick with grime that they had to be cleaned. He headed back through the dust for a cloth, with Dick's laugh following. "Alright, alright, but don't rub it in. Just because you happened to be in front of me, and there isn't room to pass, don't give you the right to laugh. Some day you'll be eating your share of dust, and will I laugh! I bet that the domes are all a mess."

Dick wrote down the reading of each gauge, as John cleaned the surfaces. He couldn't understand the strange numerals, and had to go over them with Morquil. Both men breathed a sigh of relief as they crawled back through the floor of the hold, and dropped the trap door in place.

* * * * *

An hour later Dick began to worry. According to Morquil, the tanks were less than one-eighth full. The big-headed man had gone over the figures twice, and was showing signs of agitation as he checked them again at Barrow's request. When he glanced up, Dick knew there was no mistake.

"The fuel is low Dick. According to the other trip, the greatest use of power is at the time we approach the planet, to fight the pull of gravity. Our trip from earth is only half completed, with the greatest need of fuel still ahead. You must think my race very stupid not to have thought of it?"

It took Dick a long time to answer. His mind was searching frantically for some solution. It was useless to ask help of the crew—they couldn't even think scientifically!

"No, Morquil. I don't think you're stupid, but I do consider your people very foolish. From the appearance of things we will never reach the domes!

"Unless something drastic is accomplished, the ship will smash to pieces on your planet. You don't know anything about the ship's operation, and we've only studied it for a short time."

They decided to inform the men immediately but say nothing to the women for the present. Within an hour of the discovery, Morquil warned the men at the controls to conserve the power as much as possible.

Every operation of the ship, was dependent on fuel. The generators for heat, light and controls, were turned by discharge through the tubes. At least one blast must be fired at all times to keep the controls sensitized, and develop power for emergency equipment. The other tubes were silenced.

During the rest migs Dick couldn't sleep, but spent every minute talking to John McCarthy. There must be some solution—and they had to find it!

CHAPTER VI

An Engineer's Mettle

In the morning the earthmen were called together. They came with smiling faces, which slowly changed to apprehension.

There were many suggestions in as many minutes, but none that gave a possibility of accomplishing the impossible. They had to stretch the fuel—without visible means of stretching it!

The women believed the meeting was a routine course in mechanics, and went on enjoying their entertainment. The men explained they were bothered by a knotty question about the machinery to account for their worried concentration. It would have been a terrible handicap if the women discovered the truth.

Three lix passed with little change. The fuel had been cut down for a while, but the ship didn't hold its course. Every tube had been fired to hold the direct route for Jupiter. They were constantly cutting into the meager supply that remained—and had to overcome the deficiency!

Due to the slight conservation of fuel the ship had been operating far below efficiency, and the cold of space began to seep through the walls. This affected the dome people more than the earthmen, and they suffered torture. Any change in temperature was unknown to them, they were chilled at a few degrees below normal heat.

Suddenly, during dinner on the third evening, Peter Yarbro jumped up from the table. The other men fastened eager eyes on his face, while the women watched in amazement.

He started to speak, then remembered the women, sat down quietly. "I—I think I've found the answer—to our problem! If you will join me in the hold, when we finish eating, I would like to talk it over with you."

Mrs. Yarbro was even more amazed. "Peter! I'm surprised at you. Jumping up from the table so excited, just because you happened to think of the answer to a problem! You ought to be ashamed."

In spite of his worries Dick lowered his head to hide the smile. If only Peter's wife knew what that problem
was, she might not think it so strange.

Hardly a man touched his food, and as soon as they were out of earshot of the women, he spoke what was in his
mind. The crew heard him at the table and many of them gathered to listen. For the first time in their lives they were
worried. Their lives depended on the earthmen before they even reached their planet.

Yarbro hesitated. "I'm not so sure now, that I have found the answer. When it came to me, I thought it was
simple, but now it seems more like a dream.

"Since knowing that the fuel was low I've racked my brain for something that might be used--and it had to be
on the ship. Every other man was looking for a mechanical answer, and my efforts would be of little use. So I've
searched for a chemical.

"Water is the only liquid in any quantity. I discarded it so many times that it left a headache, but my search
always came back to the same place. It's the only thing we've got.

"All other liquids are in too small amounts, even if they could be used, and the ship is equipped only for
chemical fuel--in liquid form!

"At dinner when I became so excited, I thought that water would do the trick. Now I don't know. It has oxygen
in large amounts, which is vitally needed, but that's the only advantage.

"Even if we dared try, it might injure the tubes. Still I believe it's the only chance of salvation. It's the one
substance on board, in any large quantity. What do you think?"

There wasn't a sound as the minutes passed. Each man searched frantically for the slightest hope; searched for
the one chance in a thousand!

Dick finally broke the silence. "What is your plan, Peter? You must have thought of something?"

"No, that's just the trouble. I thought that water might mix with the fuel, even fire with it. It was only a brain
storm I'm afraid."

After a moment Dick spoke again. "It can't be! Since there is no other substance--we must use water! There has
to be a way--and we've got to find it! We might as well use up the water and die of thirst, as to drift around in space
until we starve to death, or die in the dive at Jupiter."

Twice Mrs. Martin came down the ramp to take her husband to bed, but Dick sent her away. The men would
stay there until they had found a solution--they had to! The fuel was fast disappearing!

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Morquil still sat in the background. The other men from Jupiter had gone to their quarters. He could offer no
suggestion, but listened carefully to every word they spoke. Finally he stood up.

"I hope that you can forgive me. In the last three lixs I have regretted that I ever saw your earth. It were better
that my people die, than for us to carry people from a happy planet to die in space--because of our stupidity. We are
no better than children without cares or worries. The men of the crew realized the risk, before they left the domes--
but it is not your fault!"

"Aw, sit down you big-headed numbskull!" McCarthy's voice boomed out. "We don't blame you! We'll find
some way to run this crate, and get there in one piece. You just made us go to work before we expected. Why! A
problem like this is simple on earth--they'd solve it in no time! You just go to bed and stop worrying. We'll have
everything fixed by morning."

Morquil's expression changed slightly, and he almost smiled. He started for the ramp as if taking the words
literally, but half way up he faced the little gathering again. "Thank you, John. But I haven't forgotten that you were
a famous liar in your home town--and you haven't lost your ability. Thank you anyway, you're very kind."

When McCarthy turned toward the others, he looked rather sheepish. But the forced smiles he received made
him feel a lot better.

Hours passed, while each man told everything he had known about water. At last Dick stood up. "We've
covered every possible reaction, and many that are seemingly impossible, but have overlooked one very vital point
that will either help or hinder greatly.

"The fuel is subjected to terrific pressure. Naturally, any water that was used would receive the same treatment.
In the compression chamber the pressure rises very fast, which must develop high temperature. The result is that we
would not have water--we'd have steam! It would be almost dry steam!

"Water in the liquid form couldn't discharge oxygen fast enough to affect the fuel, but as steam it might. There
is a good chance that steam may even increase the explosive power to a point that we can't even imagine. There's
only one way to find out--try it!

"Every man here will admit that John has the most practical mechanical brain. It will be his job to find a means
of injecting the water in the proper amounts. The rest of us can try to find any kinks in the system that he suggests.
He knows every piece of equipment on board, and can pick whatever is best suited for the purpose."

As Dick sat down, John got to his feet. "This is one time that I'm ahead of you. While you've been talking I've
been planning a way to do just that. There's an extra firing tube that can hold the pressure we want.

"Fuel for all the blasts is compressed in one chamber, then discharged through any desired tube. If we put the water under the pressure, with the hydraulic system, and let it seep into the chamber at a set rate--it might work! Valves can control the steam perfectly, and regulate the flow to whatever is desired.

"The tube will have to be shut off from the fuel tank every few hours, to be filled. Preheating the water will develop steam pressure, and it won't draw enough from the hydraulic system to affect the operation of the blasts.

"What do you say, shall we try it? It means shutting off all but the emergency tube for several hours, and it will be cold!"

Within five minutes they were hauling the heavy tube from the storage room. In an hour everything was ready to assemble, and each man knew exactly what work he was to do. A pipe line was run from the water tanks, to fill the steam chamber in position.

Dick was building an electric heating unit to encase the entire tube, which could be regulated for any desired temperature.

Half of the rest period had passed when the chamber was finished and they were ready to cut an opening in the compression unit. Perspiration poured down the body of every man, but not from the exertion. Each minute that passed ate deeper into the fuel. If water couldn't replace the liquid, they were helpless.

They wanted to install the tube, while the women were asleep. The ship would be too cold for comfort for a long time after the blasts could be started again. When the heating units in the hull were shut off it would become freezing inside.

Men raced through the ship, stopping at their staterooms on the way. Dick dropped three extra covers over Dolores without disturbing her, then slipped into the heaviest clothing that he owned.

Each man was occupied in his own room, in the same way. Heavy coats were taken to the men at the controls while the remainder of the crew were sent to a room with an emergency heating unit.

In fifteen minutes they were back at the compression chamber, and at the touch of a button the blasts were silenced from the control room.

By the time an opening was cut in the heavy tanks, the cold had begun to creep into the ship. The men worked desperately, and for a while perspiration dampened their clothing. Then the chill crept deeper--and they shivered. Their fingers grew numb, and they had to warm them over a small electric unit, but the opening slowly enlarged beneath their torches.

When the tube was fitted into the hole, and the metal began to flow around the edges, even the torches seemed to throw little heat. Dick knew his nose was frosted, and warned the others not to touch their nose or ears. According to John's watch it required three hours to fit the tube in place.

When they rang for the power to be turned on, they waited in vain. When minutes passed without reaction, they glanced at each other in consternation. Brown and Martin raced up the ramp while the others waited. Within a few minutes the tubes began to fire and warmth slowly drove back the numbing cold.

Water pipes had burst, and they hurried to stop the leaks. The main tanks were uninjured, as the cold hadn't penetrated the big supplies in storage.

Dick suddenly realized that Brown and Martin hadn't returned. When he reached the upper deck all of the women were gathered near the room where the crew had been left. The thermometer was only fifty degrees, even then, and they shivered in heavy coats.

Every dome man was stretched out on the floor! As Dick stepped within, his heart almost stopped beating--but they were only unconscious! His breath escaped in a long sigh, after holding it for almost a minute.

Brown and Martin were trying to revive the prone forms. The control men lay beside the others, brought there by the two earthmen. The eyes of first one then another, slowly opened, and they looked around in amazement. Cold affected them like an anaesthetic, causing complete unconsciousness.

When the ship reached normal warmth, they felt as good as ever. It hadn't been cold enough to freeze them, in their section, and not a man was injured. When they understood what happened, the men hurried back to the controls.

The heavy coils were soon fastened around the tube, and it was filled through a valve on the upper side. A gauge was set to register the pressure of the vapor within. They decided to raise steam pressure enough to equal the compression of the fuel.

It required fifteen minutes for the water to reach the boiling point, while they nervously held their watches. They could keep track of minutes and hours, although there was no longer day and night in their lives. According to their figures, they now ate dinner at three o'clock in the morning, and went to bed in the early afternoon.
They held their breath when the steam valve was opened. It moved slowly under Dick's fingers, while a thousand questions raced through every mind.

"Would it silence the blasts? Would it put them out of commission permanently? Was that moment, and the turning of that valve, the end of existence for them all?"

Dick glanced at the gauge on the tube, then jerked the valve shut. The pressure was still far below that of the fuel. He turned the heating unit on full, and watched the gauge climb higher. They didn't understand the numerals of the domed cities, but knew the pressure was getting terrifically high.

When he opened the valve again, the steam gauge did not rise! It held almost steady. The hiss of escaping steam, sounded through the heavy metal faintly.

The tubes began to fire spasmodically! Dick bit his lips, as he opened the valve a little wider. John McCarthy wiped the sweat from his forehead, as every face turned white as chalk.

They fired evenly again!!! The steam was working through the mixture--discharging through the blasts!

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They felt their bodies sway under the effects of acceleration and exultance filled them. There was some reaction, at least!

Morquil appeared on the ramp, his face lighted by a smile. "What have you done? The ship is traveling at almost twice the speed that it was before! Is it all right?"

Dick sat down hard. Not a man in the crowd was able to answer. Success had left them speechless. Barrow was the first to recover his voice.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Dick! We took three separate observations, and each showed the same result--almost double normal speed! Does it mean what you wanted? Can we reach the domes?"

"I hope so, Morquil. If the steam has made that much difference, we'll get there without trouble. The water must be conserved as much as possible--and hope that it lasts. Whether it increases the power of the fuel, or simply creates an additional body to drive against, is not important. We're getting there!"

CHAPTER VII

Jupiter and Trouble!

The huge ship circled the planet twice, with the instruments adjusted to detect the metal of the domes. They spread over many miles of the surface, yet were like grains of sand on the enormous globe. When the gauges quivered over a section, hidden beneath the mists, every one breathed a sigh of relief.

It would be many hours before the ship was within the cities, but they were home! Every earthman had the same feeling. Jupiter was almost as much of a home to them as to the natives, even before they had seen it. They eagerly looked forward to sight of the domes that would be under their care.

John McCarthy entered the control room with a big tray of containers. "Here! It's not liquor, but I'll bet you enjoy it more. There's enough in each of these to really quench your thirst. I for one, will enjoy drinking all of the water I want, after five weeks on short rations."

It seemed impossible that the clouds outside could be deadly. They were beautiful in the reflected light of the sun, yet those vapors contained poison that no man could live in. The domes were the only place that life could exist on the strange planet.

As they dropped through the heavy mists, it created a feeling of dense fog. They could see nothing of the surroundings, trusting entirely on the instruments. It was like groping in the dark, yet the earthmen knew it had been done before, and the dome men showed no fear.

When a slight jar shook the ship, they breathed easier. It had touched the ground! They could feel some effect of the heavy gravity, even within the insulated hull. The ship slanted down at a steep angle, sliding forward with its own weight.

The earthmen didn't understand what was happening, but watched the actions of the dome men. They were using a different control board now, beneath the other panel. McCarthy was down in the hold, watching the action of machines that had been idle until now.

When they stopped, the mists disappeared from around them. Lights above outlined a huge metal passage. The ship started forward again and heavy doors slid back at the approach with bright light appearing beyond.

They were looking across sun-lit country; the most perfect scene they had ever witnessed. Strange trees, and growth of every description, spread in every direction. When the ship slid into the open, they were beneath one of the domes--enormous beyond their greatest imagination, and exquisitely beautiful.

While they watched spellbound, people started across the fields to greet the expedition. The women were well proportioned, and far different from the men of the race. Not as tall as the women of earth, or quite as well built, but their heads were much smaller than the men's.
All men were dressed in flowing robes, the women in much less clothing. They wore tight-fitting garments, like bathing suits of metallic cloth. They were happy and carefree, seemingly without a worry in their lives. Children came romping across the fields beside their parents.

Minutes, slipped by, and the people from earth hadn't moved. Sigh of their new home was too wonderful to grasp at once. Instead of the gloomy metal covering they had expected, the curved surface above was finished in blue that resembled clear sky at home—as if they had reached the land of their dreams.

When their minds snapped back to reality, the dome men were being welcomed by friends and relatives. The babble of voices came faintly to the control room, from the power hull. John McCarthy joined them. When the machines stopped, he came up to find the reason. Now the others watched as he gazed at the beautiful scene for the first time. Their own amazement was reflected in his eyes. When he looked up at the curved dome, his wife slipped her arm around him.

They were disturbed by the crew, returning with their friends to welcome the engineers. The dome people seemed completely happy. They were like children greeting their parents, holding the hands of the earth people and gazing into their faces with adoration. In their minds, the future was secure, and they no longer had a care in the world. Eileen McCarthy was so overwhelmed at the reception that she hugged two of the little women.

When Peter Yarbro learned that he was in charge of this agricultural dome, his pleasure knew no bounds. His wife couldn't wait to see the home that had been prepared for them—and waiting almost twenty years. A circle of buildings formed the foundation of the immense metal ceiling, as well as housing thousands of inhabitants. The back walls of the structures were always blank, toward the vapor beyond the miniature civilization. Each city was a world of its own, with a curved horizon at the top of the buildings.

In Yarbro's dome there were few means of travel, as every inch of soil was cultivated. The dome dwellers were past masters at farming, and loved this work more than any other type of labor. To them, it was a pleasure that vied with amusement machines of other cities.

When Mrs. Yarbro entered her new apartment, thirty stories above the ground, and stepped to one of the balconies, the view was superb. She was not interested in the next dome, but wanted to settle her own domain as soon as possible; completely happy.

The rest of the party entered an open car, mounted on a single track, and started for the next city. Every object that moved was operated by the control of gravity, and could develop enormous speed and power. It rolled swiftly across the open ground, to enter a tunnel three hundred feet wide, which carried all of the commerce between the cities. When it emerged in the next dome, the imitation sky was the same, but only a small portion of the ground surface was cultivated.

Small buildings dotted the level floor, which Morquil explained were the entrances of the mines, unworked for many years. Jerold Brown and his wife remained in this city, in an apartment as well situated as that of the Yarbro's, in the first dome.

Hours passed as they moved from city to city. When they reached the capitol, only the Barrows, McCarthys and Martins remained of the original fourteen. The others were in their own domes, settling down to the new existence.

Every occupation seemed to have been forgotten by the childish people, to come and welcome the beings from another planet. They lined every inch of the way, many deep.

The main dome was three times the size of the others. Supporting pillars, one hundred feet in diameter, seemed vague where they touched the ceiling above. Parks covered most of the ground, dotted here and there by amusement buildings and theaters.

Cars whizzed back and forth, as people gathered to see the strangers. For the first time in generations the amusement buildings were deserted. Since their arrival, Dick had seen no sign of work, and finally questioned Morquil.

"The people work one mig out of each lix, Dick. It is enough to carry on cultivation of the crops, and keep the amusement buildings running properly and efficiently."

Barrow was stunned. The working period would have to be increased to three immediately, then four and five. They seemed to think that bringing men from another world would do the work, and were apt to be disappointed when he started issuing orders.

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When Dick and his wife were installed in their new home, and the McCarthys settled in a nearby apartment, Morquil hesitated. The Martins were anxious to see their own habitation, and looked at the dome man questioningly.

He finally spoke with hesitation. "I have bad news for you. The Martins will have to occupy an apartment in this city for a while. Their dome is out of order. Trouble developed soon after the ship left here, on this trip, and over a thousand people were killed. Every other city is overcrowded with refugees.

"It started with a strange banging on top of the dome, which kept increasing. No one knew what the trouble was or how to stop it, so they waited to see what happened. It didn't sound as if the ceiling was going to fall--but as if the banging came from outside! It was several migs before they knew the cause.

"When a large section crashed to the ground, it was a complete surprise, and caught the inhabitants unprepared. Soon the air was mixing with the poison gases from outside. People tried to escape, and most of them did. All except those that fell unconscious from the gas.

"Before the last of them reached the tunnel, green things dropped to the ground, and started after those who remained. They had to close the doors between the cities to keep the creatures from entering this dome. It is the first time that anything has happened to my people, and we don't know what it could be."

For a long time the earthmen remained silent. The troubles of this civilization had been dumped into their laps already--in the form of a terrible calamity. It sounded almost as if some kind of life forms had broken through the domes from the outside! Perhaps there was more danger than could be imagined. One dome had been injured, if not destroyed, and others might follow!

A meeting of the earthmen was called immediately, much to their surprise. Dick dared not let conditions stay as they were, for fear of future trouble. Action must be taken at once.

"We don't know what we're facing, but the fate of the race as well as our own lives, seem to be in danger. The break in the dome might have been accident, and the moving forms the imagination of fear. But we know that over a thousand people were killed--whatever caused the trouble!"

The men went back to their domes to rest, and plan some means of entering the deserted city, but were disturbed before they had time for sleep.

The agricultural dome had been attacked! The pounding had begun within a short time of their arrival.

One thing was certain, the injured dome had been attacked! It was not accident that the metal ceiling fell. There were living beings in the gases outside their civilization!

The first dome had been attacked just after the space ship left for the earth, and this attack came just after its return to the domes. There was little doubt that movement of the ship had disturbed the serenity of existence. Perhaps the gas creatures hadn't known what was beneath the metal hives until the ship appeared.

The pounding on the agricultural dome, had to be stopped! A hole would let in the gas! Rifles, that had been brought back on the ship as curiosities, were given to each earthman. They loaded them carefully while they searched for some means of reaching the trouble.

When the leader of the dome heard what they were planning, he showed them sealed openings to a space between the sections of metal, which hadn't been used since the city was built. The dome was constructed in three layers, for insulation, and to give added protection. It was like a maze, to work their way toward the pounding through the network of struts. At times they had to crawl on their hands and knees, at others there were clearly defined passages.

They were afraid, and not ashamed to show it. They were hunting creatures which they knew nothing about--didn't even know whether bullets would affect them! They might face thinking beings, or forms of life that only wanted to search in the domes for food. It was not a pleasant thought.

Every rifle was cocked as they neared the source of the pounding. Every nerve drawn to the finest point.

Suddenly Dick stopped. He was ahead of the others and first to glimpse what they faced. He motioned to use the oxygen masks, as he fastened his own in place.

As they crept closer, light glinted on the giant pointed hammer, operated from beyond the outer layer of metal. It rose and fell at even intervals, through the rent in the upper surface. The ram had already crushed through two thicknesses of metal, and was battering at the inner layer.

The inside section was more like glass than metal and dim light passed through, but the outer layers were opaque. When the huge ram disappeared from the glow of light it left a gaping hole where it had been. It was of material they had never seen and glistened with a brownish hue. It appeared to shorten and expand in diameter, each time it struck the surface.

For a moment they hesitated, trying to decide the best means of attack. Whatever animated the ram was above their vision, and they had to be close to the opening to see it.

Each time the shiny object descended, the dome vibrated beneath their feet. As long as the vibration remained they were safe, but when it felt like a thud--the metal would be cracking!
Thousands of helpless people were depending on the action of earthmen, for their future existence. They seemed to think that it was only necessary to tell their troubles to these amazing strangers, to have them solved. Stories about the use of water to drive the space ship, had circulated throughout the cities, crediting the newcomers with superhuman powers.

As the little party crept nearer, they separated, to approach the opening from every direction. Dick was to fire first—if he saw anything to shoot at! It might be a powerful machine, clamped to the outer surface, instead of a being that could be injured. The glass globes of the masks were clouding with moisture, and it was hard to see.

A thud came, that didn't vibrate quite as much, and the men could feel the hair on their necks stiffen. It was now or never, and Dick fired although he was still several feet from the opening. He fired at the topmost section of the ram, hoping it might stop the hammering for a moment even if it didn't injure the equipment. Two more shots rang out, before the object could deliver another blow.

It was alive! The heavy ram jumped from the shock of the bullets, curving convulsively to one side of the opening. Then it drew back out of sight.

CHAPTER VIII
Battle with a Monster

Minutes passed, while the earthmen hardly dared breathe. Their ebbing heartbeat seemed to almost echo in their breasts. Then the object appeared at the opening, hesitated, and was thrust in!

The hammer was a head!!! It swayed back and forth, like the head of a huge caterpillar, and every gun fired in unison. Shot after shot pumped into the head with rapid and unerring accuracy.

The giant head moved from one side to the other, while two gigantic eyes peered around. It didn't know enough to draw back from the danger zone, but muscular reaction finally moved it out of sight.

Dick crept forward, motioning for the others to wait until he investigated. There was no need for all of them to enter the danger zone.

He turned the flashlight on, that had been strapped to his waist, and played it around the jagged opening, then climbed to the next level and searched again.

When he crawled to the outer surface, the creature was writhing a few feet away. He motioned, and the other men soon joined him, where they could watch the creature.

They were standing almost on the direct center of the dome, where it was almost flat. The flashlights penetrated the mists enough to mark out the shape of the attacker, when they were all centered.

Suddenly they felt sick to their stomachs.

It was a caterpillar! As loathsome a creature as they could have imagined with its curled body, and the farthest possible thing from a human being. A form of life that existed in the poison gases, where men would die within minutes. The muscles of the creature had to be terrifically strong, to move against the gravity of the huge globe.

Even at the center of the dome, they felt less effect of the neutralized gravity of the interior. It required effort to stand on their feet. Some effect of the neutralizers in the giant pillars, which eliminated most of the weight of the dome, enabled them to handle their bodies.

The creature before them was accustomed to normal gravity of the heavy planet, and even the metal of the dome was not beyond the pounding of its hammer. What they had mistaken for a battering ram, was the brown tip of the mammoth insect. From end to end it measured over sixty feet. The men finally turned away in disgust, as it writhed in muscular reaction.

John McCarthy was climbing into the opening behind the other men, when he happened to glance back. His flashlight dimly lighted the spot where the monster had been, and it was gone!

He hesitated with one foot in the air, then realized what had happened. The movement of the body had moved it farther and farther from the center of the dome. It had reached a place where the curve was sufficient to let it slide on the smooth metal. A moment later, a slight jar was felt through the entire structure—it had slid from the man-made mound, to crash on the ground below. Memory of that sight made a sober return to the interior.

Before they dared rest, metal sheets were carried to the opening and blocked in place. Then dome men welded them to the solid metal. They didn't want to see any of those creatures in the cities!

Twelve hours had passed by the time the opening was sealed, and the earthmen dragged their tired forms through the maze of supports for the last time.

They were almost asleep before they could reach their own apartments, and tumble onto comfortable beds. They had conquered the first problem.

Dick was awakened by an excited man, talking faster than he could understand the new language. When he grasped what the other was saying, he leaped from bed wide awake.

Every dome had been attacked!!! The caterpillars were pounding many spots on each one. They seemed to be trying to get at the creatures that had destroyed one of their number.
In that moment Dick felt like an old man. He thought of the space ship; the only way of attacking from the outside, and gave that up. There wasn't enough fuel to handle it, and the blasts might injure the metal domes. His mind searched frantically for some way of fighting all of the creatures—and knew it couldn't be done.

He was racing across the open ground, while thousands of people gazed at the banging overhead. Suddenly he stopped, then turned back toward his apartment, running just as hard. There was a system of communication between the domes—that sometimes worked! It was not efficient, but if he could get in touch with the others immediately, there was one chance!

He tried frantically to get a connection, but it wasn't until one of the natives helped with the intricate system of signals, that he heard the voice of Andrew Smith. A few moments later Philip Jones answered, then Jerold Brown and Peter Yarbro. Each man was given quick, yet explicit, instruction.

When Dick turned away from the phone, John McCarthy entered the room, followed by George Martin. The noise in the city had finally aroused them from their slumber.

John started to smile, but the expression on Barrow's face drove all thought of greeting away.

"What is it? I thought the people were doing a day's work—but you-----!!" His face turned ashen as he ran to the balcony, George Martin only a step behind. After gazing up for a moment, McCarthy turned slowly as he ran to the balcony, George Martin only a step behind. After gazing up for a moment, McCarthy turned slowly to face Dick.

"The worms? It sounds like hundreds of them! We better work fast, or they'll have the whole roof down around our ears."

"No, John. We can't fight them with guns. They have attacked every dome on the planet!"

When full realization came to the big Irishman, he sank slowly into a chair. "Then what? Have you got any plan—or are we helpless?"

"We've got work to do and plenty of it. There's a slight chance of saving the cities. I've already instructed the others."

As the three men raced toward the power plant, Dick explained. John and George were to do the work, while he traveled from dome to dome to make sure the people were prepared, and see that the power plants were used as he intended.

By the time they reached the entrance of the building, John nodded, and Barrow turned back as the other men entered the door. The first dome people that Dick saw were told to remove everyone from the buildings, and gather them in the open spaces of the parks. Leaving no one within any structure!

The expression on his face scared them even more than the pounding of the worms, and they hurried to obey.

Dick jumped into the nearest ground car. He couldn't be bothered traveling on the railroads. This happened to belong to the assistant head of the dome, whom he dispossessed. It jerked crazily across streets and parks, while he learned to handle the controls.

An hour later Dick was back at the powerhouse in the big dome. Every city was ready. In several places the hammering heads had broken through the outer layers, and were banging at the translucent inner ceiling. The creatures had learned how to break through.

The first worm that attacked, while the space ship was away, either took its time or didn't realize what was beneath the heavy metal. These creatures were working in earnest.

Heavy insulated cables ran from the powerhouse to the nearest metal pillars, where McCarthy and Martin were working desperately to fasten them in place. The booming voice of the Irishman had kept the natives back, although they crowded as close as they dared. They were really afraid, when the hammering grew plainer with each passing minute.

When the cables were fastened, John shouted to Dick, who was waiting in the powerhouse. He pulled a heavy switch, at the end of the wires.

The city was suddenly in complete darkness, then it flashed bright again as power flowed back into the thousands of coils in the ceiling material. Twice more it darkened, when the giant switch was thrown, and the lights came on again. This time it stayed bright.

Dick ran to the doorway, and gazed at the dome above. It was silent! The people were frightened, and moved restlessly about. Twice more he turned the power into the metal, and after one long darkened period, the city remained bright. No sound came from the dome! Either the worms were dead—or frightened away!

Within a week the doors to the deserted city were opened, and the earthmen passed through. When they glimpsed the interior, they stopped in consternation, then started to laugh.

Huge worms covered the ground, and smaller editions of the same species, crawled around them. They were using the dome for a hatching place!

They had only entered it to bring forth their young! It was not brains that tempted them to attack the city, but the instinct to find a protected place for their eggs. Since they had broken in, many of the young had hatched, and
were crawling around the ground.

Sight of the earthmen seemed to excite their feelings, and several of the creatures started toward them. The men fired carefully, and the forms squirmed on the ground. The ones that came behind stopped, and some of the young tried to feed on the remains of their companions.

The sight was so sickening that the earthmen fired at every living thing they could see. Several of the wounded creatures crawled up the huge pillars, to disappear through the opening above, while the men shot at their disappearing forms. When the last caterpillar lay dead, the entire area appeared like a battlefield.

Three days later the gas had been expelled, and the hole in the dome repaired. The population was returning to their homes, burying the carcasses in the fields. The city was livable again, and they knew electric current would stop any future attack of the strange creatures.

* * * * *

Ten years later, Dick Barrow sat on the balcony before his apartment. His son John, eight years old, was playing with Dick McCarthy. While he watched the boys, his mind swung back to the earth the little group had left so many years before.

For three years they had talked of returning to their home planet, and the evening before the conversation reached a climax. They were starting in two months.

It no longer required years to manufacture fuel for one trip. All machinery was working at top efficiency, and they could turn out enough of the liquid in a month, to drive the ship back and forth several times. Crews of workmen had been trained to care for all mechanical equipment, and there was no longer need for the engineers from the earth.

The day the little party (it now consisted of eighteen with the four children), entered the space ship tears rolled down the cheeks of many of the crowd. The dome people had learned to almost worship these members of an alien race, and thought they would never leave. But when they realized that their leaders were dissatisfied, and wanted to return to their native planet, they aided in every way they knew how.

The ship was out of port for less than a week when the people became restless. They hardly spoke, even at meal time, and for the first time in ten years there were petty quarrels.

When Barrow called them to the main cabin, they came grudgingly, then slowly the expressions changed. Smiles appeared on their faces, and their heads moved with sheepish nods of assent.

"We're fools, and you all know it. We were happy in the domes, happier than we ever were in our lives before. We didn't appreciate it and longed to return to the earth. We wanted to leave, yet had everything there to live for. We had comfort, every pleasure, and more friends than we can possibly have on our own world. I feel ashamed!

"Right now we wish that we were back in our own apartments, and might as well admit it. The earth is not what we want, we want the domes! They are home!!!

"The best thing for us to do, now that we are on the way to the earth, is establish commerce.

"We can create friendship between the planets, but we are natives of Jupiter! Our interests will always be with the dome people. We have almost become part of that race, and they have given us everything in return. They even gave us our freedom when we wanted it. We belong there!"

Ten years more passed, and John Barrow was beginning to help with his father's work. Vacationing in Jupiter's domes had become so popular on the earth that they were building another city to accommodate the tourist trade. It was the third to be added to the original six. Merchant ships were constantly discharging goods from the earth, and carrying back rare metals.

Space ships from the earth, designed after the original Jupiter ship, were searching the little known planets for minerals. Domes were being built on three of the smaller globes, and pioneering humans migrated to new worlds. There was danger, yes, but also fame and fortune for the hardy people who would inhabit them.

The earth had changed a lot, since the visit of the space ship. They had adopted the principle of controlling gravity, and tremendous structures were the result. New buildings were several times as large as the greatest structure of ten years before. Both planets had benefited from the friendship, and both were happier as a result.

As Dick Barrow's mind ran over these facts, he smiled and spoke aloud to himself. "And all of this in twenty years--it seems incredible!"

"What did you say, dear?" asked Dolores.

Dick smiled as he glanced at her. "It's nothing. I was just thinking. Remember the night you fell in front of my table in the hotel? And I thought it was accidental--you scheming gold-digger!"

The ruler of the domes ducked when his wife threw her book--but she didn't throw it very hard.

THE END

FOOTNOTES:
[1] This gravity power was derived from huge weights swung on an axis that could be faced toward any point
in the universe, and the slightest pull resulted in force that was exerted on the fuel. The explosive mixture remained at constant pressure, creating a smooth driving medium. Discharge of the fuel under high compression resulted in greater power than could be obtained in any other way.

When the fuel shot through the tubes, it exerted force on the gas cloud that was far above the actual speed of the explosion. The heat of combustion was reduced, and the ship operated without effect from the blasts. The tubes were small, yet the power expended was beyond anything ever accomplished on earth.--Author.
"Your name ith Jathon Ramthey?" the Port Security Officer lisped politely.

Jason Ramsey, who wore the uniform of Interstellar Transfer Service and was the only Earthman in the Service here on Irwadi, smiled and said: "Take three guesses. You know darn well I'm Ramsey." He was a big man even by Earth standards, which meant he towered over the Irwadian's green, scaly head. He was fair of skin and had hair the color of copper. It was rumored on Irwadi and elsewhere that he couldn't return to Earth because of some crime he had committed.

"Alwayth the chip on the shoulder," the Port Security Officer said. "Won't you Earthmen ever learn?" The splay-tongued reptile-humanoids of Irwadi always spoke Interstellar Coin with a pronounced lisp which Ramsey found annoying, especially since it went so well with the officious and underhanded behavior for which the Irwadians were famous the galaxy over.

"Get to the point," Ramsey said harshly. "I have a ship to take through hyper-space."

"No. You have no ship."

"No? Then what's this?" His irritation mounting, Ramsey pulled out the Interstellar Transfer Service authorization form and showed it to the Security Officer. "A tip-sheet for the weightless races at Fomalhaut VI?"

The Security Officer said: "Ha, ha, ha." He could not laugh; he merely uttered the phonetic equivalent of laughter. On harsh Irwadi, laughter would have been a cultural anomaly. "You make joketh. Well, nevertheloth, you have no ship." He expanded his scaly green barrel chest and declaimed: "At 0400 hours thith morning, the government of Irwadi hath planetarished the Irwadi Transfer Thervith."

* * * * *

"Planetarized the Transfer Service!" gasped Ramsey in surprise. He knew the Irwadians had been contemplating the move in theory for many years, but he also knew that transferring a starship from normal space through hyper-space back to normal space again was a tremendously difficult and technical task. He doubted if half a dozen Irwadians had mastered it, yet the Irwadi branch of Interstellar Transfer Service was made up of seventy-five hyper-space pilots of divers planetalities.

"Ecthactly," said the Security Officer, as amused as an Irwadian could be by the amazement in Ramsey's frank green eyes. "Tho if you will kindly thurrender your permit?"

"Let's see it in writing, huh?"

The Security Officer complied. Ramsey read the official document, scowled, and handed over his Irwadi pilot license. "What about the Polaris?" he wanted to know. The Polaris was a Centaurian ship he'd been scheduled to take through hyper-space on the run from Irwadi to Centauri III.

"Temporarily grounded, captain. Or should I thay, ecth-captain?"

"Temporarily my foot," said Ramsey. "It'll be months before you Irwadians can get even a fraction of the ships into hyper. You must be out of your minds."

"Our problem, captain. Not yourth."

That was true enough. Ramsey shrugged.

"Your problem," the Security Officer went on blandly, "will be to find a meanth of thelf-thupport until you and all other ecthra-planetarieth can be removed from Irwadi. We owe you ecthra-planetarieth nothing. Ethpect no charity from uth."

Ramsey shrugged. Like all extra-planetaries on a bleak, friendless world like Irwadi, he'd regularly gambled away and drank away his monthly paycheck in the interstellar settlement which the Irwadians had established in the Old Quarter of Irwadi City. But last month he'd managed to come out even at the gaming tables, so he had a few hundred credits to his name. That would be enough, he told himself, to tide him over until Interstellar Transfer Service came to the rescue of its stranded pilots.

Ramsey went up the gangway and got his gear from the Polaris. When he returned down the gangway, the late afternoon wind was blowing across the spacefield tarmac, a wet, bone-chilling wind which only the reptile-humanoid Irwadians didn't seem to mind.

Ramsey fastened the toggles of his cold-weather cape, put his head down and hunched his shoulders, and walked into the teeth of the wind. He did not look back at the Polaris, marooned indefinitely on Irwadi despite anything the Centaurian owners or anyone else for that matter could do about it.

* * * * *

The Irwadi Security Officer, whose name was Chind Ramar, walked up the gangway and ordered the ship's
Centaurian first officer to assemble his crew and passengers. Chind Ramar allowed himself the rare luxury of a fleeting smile. He could imagine this scene being duplicated on fifty ships here on his native planet today, fifty outworld ships which had no business at all on Irwadi. Of course, Irwadi was an important planet-of-call in the Galactic Federation because the vital metal titanium was found as abundantly in Irwadian soil as aluminum is found in the soil of an Earth-style planet. Titanium, in alloy with steel and manganese, was the only element which could withstand the tremendous heat generated in the drive-chambers of interstellar ships during transfer. In the future, Chind Ramar told himself with a kind of cold pride, only Irwadian pilots, piloting Irwadian ships through hyperspace, would bring titanium to the waiting galaxy. At Irwadi prices.

With great relish, Chind Ramar announced the facts of planetarization and told the Centaurians and their passengers that they would be stranded for an indefinite period on Irwadi. Amazement, anger, bluster, debate, and finally resignation—the reactions were the expected ones, in the expected order. It was easy, Chind Ramar thought, with all but the interstellar soldiers of fortune like Jason Ramsey. Ramsey, of course, would need watching. As for these others....

One of the others, an Earthgirl whose beauty was entirely missed by Chind Ramar, left the Polaris in a hurry. She either had no luggage or left her luggage aboard. Jason Ramsey, she thought. She had read Chind Ramar's mind; a feat growing less rare although by no means common yet among the offspring of those who had spent a great deal of time bombarded by cosmic radiation between the stars. She hurried through the chilling wind toward the Old Quarter of Irwadi City. Panic, she thought. You've got to avoid panic. If you panic, you're finished....

* * * * *

"So that's about the size of it," Ramsey finished.

Stu Englander nodded. Like Ramsey he was a hyper-space pilot, but although he had an Earth-style name and had been born of Earth parents, he was not an Earthman. He had been born on Capella VII, and had spent most of his life on that tropical planet. The result was not an uncommon one for outworlders who spent any amount of time on Irwadi: Stu Englander had a nagging bronchial condition which had kept him off the pilot-bridge for some months now.

Englander nodded again, dourly. He was a short, very slender man a few years older than Ramsey, who was thirty-one. He said: "That ties it. And I mean ties it, brother. You're looking at the brokest Capellan-earthman who ever got himself stuck on an outworld."

"You mean it?"

"Dead broke, Jase."

"What about Sally and the kids?"

Englander had an Arcturan-earthian wife and twin boys four years old. "I don't know what about Sally and the kids," he told Ramsey glumly. "I guess I'll go over to the New Quarter and try to get some kind of a job."

"They wouldn't hire an outworlder to shine their shoes with his own spit, Stu. They have got the planetarization bug, and they've got it bad."

Sally Englander called from the kitchen of the small flat: "Will Jase be staying for supper?"

Englander stared at Ramsey, who shook his head. "Not today, Sally," Englander said, looking at Ramsey gratefully.

"Listen," Ramsey lied, "I've been lucky as all get out the last couple of months."

"You old pro!" grinned Englander.

"So I've got a few hundred credits just burning a hole in my pocket," Ramsey went on. "How's about taking them?"

"But I haven't the slightest idea when I could pay back."

"I didn't say anything about paying me back."

"I couldn't accept charity, Jase."

"O.K. Pay me back when you get a chance. There are plenty of hyper-space jobs waiting for us all over the galaxy, you know that."

"Yeah, all we have to do is get off Irwadi and go after them. But the Irwadians are keeping us right here."

"Sure, but it won't last. Not when the folks back in Capella and Deneb and Sol System hear about it."

"Six months," said Englander bleakly. "It'll take at least that long."

"Six months I can wait. What d'you say?"

Englander coughed wrackingly, his eyes watering. He got off the bed and shook Ramsey's hand solemnly. Ramsey gave him three hundred and seventy-five credits and said: "Just see you make that go a long way supporting Sally and the kids. I don't want to see you dropping any of it at the gaming tables. I'll knock your block off if I see you there."

"I'll knock my own block off if I see me there. Jase, I don't know how to thank--"
"Don't is right. Forget it."
"Do you have enough--"
"Me? Plenty. Don't worry about old Jase." Ramsey went to the door. "Well, see you."

Englander walked quickly to him and shook his hand again. On the way out, Ramsey played for a moment or two with the twins, who were rolling a couple of toy spaceships marked hyper-one and hyper-two across the floor and making anachronistic machine-gun noises with their lips. Sally Englander, a plump, young-home-maker type, beamed at Ramsey from the kitchen. Then he went out into the gathering dusk.

* * * * *

As usual on Irwadi, and particularly with the coming of night, it was bitterly cold. Sucker, Ramsey told himself. But he grinned. He felt good about what he'd done. With Stu sick, and with Sally and the kids, he'd done the only thing he could do. He still had almost twenty-five credits left. Maybe he really would have a lucky night at the tables. Maybe... heck, he'd been down-and-out before. A fugitive from Earth didn't have much choice sometimes....

"Red sixteen," the croupier said indifferently. He was a short, heavy-set Sirian with a shock of scarlet hair, albino skin, and red eyes.

Ramsey watched his money being raked across the table. It wasn't his night, he told himself with a grim smile. He had only three credits left. If he risked them now, there wouldn't even be the temporary physical relief and release of a bottle of Irwadian brandy before hitting the sack.

Which was another thing, Ramsey thought. Hitting the sack. Ah yes, you filthy outworlder capitalist, hitting the sack. You owe that fish-eyed, scale-skinned Irwadian landlady the rent money, so you'd better wait until later, until much later, before sneaking back to your room.

* * * * *

He watched the gambling for another hour or so without risking his few remaining credits. After a while a well-dressed Irwadian, drunk and obviously slumming here in the Old Quarter, made his way over to the table. His body scales were a glossy dark green and he wore glittering, be-jeweled straps across his chest and an equally glittering, be-jeweled weapons belt. Aside from these, in the approved Irwadian fashion, he was quite naked. An anthropologist friend had once told Ramsey that once the Irwadians had worn clothing, but since the coming in great number of the outworlders they had stripped down, as though to prove how tough they were in being able to withstand the freezing climate of their native world. Actually, the Irwadian body-scales were superb insulation, whether from heat or from cold.

"... Earthman watching me," the Irwadian in the be-jeweled straps said arrogantly, placing a fat roll of credits on the table.

"I'm sorry," Ramsey said. "Were you talking to me?"

"I thertainly wath," lisped the Irwadian, his eyes blazing with drunken hatred. "I thaid I won't have any Earthman thnooping over my thoulder while I gamble, not unleth he'th gambling too."

"Better tell that to your Security Police," Ramsey said coldly but not angrily. "I'm out of a job, so I don't have money to throw around. Go ahead and tell me--" with a little smile--"you think it was my idea."

The Irwadian looked up haughtily. Evidently he was looking for trouble, or could not hold his liquor, or both. The frenzy of planetarization, Ramsey knew from bitter experience on other worlds, made irrational behavior like this typical. He studied the drunken Irwadian carefully. In all the time he'd spent on Irwadi, he'd never been able to tell a native's age by his green, scale-skinned, fish-eyed poker-face. But the glossy green scales covering face and body told Ramsey, along with the sturdy muscles revealed by the lack of clothing, that the Irwadian was in his prime, shorter than Ramsey by far, but wider across the shoulders and thicker through the barrel chest.

"You outworlderth have been deprethng the thandard of living on Irwadi ever thince you came here," the Irwadian said. "All you ever brought wath poverty and your ditheath germth and more trouble than you could handle. I don't want your thtink near me. I'm trying to enjoy mythelf. Get out of here."

* * * * *

It was abruptly silent in the little gambling hall. Since the establishment catered to outworlders and was full of them, the silence, Ramsey thought, should have been both ominous and in his favor. He looked around. Outworlders, yes. But not another Earthman present. He wondered if he was in for a fight. He shrugged, hardly caring. Maybe a fight was just what he needed, the way he felt.

"Get out of here," the Irwadian repeated. "You thinkt."

Just then a Vegan girl, blue-skinned and fantastically wasp-waisted like all her kind, drifted over to Ramsey. He'd seen her around. He thought he recognized her. Maybe he'd even danced with her in the unit-a-dance halls reserved for humanoid outworlders.

"Are you nuts?" she said, hissing the words through her teeth and grabbing Ramsey's elbow. "Don't you know who that guy is?"
"No. Who?"
"He's Garr Symm, that's who."
Ramsey smiled at her without mirth. "Do I bow down in awe or run from here screaming? I never heard of Garr Symm."
"Oh you fool!" she whispered furiously. "Garr Symm is the brand new number one man of the Irwadi Security Police. Don't you read the 'casts?"
Before Ramsey could answer or adjust to his surprise, the Irwadian repeated: "I'm telling you for the third time. Get out."
Ostentatiously, Ramsey reached into his cloak-pocket for a single credit bill and tossed it on the table. "The denomination is not sufficient, sir," the albino Sirian croupier said indifferently. Ramsey had known it was not.
Garr Symm's face turned a darker green. The Vegan girl retreated from Ramsey's side in fright. Symm raised his hand and an Irwadian waiter brought over a drink in a purple stem glass with a filigree pattern of titanium, bowing obsequiously. Symm lurched with the glass toward Ramsey. "I'm telling you to go," he said in a loud voice.
Ramsey picked up his credit note but stood there. With a little sigh of drunken contentment, Garr Symm sloshed the contents of his stem glass in Ramsey's face.
The liquor stung Ramsey's eyes. Many of the other outworlders, neither Irwadian nor Earthmen, laughed nervously.
Ramsey wiped his eyes but otherwise did not move. He was in a rough spot and he knew it. The fact that their new Security Chief went out drunk at night with a chip on his shoulder was the Irwadian government's affair, not Ramsey's. He'd been insulted before. An Earthman in the outworlds, particularly an Earthman fugitive who knew he dared not get into the kind of trouble that could bring the Earth consul to investigate, was used to insults. For Earth was the leading economic and military power of the galaxy, and the fact that Earth really tried to deal fairly with its galactic neighbors meant nothing. Earth, being top dog, was resented.
The thing which got Ramsey, though, was this Garr Symm. He had never heard of Garr Symm, and he thought he knew most of the big shots in the Irwadian Security Police by name. But there must have been a reason for his appointment. A government throwing off outworld influence had a reason for everything. So, why Garr Symm?
* * * * *
"You, Mith Vegan!" Garr Symm called suddenly. "You whispered to the Earthman. What did you tell him?"
"Not to look for trouble," the Vegan girl said in a frightened voice.
"But what else?"
"Honest, that's all."
"Come here, pleath."
Her blue skin all at once very pale, the Vegan girl walked back toward Garr Symm. He leered at her quite drunkenly and took hold of her slender arm. "What did you tell him? For the latht time."
The girl whimpered: "You are hurting my arm."
Thoughts raced through Ramsey's mind. As an administrator, as an Irwadian public servant in a touchy job, Garr Symm, a drunkard, was obviously grossly incompetent. What other qualifications did he have which gave him the top Irwadian Security job? Ramsey didn't know. He sighed. The Vegan girl's mouth formed a rictus of pain. Ramsey had a hunch he was going to find out.
He said curtly: "Let go of her, Symm. She told me nothing that would interest you."
* * * * *
Garr Symm ignored him. The blue-skinned girl cried.
Ramsey grimaced and hit Garr Symm in the belly as hard as he could. Symm thudded back against the table. It overturned with a crash and the Security Chief crashed down on top of it. There wasn't a sound in the gambling hall except Ramsey's sudden hard breathing, the Vegan girl's sniffling, and Garr Symm's noisy attempts to get air into his lungs. Then Garr Symm gagged and was sick. He writhed in pain, still unable to breathe. His hands fluttered near his weapons belt.
"Come on," Ramsey told the Vegan girl. "We'd better get out of here." He took her arm. Dumbly she went with him. None of the outworlders there tried to stop them. Ramsey looked back at Garr Symm. The Irwadian was shaking his fist. He had finally managed to draw his m.g. gun, but the crowd of outworlders closed between them and there was no chance he could hit Ramsey or the girl. Retching, he had dirtied the glossy green scales of his chest.
"I'll get you," he vowed. "I'll get you."
Ramsey took the girl outside. It was very cold. "I'm so afraid," she said. "What will I do? What can I do?" She shook with fear.
"You got a place to sleep?"
"Y-yes, but I'm the only Vegan girl in Irwadi City. He'll find me. He'll find me when he's ready."
"O.K. Then come home with me."
"I--"
"For crying out loud, I don't look that lecherous, do I? We can't just stand here."
"I--I'm sorry. I'll go with you of course."
Ramsey took her hand again and they ran. The cold black Irwadian night swallowed them.
"So you live in the Old Quarter too," the Vegan girl said.
"Heck yeah. Did you expect a palace?"

Ramsey had a room, rent one Irwadi month in arrears, in a cold-water tenement near the river which demarked the Old and the New Quarters. The façade of the old building was dark now. His landlady was probably asleep, although you never could tell with that old witch. Ramsey knew it wouldn't be the first time she stayed up through half the night to await a delinquent tenant.

"I--I never went to a man's room before," the blue-skinned Vegan girl said. She was rather pretty in a slender, muscleless, big-eyed, female-helpless mode.
"You're a dance-hall girl, aren't you?"
"Still, I never spent the night in a man's--"
"What's the matter with you? You think we're going to spend the night here? Somebody over at those gaming tables will be able to identify me. Garr Symm'll be on his way before long."
"Then what are we going to do?" The girl was shivering with cold.
"Hide," Jason Ramsey said. "Somewhere. I just came back to get my things. There isn't much, but there's an old m.g. gun which we might need."
"But they'll find us, and--"
"You coming upstairs or will you wait out here and freeze to death in the cold?"
"I'm coming."

They went upstairs together, on tip-toe. Ramsey's room was on the third floor, with a besooted view of the industrial complex on the river by day. The narrow hall was dark and silent. Behind one of the closed doors an outworlder cried out in his sleep. Ramsey had to cup a hand over the Vegan girl's mouth so she wouldn't scream in empathic fear. He opened the door of his room, surprised that it was not locked. He thought he had left it locked.

At once he was wary. It was dark in the hall, just as dark in the room. He could see nothing. The door hinges squeaked.
"Come in, Captain Ramsey," a voice said. "I thought you would never get here."

He stood on the threshold, uncertain. The voice had spoken not Interstellar Coine, but English. It had spoken English, without a foreign accent.
And it was a girl's voice.

Still, it could have been an elaborate trick. It was unlikely, but not impossible, that Garr Symm had learned Ramsey's identity already and had sent an operative here to await him. Ramsey and the Vegan girl had come on foot. It was a long walk.

"I'm armed," Ramsey lied. "Come over here. Slowly. Don't put any lights on." He could feel the Vegan girl trembling next to him. Not able to understand English, she didn't know what was going on.

"You're armed," the unseen girl's voice said in crisp, amused English, "like I'm a six-legged Antarean spider-man. You have an m.g. gun, Ramsey. It's in this room. I have it. That's all you have. No, don't try to lie to me. I'm a telepath. I can read you. Come in and put the light on and shut the door. You may bring the girl with you if you want. Brother, is she ever radiating fear! It's practically drowning your own mind out."

The unseen girl wasn't kidding, Ramsey knew. She could read minds. She had proved it to him. Which left him this choice: he could grab the Vegan girl's arm again and get the heck out of there, or do what the unseen Earth girl told him to do. He wanted that m.g. gun. He took the Vegan girl's hand and advanced over the threshold and closed the door and switched on the light.

The girl was sitting on the bed. She was an Earthgirl, all right. She had come in a toggle-cloak of green Irwadian fur, which was folded neatly at her side on the bed. Under it she wore a daring net halter of the type then fashionable on Earth but which had not yet taken over the outworlds. It left her shoulders bare and exposed a great deal of smooth, tawny skin through the net. Her firm breasts were cupped in two solid cones of black growing out of the net. Her midriff was bare to an inch or two below the navel. Her loins were covered by an abrevitog which formed a triangle in front and, Ramsey knew, would form one in back. Her long, well-formed legs were bare down
to the mid-calf boots she wore. She had a beautiful body and had dressed so Ramsey couldn't miss it. Her face was so provocatively beautiful that Ramsey just stood there staring at it—after he had taken in the rest of her. She wore her hair quite long. She seemed perfectly composed. In her right hand she held Ramsey's m.g. gun, but she wasn't pointing it at them.

She looked at the timid Vegan girl and smiled. "Oh, I am sorry, Captain Ramsey," she said. "I couldn't know, of course, you'd be coming home with—company."

"It isn't what you think it is," Ramsey said, surprised to find himself on the defensive. "The girl's in trouble. So'm I."

The Earthgirl laughed. "Already? You looked the type, but I thought it would take a little time."

"What do you want?" Ramsey said. They were speaking in English. The Vegan girl tugged at Ramsey's arm. She wanted to get out of there and hoped Ramsey would go with her. Abruptly the Earthgirl burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Ramsey demanded.

"Your little Vegan friend. I read her mind, Ramsey. She thinks I'm your wife. She thinks I'm mad at you for bringing her home."

"Then why don't you talk in Coine," Ramsey said in the interstellar language, "and make her feel better? She might as well know I never saw you before in my life." He was annoyed.

* * * * *

The Vegan girl smiled timidly, taking hope.

"But you did," the beautiful Earthgirl said. "I was on the Polaris today, Captain. You were to be the pilot, until Interstellar Transfer here on Irwadi was planetarized."

"I didn't see you. Dressed like that I wouldn't have forgotten you."

"I wasn't dressed like this." The girl smiled, very sure of herself. "I read your mind when you came in. The costume's had the desired effect, I see. But you needn't broadcast your animal desires so blatantly."

"Nobody asked you to read my mind. Besides, you needn't broadcast your physical assets so blatantly."

"Touché," said the Earthgirl.

"Listen," Ramsey began. "We're in a jam. We're in a hurry."

"So you told me. I couldn't have wished for more. It looks like I didn't need this costume and its obvious inducements at all, if you're really in a jam."

"What the devil is that supposed to mean?"

"My name is Margot Dennison, Captain Ramsey. I have managed to buy an old starship, small and held together by spit and string and whatever the Irwadians use for prayer—"

"They're atheists," Ramsey said a little pointlessly. It was the girl. Darn her hide, she was beautiful! What did she expect? Looking at her, how could a man concentrate.... "Hey!" Ramsey blurted suddenly. "Did you say Margot Dennison? The tri-di star?"

* * * * *

Margot Dennison smiled. "That's right," she said. "Stranded five hundred light years from nowhere, Captain Ramsey. With a ship. With money. In need of a hyper-space pilot. That's why I'm here, or didn't you guess?"

"I'm listening."

"Isn't it clear? I'll pay you to take me away from here."

"Where to?"

"Through hyper-space to Earth. Well?"

"I've been grounded. If I take you through hyper-space, I lose my license."

"You really don't believe that, do you? After the Irwadians grounded all of you without warning, and grounded all ships until they can train a few more pilots. You don't really think I.T.S. would take your license away if you took a ship up and through hyper, do you? Under the circumstances? Especially since you're in a jam with a totalitarian government gone wild? Do you?"

Ramsey said abruptly: "I'm sorry. I can't take you to Sol System."

Margot Dennison smiled. It wasn't the kind of smile designed to make a man roll over on his back and wave all fours in the breeze. Margot Dennison didn't need that kind of smile.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I read your mind, you see. Very well, Captain. If you're a fugitive from Earth—I assume Ramsey isn't your real name, by the way—you may take me through hyper to Centauri. That will be quite satisfactory. I will make my way from Centauri. Well?"

"Give me the gun," Ramsey said.

"My goodness, of course. I'm not trying to hold you up. Here." She got up from the bed for the first time and walked toward them. She had firm, long legs, and used them well. She was utterly lovely and although part of it was probably her professional know-how, she made you forget that. She was the most attractive girl, Earth or outworld,
Ramsey had seen in years.
Ramsey took the gun. Their hands met. Ramsey leaned forward quickly and kissed her on the lips. He was still holding the Vegan girl's slender arm, though. She tried to run away but couldn't. Margot Dennison returned the kiss for an instant, to show Ramsey that when she really wanted to return it, if she ever really would, she would pack the same kind of libidinal vitality in her responses as she did in her appearance; then she stood coldly, no longer responsive, until Ramsey stepped back.
"Maybe I was asking for it," she said. "I was prepared for that--and more. But it isn't necessary now, is it? My gosh, Ramsey! Will you please close that mind of yours? You make a girl blush."
"Then put on your cloak," Ramsey said, and, really blushing this time, she did so.
She said: "I'm prepared to pay you one thousand credits; what do you say?"
"I say it must be a pretty important appointment you have on Centauri."
"Earth, Captain Ramsey. I'm settling for Centauri. Well?"
"I'll take you," Ramsey said, "if this girl comes too."
Margot Dennison looked at the frightened Vegan girl and smiled. "So it's like that," she said.
"It isn't like anything."
Ramsey packed a few things in an expanduffle and the three of them hurried through the doorway and down stairs. The cold dark night awaiting them with a fierce howling wind and the first flurries of snow from the north.
"Where to?" Ramsey hollered above the wind.
"My place," Margot Dennison told him, and they ran.

Margot Dennison had a large apartment in Irwadi City's New Quarter. This surprised Ramsey, for not many outworlders lived there. That night, though, he was too tired to think about it. He vaguely remembered a couch for himself, a separate room for the Vegan girl, another for Margot Dennison. He slept like a log without dreaming.
He awoke with anxious hands fluttering at his shoulder. Opening one sleepy eye, he saw the Vegan girl. He saw daylight through a window but said, "Gmph! Middle of the night."
The Vegan girl said: "She's gone."
Ramsey came awake all at once, springing to his feet fully dressed and flinging aside his cloak, which he'd used as a blanket. "Margot!" he called.
"She's gone," the Vegan girl repeated. "When I awoke she wasn't here. The door--"

Ramsey ran to the door. It was a heavy plastic irising door. It was locked and naturally would not respond to the whorl patterns of Ramsey's thumb.
"So now we're prisoners," Ramsey said. "I don't get it."
"At least there's food in the kitchen."
"All right. Let's eat."
There were two windows in the room, but when Ramsey looked out he saw they were at least four stories up. They'd just have to wait for Margot Dennison.

It took the Vegan girl some time to prepare the unfamiliar Earth-style food with which Margot Dennison's kitchen was stocked. Ramsey used the time to prowl around the apartment. It was furnished in Sirian-archaic, a mode of furniture too feminine to suit Ramsey's tastes. But then, the uni-sexual Sirians, of course, often catered to their own feminine taste.

Ramsey found nothing in Margot Dennison's apartment which indicated she had done any acting on Irwadi, and that surprised him, for he'd assumed she had plied her trade here as elsewhere. He felt a little guilty about his snooping, then changed his mind when he remembered that Margot had locked them in.
In one of the slide compartments of what passed for a bureau in Sirian-archaic, he found a letter. Since it was the only piece of correspondence in the apartment, it might be important to Margot Dennison, thought Ramsey. And if it were important to her...  

Ramsey opened the letter and read it. Dated five Earth months before, it ran:
My darling Margot: By the time you read this I shall be dead. Ironical, isn't it? Coming so close--with death in the form of an incurable cancer intervening.
As you know, Margot, I always wished for a son but never had one. You'll have to play that role, I'm afraid, as you always have. Here is the information I told you I would write down. Naturally, if you intend to do anything about it, you'll guard it with your life.

Apparently the hyper-space pattern from Irwadi to Earth is the one I was looking for. The proto-men, if I may be bold enough to call them that, first left hyper-space at that point, perhaps a million, perhaps five million, Earth
years ago. I don't have to tell you what this means, my child. I've already indicated it to you previously. It suffices to remind you that, in what science has regarded as the most amazing coincidence in the history of the galaxy, humanoid types sprang up on some three thousand stellar worlds simultaneously between one and five million years ago. I say simultaneously although there is the possibility of a four million year lag: indications are, however, that one date would do quite well for all the worlds.

Proto-man was tremendously ahead of us in certain sciences, naturally. For example, each humanoid type admirably fits the evolutionary pattern on its particular planet. The important point, Margot, is the simultaneity of the events: it means that proto-man left hyper-space, his birth-place, and peopled the man-habitable worlds of the galaxy at a single absolute instance in time. This would clearly be impossible if the thousands of journeys involved any duration. Therefore, it can only be concluded that they were journeys which somehow negated the temporal dimension. In other words, instant travel across the length and breadth of the galaxy!

Whoever re-discovers proto-man's secret, needless to say, will be the most influential, the most powerful, man in the galaxy. Margot, I thought that man would be me. It won't be now.

But it can be you, Margot. It is my dying wish that you continue my work. Let nothing stop you. Nothing. Remember this, though: I cannot tell you what to expect when you reach the original home of proto-man. In all probability the whole race has perished, or we'd have heard of them since. But I can't be sure of that. I can't be sure of anything. Perhaps proto-man, like some deistic god, became disinterested in the Milky Way Galaxy for reasons we'll never understand. Perhaps he still exists, in hyper-space.

Finally, Margot, remember this. If you presented this letter to the evolutionary scientists on any of the worlds, they'd laugh at you. It is as if unbelief of the proto-man legend were ingrained in all the planetary people, perhaps somehow fantastically carried from generation to generation in their genes because proto-man a million years ago decided that each stellar world must work out its own destiny independently of the others and independent of their common heritage. But in my own case, there are apparently two unique factors at work. In the first place, as you know, I deciphered--after discovering it quite by accident--what was probably a proto-man's dying message to his children, left a million years ago in the ruins on Arcturus II. In the second place, isn't it quite possible that my genes have changed, that I have mutated and therefore do not have as an essential part of my make-up the unbelief of the proto-man legend?

Good luck to you, Margot. I hope you're willing to give up your career to carry out your dying father's wish. If you do, and if you succeed, more power will be yours than a human being has ever before had in the galaxy. I won't presume to tell you how to use it.

Oh, yes. One more thing. Since Earth and Alpha Centauri are on a direct line from Irwadi, Centauri will do quite well as your outbound destination if for some reason you can't make Earth. Again, good luck, my child. With all my love, Dad.

Ramsey frowned at the letter. He did not know what to make of it. As far as he knew, there was no such thing as a proto-man myth in wide currency around the galaxy. He had never heard of proto-man. Unless, he thought suddenly, the dying man could have simply meant all the myths of human creation, hypothecating a first man who, somehow, had developed independently of the beasts of the field although he seemed to fit their evolutionary pattern....

But what the devil would hyper-space have to do with such a myth? Proto-man, whatever proto-man was, couldn't have lived in hyper-space. Not in that bleak, ugly, faceless infinity....

Unless, Ramsey thought, more perplexed than ever, it was the very bleak, ugly, faceless infinity which made proto-man leave.

"Breakfast!" the Vegan girl called. Ramsey joined her in the kitchen, and they ate without talking. When they were drinking their coffee, an Earth-style beverage which the Vegan girl admitted liking, the apartment door irised and Margot Dennison came in.

Ramsey, who had replaced the letter where he'd found it, said: "Just what the devil did you think you were doing, locking us in?"

"For your own protection, silly," Margot told him smoothly. "I always lock my door when I go out, so I locked it today. Naturally, we won't have a chance to apply for a new lock. Besides, why arouse suspicion?"

"Where'd you go?"

"I don't see where that's any of your business."

"Believe it or not," Ramsey said caustically, "I've seen a thousand credits before. I've turned down a thousand credits before, in jobs I didn't like. As for being stranded here on Irwadi, it's all the same to me whether I'm on Irwadi or elsewhere."

"What does all that mean, Captain Ramsey?"
"It means keep us informed. It means don't get uppity."

Margot laughed and dropped a vidcast tape on the table in front of Ramsey. He read it and did not look up. There was a description of himself, a description of the Vegan girl, and a wanted bulletin issued on them. For assaulting the Chief of Irwadi Security, the bulletin said. For assaulting a drunken fool, Ramsey thought.

"Well?" Margot asked. This morning she wore a man-tailored jumper which, Ramsey observed, clashed with the Sirian-archaic furniture. She looked cool and completely poised and no less beautiful, if less provocatively dressed, than last night.

Ramsey returned question for question. "What about the ship?"

"In a Spacer Graveyard, of course. There isn't a landing field on the planet we could go to."

"You mean we'll take off from a Graveyard? From a junk-heap of battered old derelict ships?"

"Of course. It has some advantages, believe it or not. We'll work on the ship nights. It needs plenty of work, let me tell you. But then the Graveyard is a kind of parts department, isn't it?"

Ramsey couldn't argue with that.

They spent the next three days sleeping and slowly going stir-crazy. They slipped out each night, though, and walked the two miles to the Spacer Graveyard down near the river. It was on the other side of the river, which meant they had to boat across. Risky, but there was no help for it. Each night they worked on the ship, which Ramsey found to be a fifty-year old Canopusian freighter in even worse condition than Margot had indicated. The night was usually divided into three sections. First, reviewing the work which had been done and planning the evening's activities. Then, looking for the parts they would need in the jungle of interstellar wrecks all about them. Finally, going to work with the parts they had found and with the tools which Ramsey had discovered on the old Canopusian freighter the first night.

* * * * *

As they made their way back across the river the first night, Ramsey paddling slowly, quietly, Margot said:

"Ramsey, I--I think we're being watched."

"I haven't seen or heard a thing. You, Vardin?" Vardin was the Vegan girl's name.

Vardin shook her head.

Ramsey was anxious all at once, though. Things had gone too smoothly. They had not been interfered with at all. Personally, things hadn't gone smoothly with Ramsey, but that was another story. He found himself liking Margot Dennison too much. He found himself trying to hide it because he knew she could read minds. Just how do you hide your thoughts from a mind reader? Ramsey didn't know, but whenever his thoughts drifted in that direction he tried thinking of something else--anything else, except the proto-man letter.

"Yes, that's just what I was thinking," Margot said in the boat. "I can read minds, so I'd know best if we were being watched. To get a clear reading I have to aim my thoughts specifically, but I can pick up free-floating thoughts as a kind of emotional tone rather than words. Does that make sense?"

"If you say so. What else did you read in my mind?"

Margot smiled at him mysteriously and said nothing.

Ramsey felt thoughts of proto-man nibbling at his consciousness. He tried to fight them down purely rationally, and knew he wouldn't succeed. He grabbed Margot and pulled her close to him, seeking her lips with his, letting his thoughts wander into a fantasy of desire.

Margot slapped his face and sat stiffly in her cloak while he paddled to the other side of the river. Vardin sat like a statue. Ramsey had come to a conclusion: he did not like letting Margot know how he felt about her, but it was mostly on a straight physical level and he preferred her discovering it to her learning that he'd read the proto-man letter from her father. In his thoughts, though, he never designated it as the proto-man letter from her father. He designated it as X.

When they reached the bank, Margot said: "I'm sorry for slapping you."

"I'm sorry for making a pass."

"Ramsey, tell me, what is X?"

Ramsey laughed harshly and said nothing. That gave Margot something to think about. Maybe it would keep her thoughts out of his mind, keep her from reading...

X marks the spot, thought Ramsey. XXX marks the spot-spot-spot. X is a spot in a pot or a lot of rot....

"Oh, stop it!" Margot cried irritably. "You're thinking nonsense."

"Then get the heck out of my mind," Ramsey told her.

Vardin walked on without speaking. If she had any inkling of what they were talking about, she never mentioned it.

Margot said: "I still get the impression."

"What impression?"
"That we're being followed. That we're being watched. Every step of the way."

Wind and cold and darkness. The hairs on the back of Ramsey's neck prickled. They walked on, bent against the wind.

* * * * *

Security Officer Second Class Ramar Chind reported to his Chief in the Hall of Retribution the following morning. Chind, a career man with the Irwadi Security Forces, did not like his new boss. Garr Symm was no career man. He knew nothing of police procedure. It was even rumored--probably based upon solid fact--that Garr Symm liked his brandy excessively and often found himself under its influence. Worst of all--after all, a man could understand a desire for drink, even if, sometimes, it interfered with work--worst of all, Garr Symm was a scientist, a dome-top in the Irwadi vernacular. And hard-headed Ramar Chind lost no love on dome-tops.

He saluted crisply and said: "You wanted to see me, sir?"

* * * * *

Garr Symm leaned forward over his desk, making a tent of his scaly green fingers and peering over it. He said three words. He said: "The Earthgirl Dennison."

"The Spacer Graveyard," Ramar Chind said promptly. That was an easy one. His agents had been following the Dennison girl, at Garr Symm's orders. Ramar Chind did not know why.

"And?" Garr Symm asked.

"The Earthman Ramsey, the Vegan Vardin, both are with her. We can close in and arrest the lot, sir, any time you wish."

"Fool," Garr Symm said softly, without malice. "That is the last thing I want. Don't you understand that? No, I guess you don't."

"Yes, sir."

"Their ship?"

"Every morning after they leave we go over it. Still two or three nights away from completion, sir. Also--"

Ramar Chind smiled.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Two or three nights away from completion, except for one thing. They'll need a fuel supply. Two U-235 capsules rigged for slow implosion, sir. The hopper of their ship is empty."

"Is there such a fuel supply in the Graveyard?"

"No, sir."

"But could there be?"

"Usually, no. Naturally, the junkers drain out spaceship hoppers before scrapping them. U-235 in any form brings--"

"I know the value of U-235. Proceed."

"Well, there could be. If they were lucky enough to find such a fuel supply in one of the wrecks in the Graveyard, they wouldn't be suspicious. Naturally, we won't put one there."

"But you're wrong, my dear Ramar Chind. You'll load the hopper of one of those wrecks with enough U-235 for their purposes, and you'll do it today."

"But sir--"

"We're going to follow them, Chind. You and I. We want them to escape. If they don't escape, how can we follow them?"

Ramar Chind shrugged resignedly and lisped: "How much fuel will they need for their purposes, sir, whatever their purposes are?" Naturally, his lisping sounded perfectly normal to Garr Symm, who also spoke in the sibilantless Irwadi manner.

"You'd really like to know, wouldn't you?" Garr Symm said.

"Yes, sir. To put me in a position in which I could better do my--"

"To satisfy your curiosity, you mean!"

"But sir--"

"I am a scientist, Chind."

"Yes, sir."

* * * * *

"Didn't it strike you as odd that a scientist should be elevated to the top post in your department?"

"Of course, sir. I didn't question it, though."

"As you know, Chind, when it was decided to planetarize Irwadi as a first step toward driving away the outworlders, the quarters of every outworlder on Irwadi were thoroughly searched."

"I participated in the--uh, program, sir."
"Good. Then I needn't tell you. Something was found in Margot Dennison's apartment. Something of immense importance. Something so important that, if used properly, it can assure Irwadi the dominant place in the galaxy for all time to come."

"But I thought Irwadi craved isolation--"

"Isolation, Chind? To be sure, if intercourse with the other galactic powers saw us at the bottom of the heap. But at the top--who would crave isolation at the top?"

"I see, sir. And the something that was found needed a scientist?"

"Very perceptive of you, Chind. Precisely. It was a letter. We copied it. Of course, Margot Dennison knows more than what is in the letter; the letter alludes to previous information. We need Dennison and Ramsey. We have to let them go ahead with their plans. Then we will follow them, Chind. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're a good policeman, Chind. The best we have, I understand. You'll be going with me--on the most important assignment you or any Irwadian ever had."

"I am grateful, sir, that you consider me--"

"Now, see about that U-235 slow-implosion capsule."

"At once, sir."

Saluting smartly, Ramar Chind left Garr Symm's office. Symm smiled and sat perfectly still for some minutes. For Irwadi, yes, he was thinking. Certainly for Irwadi. For Irwadi absolutely. To make Irwadi the most important planet in the galaxy. But important planets--in the way that Irwadi would be important--couldn't maintain the status quo. For example, Irwadi's form of government might have to be changed. At present, an autocratic bureaucracy with no one man at the top. Ultimately, after the rediscovery of proto-man's secret--rule by one man.

Garr Symm, absolute dictator of the galaxy, if he played his hand right.

Garr Symm sat there for a long time, dreaming of power as no man before him on any world had ever dreamed of power....

* * * * *

Vardin rushed into the airlock of the Canopusian freighter in a state of excitement. At last they had given her something to do, and she had been successful at the outset. Specifically, Ramsey and the beautiful woman had given her a scintillation-counter and told her to prowl among the wrecks with it while they worked on the control board of the freighter, which the beautiful woman had named Enterprise.

"I found it!" Vardin cried. "I found it!"

She led a sceptical Margot Dennison outside while Ramsey continued working on the Enterprise. The two girls walked swiftly through the darkness between the wrecks. By this time they knew every foot of the Graveyard.

"There," Vardin said. "You see?"

The scintillation counter was clicking and blinking. Margot smiled and went to work with a portable mechanical arm and a leaded bottle. In ten minutes, she had the slow-implosion capsule out of the hopper of a battered old Aldebaranese cargo ship.

"I never saw one of those mechanical arms working before," Vardin said.

Margot smiled. She was delighted with the timid Vegan girl, with the cold night, with the way the wind blew across the Graveyard, with everything. They had their fuel. Tomorrow night the Enterprise would be ready for its dash into hyper-space. In thirty-six hours she might have her hands on the most valuable find in the history of mankind....

When they returned to the Enterprise, she let Ramsey kiss her and tried to slip the telepathic tentacles of her mind behind his guard--

Lewd libidinous fantasies, X stands for nothing for nothing for nothing, XXX--she got nowhere.

What was X? What was Ramsey's secret? Margot did not know, and wondered if she would ever find out.

She smiled, reading Vardin's mind. For Vardin was thinking: it must be so wonderful to have beauty such as she has, to melt the wills of strong handsome men such as Ramsey. It must be truly wonderful.

For the first twenty-eight years of her life, Margot Dennison would have agreed, would have delighted in her own beauty. She still did, to a point. But beyond that point, she could dream only of proto-man and his secret.

Beauty or power?

She had beauty.

She wanted power.

* * * * *

In the early hours of the following morning, behind the cover of what appeared to be a dense early morning fog but what actually was an artificially produced fog, a team of Irwadi technicians swarmed all over a battered Procyonian cruiser of three thousand tons. By mid-morning, working swiftly and with all the tools and spare parts
they would need, they made the ship, called Dog Star, space-worthy.

Later that day, but still two hours before nightfall, Ramar Chind arrived with a small crew of three Security Police. He had selected his men carefully: they knew how to handle a spaceship, they knew how to fight, they were quite ruthless. He thought Garr Symm would be pleased.

Symm did not arrive until just before nightfall. He was very agitated when he came. Ramar Chind, too, was eager. What would happen within the next several hours, he realized, might be beyond his ken, but he still recognized its importance. And, being an opportunist, he would pounce on whatever he found of value to himself. . . .

Several hours after the setting of the Irwadi primary had ushered in the cold night, Margot Dennison, Ramsey and Vardin arrived at the Graveyard and made their way at once to the Enterprise. They went inside swiftly and in a very few minutes prepared the thousand-tonner for blastoff. Ramsey's mouth was dry. He could barely keep the thoughts of proto-man from his mind. If Margot read them. . . .

"Centauri here we come," he said, just to talk.
"Centauri," said Margot.

But of course, she had another destination in mind.

Several hundred yards across the Graveyard, watching, waiting, the occupants of Dog Star were armed to the teeth.

Ramsey sat at the controls. Vardin stood behind him nervously. The space trip from Vega to Irwadi was probably the only one she had ever taken. Margot sat, quite relaxed, in the co-pilot's chair.

"I still can't believe we're not going to feel anything," Vardin said in her soft, shy voice.
"Haven't you ever been through hyper-space before?" Margot asked the Vegan girl.
"Just once."

"In normal space," Ramsey explained, "we feel acceleration and deceleration because the increase or decrease in velocity is experienced at different micro-instants by all the cells of our body. In hyper-space the velocity is felt simultaneously in all parts of the ship, including all parts of us. We become weightless, of course, but the change is instant and we feel no pressure, no pain."

Ramsey was waiting until 0134:57 on the ship chronometer. At that precise instant in time, and at that instant only, blastoff would place them on the proper hyper-space orbit. And, before they could feel the mounting pressure of blastoff, the timelessness of hyper-space would intervene.

"0130:15," Margot read the chronometer for Ramsey. "It won't be long now. 30:20--"
"All right," Ramsey said suddenly. "All right. I can read the chronometer."
"Why, Ramsey! I do believe you're nervous."
"Anxious, Margot. A hyper-pilot is always anxious just before crossover. You've got to be, because the slightest miscalculation can send you fifty thousand light years off course."
"So? All you'd have to do is re-enter hyper-space and go back."

Ramsey shook his head. "Hyper-space can only be entered from certain points in space. We've never been able to figure out why."
"What certain points?"

Ramsey looked at her steadily. "Points which vary with the orbits of the three thousand humanoid worlds, Margot," he said slowly. He watched her for a reaction, knowing that strange fact about hyper-space--perfectly true and never understood--dovetailed with her father's letter about proto-man, an unknown pre-human ancestor of all the humanoid races in the galaxy, who had discovered hyper-space, bred variations to colonize all the inhabitable worlds, found or created the three thousand crossover points in space, and used them.

Margot showed no response, but then, Ramsey told himself, she was a tri-di actress. She could feign an emotion--or hide one. She merely asked: "Is it true that there's no such thing as time in hyper-space?"
"That's right. That's why you can travel scores or hundreds or thousands of light years through hyper-space in hours. Hyper-space is a continuum of only three dimensions. There is no fourth dimension, no dimension of duration."

"Then why aren't trips through hyper-space instantaneous? They take several hours, don't they?"
"Sure, but the way scientists have it figured, that's subjective time. No objective time passes at all. It can't. There isn't any--in hyper-space."
"Then you mean--"

Ramsey shook his head. "0134:02," he said. "It's almost time."

The seconds ticked away. Even Margot did not seem relaxed now. She stared nervously at the chronometer, or watched Ramsey's lips as he silently read away the seconds. A place where time did not exist, an under-stratum of extension sans duration. An idea suddenly entered her mind, and she was afraid.
If proto-man had colonized the galactic worlds between one and four or five million years ago, but if time did not exist for proto-man, then wasn't the super-race which had engendered all mankind still waiting in its timeless home, waiting perhaps grimly amused to see which of their progeny first discovered their secret? Or must proto-man, like humans everywhere, fall victim to subjective time if objective time did not matter for him?

Ramsey was saying softly: "Fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty-six ... blastoff!"

His hand slammed down on the activating key.

An instant later, having felt no sensation of acceleration, they were floating weightlessly in the cabin of the little Enterprise.

"The qualities of radar," Garr Symm said, "exist in their totality in a universe of extension. Time, actually is a drawback to radar, necessitating a duration-lag between sending and receiving. Therefore, Ramar Chind, radar behaves perfectly in hyper-space, as you see."

"Yes," Ramar Chind said, floating near the radar screen aboard the Dog Star. At its precise center was a bright little pip of light.

The Enterprise...  
"But don't we do anything except follow them?" Ramar Chind said after a long silence.

Garr Symm smiled. "Does it really matter? You see, Chind, time actually stands still for us here. Duration is purely subjective, so what's your hurry?"

Ramar Chind licked his lips nervously and stared fascinated at the little pip of bright light.

Which suddenly dipped and swung erratically.

"What is it?" Margot asked. "What's the matter?"

"Take it easy," Ramsey told her.

"But the ship's swooping. I can feel it. I thought you weren't supposed to feel movement in hyper-space!"

"Relax, will you? There are eddies in hyper-space, that's all. If you want an analogy in terms of our own universe, think of shoals in an ocean--unmarked by buoys or lights."

"You mean they have to be avoided?"

"Yes."

"But this particular shoal--it's midway between Irwadi and Earth?"

"There isn't any 'midway,' Margot. That's the paradox of hyper-space."

"I--I don't understand."

"Look. In the normal universe, extension is measured by time. That is, it takes a certain amount of time to get from point A to point B. Conversely, time is measured by extension in space. On Earth, a day of time passes when Earth moves through space on an arc one three-hundred-sixty-fifth of its orbit around the sun in length. Since there isn't any time to measure extension with in hyper-space, since time doesn't exist here, you can't speak of midpoints."

"But this--shoal. It's always encountered in hyper-space between Earth and Irwadi?"

Ramsey nodded. "Yes, that is right."

Margot smiled.

The smile suddenly froze on her face.

The Enterprise lurched as if an unseen giant hand had slapped it.

At that moment Ramsey leaned forward over the controls, battling to bring the Enterprise back on course.

And let down his mental guard.

... precise place in hyper-space her father must have meant ... home of proto-man ... thinks I'm going to stop there, she's crazy ... heck, I'm no mystic, but there are things not meant to be meddled with ...

The ship swooped again. Ramsey went forward against the control panel head-first and fell dazed from the pilot chair. His head whirled, his arms and legs were suddenly weak and rubbery. He tried to stand up and make his way back to the controls again, but collapsed and went down to his knees. He crouched there, trying to shake the fog from his brain.

With a cry of triumph, Margot Dennison leaped at him and bore him down to the floor with her weight. He was still too dazed from the blow on his head to offer any resistance when her strong hands tugged at his belt and withdrew the m.g. gun. She got up with it, backing away from him quickly toward the rear bulkhead as the ship seemed to go into a smooth glide which could be felt within it. Vardin stood alongside Ramsey, a hand to her mouth in horror. Ramsey got up slowly.

"Stay where you are!" Margot cried, pointing the m.g. gun at him. "I'll kill you if I have to. I'll kill you, Ramsey, I mean it."

"I'll kill you if I have to. I'll kill you, Ramsey, I mean it."
Ramsey did not move.

"So you knew about my father," Margot challenged him.
"Yeah. So what?"
"And this shoal in hyper-space is a world, isn't it?"
Ramsey nodded. "I think so."
"O.K. Sit down at the controls, Ramsey. That's right. Don't try anything."
Ramsey was seated in the pilot chair again. His head was still whirling but his strength had returned. He wondered if he could chance rushing her but told himself she meant what she said. She would kill him in cold blood if she had to.
"Bring the Enterprise down on that world, Ramsey."
He sat there and stubbornly shook his head. "Margot, you'll be meddling with a power beyond human understanding."
"Rubbish! You read my father's letter, didn't you? That fear's been implanted in your genes. It's part of the heredity of our people. It's rubbish. Bring the ship down."
Still Ramsey did not move. Vardin looked from him to Margot Dennison and back again with horror in her eyes.
"I'll count three," Margot said. "Then I'll shoot the Vegan girl. Do you understand?"
Ramsey's face went white.
"One," Margot said.
Vardin stared at him beseechingly.
Ramsey said: "All right, Margot. All right."
Five minutes later, subjective time, the Enterprise landed with a lurch.
That they had reached a world in hyper-space there could be no doubt. But outside the portholes of the little freighter was only the murky grayness of the timeless hyper-space continuum.

"They've gone down, sir!" Ramar Chind cried.
Garr Symm nodded. For the first time he was really nervous. He wondered about the Dennison letter. Could his fear be attributed to ancestral memory, as Dennison had indicated? Was it really baseless--this crawling, cold-fingered hand of fear on his spine?
There was no physical barrier. The Enterprise had established that fact. Then was there a barrier which Garr Symm, along with all humanoids, had somehow inherited?
A barrier of stark terror, subjective and unfounded on fact?
And beyond it--what?
Power to chain the universe....
Think, Garr Symm told himself. You've got to be rational. You're a scientist. You've been trained as a scientist. This is their barrier, erected against you, against all humanoids, a million years ago. It isn't real. It's all in your mind.
"Do you want me to follow them down?" Ramar Chind asked.
Garr Symm envied the policeman. Naturally, Ramar Chind did not share his terror. You didn't know the terror until you learned about proto-man; then the response seemed to be triggered in your brain, as if it had been passed to you through the genes of your ancestors, waiting a million years for release....
Fear, a guardian.
Power--
Teleportation or its equivalent.
Gone the subjective passage of hours in hyper-space.
Earned--if you were strong enough or brave enough to earn it--the ability to travel instantly from one humanoid world to another. Instantly. Perhaps from any one point on any humanoid world to any one point, precise, specific, exact, on another world.
To plunder.
Or assassinate.
Or control the lives of men, everywhere.
Sans ship.
Sans fear.
Sans the possibility of being caught or stopped.
Sweating, Garr Symm said: "Bring the Dog Star down after them, Ramar Chind."
Ramsey smiled without humor. "What now, little lady?" he said mockingly.  
"Shut up. Oh, shut up!"
"What are you going to do now?"
"I told you to shut up. I have to think."
"I didn't know a gorgeous tri-di actress ever had to think."
"Let me see those figures again," Margot said.  
Ramsey handed her the tapes from the Enterprise's environment-checker.  
Temperature: minus two hundred and twenty degrees Fahrenheit.  
Atmosphere: none.  
Gravity: eight-tenths Earth-norm.  
"And we don't have a spacesuit aboard," Ramsey said.  
"But it can't be. It can't. This is the home of proto-man. I know it is. But if I went out there I'd perish from cold in seconds and lack of air in minutes."
"That's right," Ramsey said almost cheerfully. "So do I take the ship back up?"
"I hate you, Jason Ramsey. Oh, I hate you!" Margot cried. Then suddenly: "Wait! Wait a minute! What was that you were thinking? Tell me! You must tell me--"
Ramsey shook his head and tried to force the thoughts from his mind with doggerel. Ben Adam, he thought.  
Abou Ben Adam, Humpty Dumpty, hurry, hurry, hurry, the only two headed get yours here the sum of the square of the sides is equal to the square of the hyper-space, no, mustn't think that mimsy were the borogroves and the momraths now what the heck did the momraths do anyhow absolute zero is the temperature at which all molecular activity....  
"What were you thinking, Ramsey?"
His mind was a labyrinth. There were thousands of discrete thoughts, of course. Millions of them, collected over a lifetime. But all at once he did not know his way through that labyrinth and his thoughts kept whirling back to the one Margot Dennison wanted as if, somehow, she could pluck it from his mind.  
She stood before him, her brow furrowed, sweat beading her pretty face.  
And she was winning, forcing the thought to take shape in Ramsey's mind--  
But if I went out there I'd perish from cold in seconds and lack of air in minutes.  
Cold, came the known and unbidden thoughts to Ramsey's struggling mind. And lack of air. Attributes of extension, of space, but measured by duration, by time. And since time does not exist in hyper-space, the vacuum out there and the terrible, killing cold, could have no effect on you. You could go out there perfectly protected from the lethal environment by the absence of the time dimension.  
Margot smiled at him. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you, Ramsey."
He was about to speak, but she added: "And don't give me that stuff about a power we shouldn't tamper with. I'm going out there. Now."
Ramsey nodded slowly. "I won't stop you."
"But just so you don't get any ideas of stranding me here--Vardin. Vardin's going with me."
The Vegan girl looked at Ramsey mutely.  
Ramsey said: "What makes you think I'll let you take her?"
Margot smiled again. "The m.g. gun makes me think so."
"The heck of it is, you're not really bad, Margot. This thing's got you, is all. You're not essentially evil."
"Thank you for the thrilling compliment. I'm delighted," Margot said sarcastically.  
"Vardin stays with me."
Margot reminded him of the lethal m.g. gun by showing it to him, muzzle-first.  
He laughed in her face. "Go ahead and shoot."
She stared at him.  
"There isn't a lethal weapon'd do you any good here in a timeless continuum. Take an m.g. gun. It induces an artificial breakdown of radioactive fuel in its chamber, firing an instantly lethal dose of radiation. But in order for radioactive breakdown to occur, time must pass. Even if it's only milliseconds, as in the case of an m.g. gun. There aren't any millisecond on this world, Margot. There isn't any time. So go ahead and pull the trigger."
Margot frowned and pointed the gun to one side and fired.  
Nothing happened. Margot almost looked as if her hard shell had been sundered by the impotence of the m.g. gun. She pouted. Her eyes gleamed moistly.  
Then Ramsey said: "O.K. Let's go."
"What--what do you mean?"

"Out there. All of us."

"But I thought you said--"

"Sure, I'm scared stiff. A normal man would be. It's in our genes, according to your father. But I'm also a man. What the devil d'you think it was first got man out of his cave and started along the road to civilization and the stars? It was curiosity. Fear restraining him, and curiosity egging him on. Which do you think won in the end?"

"Oh, Ramsey, I could kiss you!"

"Go right ahead," Ramsey said, and she did.

They opened the airlock. They went outside smiling.

But Vardin, who went with them, wasn't smiling. There was sadness instead.

* * * * *

In cumbersome spacesuits, the five Irwadians made their way from the Dog Star to the Enterprise. Ramar Chind and his three policemen carried m.g. guns; Garr Symm was unarmed. Chind used a whorl-neutralizer to force the pattern of the lock on the outer door of the Enterprise's airlock. Then the five of them plunged inside the ship.

The inner door was not closed.

The Enterprise was empty.

Garr Symm looked doubtfully at the gray murkiness behind them. Although the Dog Star stood out there less than a quarter of a mile away, they couldn't see it through the murk.

"Where did they go?" Ramar Chind asked.

Symm waved vaguely behind them.

Chind and his men turned around.

Gritting his teeth against the fear which welled up like nausea from the pit of his stomach, Garr Symm went with them.

At that moment they all heard the music.

"You hear it?" Ramsey asked softly. His voice did not carry on the airless world, of course. But he spoke, and the words were understood, not merely by Margot, who could read his mind, but by Vardin as well.

"Music," said Margot. "Isn't it--beautiful?"

* * * * *

Ramsey nodded slowly. He could barely see Margot, although he held her hand. He could barely see Vardin although they stood hand in hand too. The music was un-Earthly, incapable of repetition, indescribably the loveliest sound he had ever heard. He wanted to sink down into the obscuring gray murk and weep and listen to the haunting, sad, lovely strains of sound forever.

"What can it possibly be?" Margot asked.

Surprisingly, it was Vardin who answered. "Music of the Spheres," she said. "It's a legend on Vega III, my world."

"And on Earth," Ramsey said.

Vardin told them: "On all worlds. And, like all such legends, it has a basis in reality. This is the basis."

That didn't sound like timid little Vardin at all. Ramsey listened in amazement. He thought he heard Vardin laugh.

Music. But didn't the notes need the medium of time in which to be heard? How could they hear music here at all? Or were they hearing it? Perhaps it merely impinged on their minds, their souls, just as they were able to hear one another's thoughts as words....

They'd never understand fully, Ramsey knew suddenly. Perhaps they could grasp a little of the nature of this place, a shadow here, the half-suggestion of the substance of reality there, a stillborn thought here, a note of celestial music there, the timeless legacy of proto-man, whatever proto-man was....

"The fog is lifting!" Vardin cried.

The fog was not lifting.

Then it was.

Ramsey would never forget that. Vardin had spoken while the dense gray murk enveloped them completely. Then it began to grow tenuous.

As if Vardin's words had made it so. Little Vardin, shy, frightened Vardin, suddenly, inexplicably, the strongest, surest one among them....

The sky, white and dazzling, glistened. The gray murk glistened too, a hundred yards off in all directions, like a wall of polished glass surrounding them.

In the very middle of the bell-jar of visibility granted them all at once, stood a black rectangular object.

"The teleporter!" Margot cried. "The matter-transmitter! I know it is. I know it is!"
Ramsey stood waiting breathlessly.  
No, he realized abruptly, not breathlessly. You couldn't say breathlessly.  
For Ramsey had not breathed, not once, since they left the Enterprise.  
You didn't breathe on a timeless world. You merely--somehow--existed.  
"It's opening!" Margot cried.  
The black rectangle, ominously coffin-shaped, was indeed opening.  
"The matter transmitter," Margot said a second time. "The secret of proto-man, of our ancestors who colonized all the worlds of space with it, instantly, at the same cosmic moment. Think of what it means, Ramsey, can you? Instantaneous travel, anywhere, without the need for energy since energy cannot be used here, without the passage of time since time does not exist here." She stood transfixed, looking at the black box. The lid had lifted at right angles to the rest of the box.  
* * * * *  
Margot said, in the whisper of an awed thought: "Who controls it controls the galaxy...."  
And she walked toward the box.  
At that moment Ramsey had a vision. He saw--or thought he saw--Margot Dennison in the costume she had worn when they first met. She stood, eyes wide, fearful, expectant, before a chess-board. The pieces seemed to be spaceships. It was a perfectly clear vision, but it was the only such vision Ramsey had ever been vouchsafed in his life. He was no mystic. He did not know what to make of it.  
Playing chess with Margot was--proto-man.  
Ramsey only saw his hand.  
A hand perhaps five million years old.  
He blinked. The vision persisted, superimposed over Margot's figure as she walked toward the box.  
A game, he thought. Because we don't understand it. Not that kind of power. Not the power a matter-transmitter would give. A cosmic game on a chess-board which wasn't quite a chess-board, with a creature who had never lived as we know life and so could never die....  
With the future of the galaxy hanging in the balance. Life or death for man hanging on a slim thread, because man wasn't ready for matter-transmission, couldn't hope to use it wisely, would use it perhaps for war, transmitting lethal weapons, thermonuclear, world-destroying weapons, instantly through space, for delivery anywhere, negating time....  
Death hovered.  
"Wait!" Ramsey called, and ran forward.  
Just then five new figures, space-suited, appeared under the gleaming dome.  
"Stop that woman!" a voice which Ramsey should not have been able to hear but which he somehow heard perfectly cried. "Stop her!"  
M.g. guns were raised, fired.  
Without effect.  
Three of the spacesuited figures ran after Margot as the voice repeated: "Stop her! The box is mine, mine!"  
It was Garr Symm's voice.  
Ramsey did not know if he should stop Margot himself, or fight Symm's men. Although they couldn't use their weapons on this world, they could still hurt--possibly even kill--Margot. Ramsey turned and waited for them.  
The strange, mystic vision was gone. He saw only three space-suited figures, saw Margot walking steadily toward the box. Either she was moving very slowly or the box retreated or it was further away than it had looked at first. For she hadn't reached it yet.  
Ramsey met the space-suited figures head-on.  
There were three of them, but they were awkward in their suits, cumbersome, incapable of quick responses.  
Ramsey hit the first one in the belly and darted back. His fist felt contact with the soft bulk of the insulined suit, then with the harder bulk of the man. He struck again, harder this time.  
* * * * *  
The scaly green face of the Irwadi within the space-suit grimaced with pain. He doubled over and fell, his helmet shattering against the ground at Ramsey's feet.  
Then an incredible thing happened. The Irwadi opened his mouth to scream. His face froze. He lost his air. His face bloated.  
And he died.  
Ramsey couldn't believe his eyes.  
It was not possible to die from lack of air or from cold on a world without the time continuum. Ramsey, Vardin and Margot had proved that by venturing out without protection.
But the Irwadi had died.
Mental suggestion?
Because he thought he would die?
Because that was the only way you could perish on a world lacking in the time dimension--by your own thoughts?
The second space-suited figure closed with Ramsey awkwardly. Ramsey hit him. The man of Irwadi fell, his helmet cracked, he tried to scream--and died.
The third man fled.
Ramsey ran after Margot. "Wait!" he cried. He couldn't talk to her about his fantastic vision. It was personal. She wouldn't understand. Mystic experience always is like that. And yet, with the conviction that only a mystic can have--although he certainly was no mystic--Ramsey knew the galaxy would be in grave trouble if mankind were given the secret of matter-transmission.
A voice said: "You are right."
It was Vardin's voice, and Vardin went on:
"Ramsey, stop her. I can't stop her. It is only granted that I observe--and convince, if I can. I am not a Vegan girl. I am--"
Ramsey said it. "Proto-man!"
"There aren't many of us left. We discovered matter-transmission. We used it once, to people the worlds of the galaxy. It was our final creative effort. We merely observe now, unable to destroy our creation, trying to keep it out of mankind's hands. You see--"
"Then back on Irwadi you knew all along we would come here!"
"I was vouchsafed the vision, yes. Even as you--stop her, Ramsey. You must stop her!"
* * * * *
Ramsey sprinted forward. Margot was nearing the black coffin now.
Ramsey ran at her, and tackled her.
They went down together, the girl fighting like a tigress, tooth and nail, wildly, sobbing, striking out at Ramsey with small impotent fists, until he subdued her. Panting, they glared at each other.
And could not stop Garr Symm from running past them, eyes rapt behind the plastiglass of his helmet, and jumping into the black box.
"To the end of the universe and back!" he cried. "Take me there and back. Instantly. Prove to me that you work! Now...." His voice trailed off. He had addressed the black rectangle almost as if it were something alive.
* * * * *
Ramsey thought he heard a growl from the box. He stood before it, looking in. The hackles rose on his neck.
"You see," Vardin said. "My ancestors and yours discovered the power of a god--and did not understand it. We were incorporeal. We created life--your ancestors. We patterned it to fit the evolution of the three thousand worlds. Human life. Millions of them, colonists for the worlds of normal space. We were tampering in our tragic pride, Ramsey, with forces we would never comprehend.
"We colonized the worlds, deciding that physical existence, along with the mental prowess we had, was the ideal state. A few of us, like myself, or my ancestors if you wish, although the purely mental lives continuously--a few of us stayed behind and saw--the loss of a million years!"
Ramsey's eyes still could not pierce the darkness inside the box.
"What do you mean?" he asked in an awed voice.
"We sent out god-like men. We did not understand our discovery. The god-like men--but look at Garr Symm."
The spacesuited figure got up slowly. It blinked at Ramsey. It growled at Ramsey. It growled. It had a recognizably green, scale-skinned face. But it was not the face of Garr Symm. It was the face of Garr Symm's caveman ancestors, a million years ago....
"This is what happened to my people," Vardin said.
She looked at Ramar Chind and Chind, responding, went to Garr Symm and led him quietly back toward the Dog Star. Chind never said a word. Garr Symm growled.
"Take the Earthgirl and go," Vardin told Ramsey.
"But I--you--aren't you coming?"
"My work is finished," Vardin told him. "For now."
"For now?"
"I am a guardian. When I am needed again--" She shrugged her slim blue shoulders.
"But Margot will never be content now," Ramsey protested. "Not when she's come so close."
"She'll understand. Just as you understand. You'll be good for each other, Ramsey, you and the girl. She's had
only her fierce pride and her dreams of power. She has room for love. She needs love.

"But you--"

"I? I am nothing. I am the end-product of an equation our ancestors found a million years ago. An equation to give them god-like power. Instead it made them savages and I have had to watch their slow climb back to the stars. An equation, Ramsey. Almost an equation of doom. Now go."

Vardin flickered, became insubstantial. Her body seemed to melt into the gray mists.
The gleaming walls were gone. The black box was gone. Vardin was gone.
Ramsey led Margot back to the Enterprise.
Moments later--although the elapsed time was subjective--they blasted off.
Margot opened her eyes. She had been sleeping. She smiled at Ramsey tremulously. "I love you," she said. Her words seemed to surprise her.
"I can't go back to Earth," Ramsey said.
"Who wants to go back to Earth--if you can't?"
They had, Ramsey knew, all of space and the life-span of mortal man to enjoy together.
THE END
THE OBSERVERS
By G. L. VANDENBURG

You can’t be too suspicious when security is at stake. When everybody who is after a key military job wears a
toupee, it is obviously a bald case of espionage.

A job as laboratory technician with the Army Weapons Development Center carried about as much prestige as
a bat boy in a World Series.

George Fisher was a laboratory technician.

He was a shy but likeable fellow, a diligent worker and trustworthy. He didn’t talk. He was rarely talked to. He
had no burning ambition to push himself ahead in the world. Being an assistant to the brains was good enough for
him. He had a commendable talent for minding his own business.

In a security job these qualities counted ahead of scientific knowledge.

One day George Fisher turned up dead. The initial shock and concern experienced by his superiors was soon
overcome by the coroner’s finding. Suicide.

Harry Payne was the Civilian Personnel Director of Fort Dickson. It was his job to find a replacement for
George Fisher.

"Miss Conway!" Harry’s voice lashed into the intercom.

There was an interminable pause. He cursed under his breath.

Then, "Yes, Mr. Payne?"

"Where the hell were you? Never mind. Bring me the file on George Fisher."

"George Fisher?" Miss Conway was in her favorite state of mind ... confusion. "But he’s dead, isn’t he?"

Harry let out a deep anguished groan. "Yes, Miss Conway, he’s dead. That’s why I want his file. That answer
your question?"

"Yes, sir. Be there in a jiffy!"

Harry could tell she was bubbling over with smiles as she spoke. A few more centuries would pass, he thought,
before they manufactured another broad as dumb as Miss Conway.

* * * * *

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked out the window. Across the parade ground he could see the
Army Weapons Development Center. He had no idea what new bomb they might be working on behind those
heavily guarded fences. He didn't care.

He was only concerned with the people who worked there. The rest of Fort Dickson used mostly Civil Service
Personnel. But the barricaded security jungle across the parade grounds was more particular about its hired help. A
person's record had to be spotless almost from the day of his conception ... or a person could not even gain entrance.

Harry had never been inside Weapons Development. He had once been to traffic court as a roaring juvenile
eighteen years before. That was enough to bar him from even visiting. He realized, though, that the army couldn't
afford to take chances.

Hiring new technicians required an arduous screening process. Harry loathed it. He was thankful that the
personnel at Weapons Development were highly paid and usually permanent. He never had to hire more than one
person a year.

Miss Conway swept into the office and handed Harry the folder.

"Thanks," he muttered.

"Don't mention it, boss."

Harry called after her as she went back toward the reception room.

"Stay by your desk, will you? The government may need you."

A muffled giggle was her only response.

Miss Conway was a civil service employee. She had been Harry's secretary for six months. Like most other
civil service personnel, according to Harry's way of thinking she was a tower of inefficiency. His chief annoyance
stemmed from the fact that the army had arbitrarily placed her in his office. He had been given no choice in the
matter. It was one hell of a way to treat a personnel director, he thought.

He sat at his desk gloomily aware of the headaches he'd have to face in his quest for George Fisher's
replacement. He opened the folder and glanced at the vital statistics.

Fisher, George--Age: 40--Weight: 160--Height: 5'9"--Eyes: Green--Hair: None--Complexion: Light--Date of

He turned to a page marked "Qualifications" and started reading. The phrase "Education and experience in nuclear physics required," caught his eye. The requirement was no surprise to him. But whenever he saw it he took a few minutes off to indulge his curiosity. What was the big project at Weapons Development? He'd love to know. He wouldn't find out, of course. And the inability to find out naturally gave his imagination the widest latitude. His most persistent theory involved an atomic powered rocket capable of knocking the Russians' manned satellites out of space. The Russians were still ahead of everyone and their latest satellites were heavily armed. As usual they were lording it over the rest of the world. And the rest of the world had not come up with an effective answer to this challenge.

Harry closed the folder. He glanced at a list of technical schools. He would call each of them and ask them to submit a list of lab technicians. He would also look over the field of technicians still left in private enterprise.

The intercom buzzed.
"What is it, Miss Conway?"
"Miss Ralston is here."
"Who is Miss Ralston?"
"She has an appointment with you."
"An appointment!" Harry was baffled. "Who made it?"
"I did. I guess I forgot to tell you."

Harry closed his eyes and counted to ten. "Thank you, Miss Conway. Will you step into my office for a moment?" He tried to control his mounting anger.

She breezed into the office.
"Now, Miss Conway, will you please tell me who is this Miss Ralston?"
"She operates 'Ralston Personnel Consultants'. I think she wants to talk to you about the replacement for George Fisher. You know, the one who died."
"Yes, yes, I know. And you know, Miss Conway, we don't do business through agencies."
"Oh, Miss Ralston doesn't run an agency. She told me. Her business is much more exclusive than that. She handles very highly specialized people. That's the reason why ..."
"I know. That's why you gave her an appointment with me," said the exasperated personnel director. "Well, you can go right back out and tell her I've canceled the appointment. This is a security job we're filling and ..."

* * * * *

Before Harry could utter another syllable his attention was drawn to the doorway. The view to the outer office was blocked by a bundle of curves. The most alluring female bombshell his eyes had ever beheld put everything important out of his mind.

"I didn't realize you were being so inconvenienced, Mr. Payne. I'm terribly sorry." Her eyes drooped. "I can take my business elsewhere." Miss Ralston's voice was just above a half whisper. The words came out warm and intoxicating.

"No, wait! Wait a minute, Miss Ralston." Harry was out of his chair and at the door. He took her arm. "Who said anything about inconvenience? Come in. Come in. That'll be all, Miss Conway. Thanks."

The secretary giggled and left. Miss Ralston sat down and lit a cigarette. Harry noticed she was wearing a beige knit suit with a neckline that spoke volumes. Every curve was in the right place. Every movement had another movement all its own.

Harry knew she was bound to talk business and he knew there wasn't much he could do for her in that direction. But at thirty-five, and eligible, he just couldn't let this woman leave his office. Harry Payne was a sucker for a gorgeous face. He knew it and he knew the gorgeous face knew it.

"Tell me, Miss Ralston, when did my secretary arrange this appointment for you?"
"I called yesterday."

Harry arched his eyebrows and smiled. "Yesterday? What prompted you to call me?"
"You're looking for a laboratory technician, aren't you?"
"What gave you that idea?" he asked, not caring in the slightest what gave it to her.
"I make it my business to comb the papers every day, Mr. Payne. I came across the news of George Fisher's suicide and called you. Simple as that."
"You don't waste any time."
She smiled and pursed her lips. "Do you?"
"I try not to."
"I have seven clients who would qualify for the job. I'd appreciate it if you'd see them."
"Well, as a matter of fact, Miss Ralston ..."
She leaned forward with an inquisitive "Yes?"
Harry cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact I'm not supposed to do business with civilian agencies."
"Mr. Payne," she smiled demurely, "do I look like an agency? Or do I look like a Personnel Consultant?"

Now there was an opening, Harry thought, but it might be best to avoid it. "You're working to get someone a job. It amounts to the same thing."
"I see. Then how do you go about hiring your new personnel?"
"I do the soliciting myself. Sorry, Miss Ralston, but I don't make the rules and regulations."
But the lady was undeterred. She crossed her legs and sank further into the easy chair. Her eyes sparkled at
Harry.
"These clients of mine are all top men, Mr. Payne. Why couldn't I just leave you their names? You can still do the soliciting. I'd be happy to forego my regular commission on this job. Call it the value of prestige."
Harry recognized another opening and this time plunged in. "Suppose we talk it over later. There's a place at Fourth Avenue and Woodward called 'Maria's.' Best Italian food in captivity. I'm through at five. What about you?"
She didn't have to say anything. Her eyes told him he would be having an Italian dinner that night. And not alone. She rose and walked in front of his desk.
"I'm so glad we have something in common, Mr. Payne. I can't think well on an empty stomach either."
After walking her to the outer office he came back to his desk. He took a deep breath and loosened his tie. Dreams like Miss Ralston didn't materialize every day. For a first meeting he figured he hadn't fared too badly at all. And if this first date went well he was sure he'd be seeing a lot of this girl.
It did not escape Harry's mind that here was a girl who was in the habit of getting what she wanted. But why not? Her powers of persuasion were Grade-A. They were so good they presented him with one big problem. He had regulations. Army regulations. He couldn't violate them. Miss Ralston, it was obvious, was going to meet him solely for the purpose of getting a client a job. Would he be able to see her again after she knew he had no intention of hiring that client?

The following morning Harry entered the office to find his secretary unusually busy. She was pecking away furiously at the typewriter.
He handed her a sheet of paper and said, "Miss Conway, copy these names and addresses and when they ..."
"When they come in you'll see them at half-hour intervals." She smiled benignly. "Miss Ralston just called and told me. Pretty smart chick, huh, boss?"
Harry did a slow burn and ambled into his office. Miss Conway was right, of course, and that's what annoyed him. It had been quite a night. He dined and dined her. They did all the bright spots. And, wonder of wonders, on the first date they wound up at Paula Ralston's apartment. She was a captivating hostess, an exquisite dancer and something of a sorceress. After one kiss, an unforgettable one, Harry had agreed to interview her seven clients. But all this was last night, Harry reminded himself. Today was a different matter. He was in the sanctity of his office now and capable of clearer thinking. Paula Ralston had accomplished the first phase of her mission. The next move was his. Seeing the clients, he rationalized, was not violating the regulations. And for the moment it satisfied her.
She certainly was a determined girl. Anyone would think, watching her operate, that a lab technician was a job of world-shaking importance. What the hell, he shrugged, if the girl didn't look out for her own interests, she wouldn't have a successful business. There's only one way to keep clients happy and that's to keep them busy.
Besides, her maneuvering wasn't going to work anyway. He just couldn't hire any of them. His problem now was to stall her for a couple of days so he could keep seeing her. In the end he might possibly tell her the army had refused to accept any of them.
He glanced out the window and saw the Weapons Development Center across the parade ground. Business appeared to be going on as usual. Routine. Quiet. Cautious. High time I start thinking seriously about that replacement, he thought.
There was a knock at the door.
"Come in."
Miss Conway bounced in. "They've started to arrive. The first one is a Mister Thompson."
"Okay, let's get started. Send him in."
Thompson was a small, roundish man in his mid-forties. He remained quite at ease during the interview. Harry began the session in the usual dull manner, formulating his questions from the several sheets of information Mr. Thompson had brought with him.
It wasn't long before Harry detected something unusual about the man. But he couldn't determine what it was. He became more alert, more interested as the interview progressed.

"Where are you from originally, Mr. Thompson?"
"Chicago."
"Oh, yes." He glanced at the written information. "I see you went to the University."
"Yes, sir. My practical experience is documented on the second sheet."

What was it about this guy? He was overly polite but that could hardly be considered strange. His answers were brief, to the point, even curt. That was just a personality trait, Harry supposed. Couldn't condemn a man for that.

"How long did you live in Chicago?"
"Twenty-one years, sir."
"Are you married?"
"No, sir."

He had noted before that Mr. Thompson had a distracting habit of patting his hair. Now he knew why. He was wearing a toupee. Harry wondered if the poor guy was sensitive about it. If he was that conscious of it, it might account for his strange attitude.

"Thank you for coming in, Mr. Thompson. I'll submit your papers to Colonel Waters. If he has any further interest in you, don't be surprised if you receive a visit from a couple of Intelligence agents. That's routine for this job. I just tell you in advance so you won't worry."

"I understand," he said, rising and checking his toupee once more. "Many thanks to you, sir." He shook Harry's hand and left the room.

Harry glanced at the papers again. Mr. Thompson's background was impressive indeed. There didn't seem to be much question as to his ability. But what a queer duck he was!

The second applicant was a short, wiry man named Chase. Like his predecessor, he was brief and to the point with his answers. He let his qualification papers speak for themselves. He was formal and polite.

Midway through the interview Harry noticed that he too was wearing a toupee. If that wasn't the damnedest coincidence! Fortunately Mr. Chase didn't have the annoying habit of patting his head every thirty seconds. Harry guessed he either had a more expensive one or was just endowed with more confidence that it would not slip off.

The interview over, Mr. Chase offered his thanks and strolled out.

Harry had a few moments to himself before Paula's third client arrived. He thought about the first two men. Funny thing about toupees ... even the most expensive ones could always be detected. He couldn't quite understand why the two men wore them. They were often used by playboys, actors, self-styled over-age Romeos, people whose niche in society depends upon their looks. But not scientists or technicians. In fact Harry couldn't remember ever having known one such person who shunned his baldness in this manner. That didn't mean they had no right. But it did seem peculiar as hell.

* * * * *

By the time the third interview was over Harry Payne's curiosity was ablaze. Applicant number three, Mr. Boles, was not only wearing a toupee but had gone one step further. Just north of his mouth there was a mustache! A good-looking mustache, well groomed and shaped, but phoney as a wax banana.

For a moment he thought Paula Ralston might be perpetrating a joke of elaborate proportions. He rejected the idea as fast as it came to him. He didn't know the girl very well yet, but he knew her well enough to know she was strictly business. She wanted one of these men to get that job.

He flipped the intercom button for Miss Conway. She might be able to tell him ... indirectly.

"You wanted me, Mr. Payne?"
"Yes, Miss Conway. The three men who've already been in here ... have you noticed anything strange about them?"

Her eyebrows merged and spelled perplexity. She pursed her lips and gave the matter the gravest consideration. Then she concluded, "Yes, something very strange."

Harry was hopeful. "What was it?"
"None of them did very much talking. Strictly anti-social types."

Harry groaned, realizing he should have known better. "Thank you, Miss Conway. That's all."
"The fourth guy is waiting outside."
"Let him sit for a couple of minutes, then send him in."

He decided to put the whole matter out of his mind and get the interviews over as fast as possible. There were other, more serious duties to attend to. The toupee episode was probably nothing more than a crazy coincidence anyway. Strictly an item for Believe-It-Or-Not.

* * * * *
By two o'clock that afternoon the four remaining candidates had come and gone. And Harry Payne sat at his
desk in the immediate aftermath questioning his sanity. All seven men wore toupees! It was incredible but true. And
now the matter was one of deep and abiding concern to him. There was nothing funny about it. There was a touch of
the macabre in it that rendered his flesh cold and weak.

He lit a cigarette and tried to pull his thoughts together. Seven men applying for the same job; seven men with
one thing in common; seven men as bald as Doctor Cyclops. Harry had to abandon the notion that sheer coincidence
brought these men together. That was too fantastic. They were brought together by design.

Their backgrounds varied in that they had all worked and come from different parts of the country. But those
facts were only on paper. It was an odds-on bet they all knew each other. There was even something about the order
in which they arrived at the office that indicated a pattern or an over-all plan. Numbers three, five and six had worn
false mustaches.

If it was true the seven men were well acquainted then Paula Ralston could undoubtedly give him some
answers. Harry had another dinner engagement with her at five o'clock. But this date, he told himself, would be
different. He was going to be all business until he learned exactly what she was involved in.

He picked up the phone, got an outside line and dialed. Frank Barnes was a private detective. A good one.
Harry was sure he could rely on him for a small favor.

A subdued, resonant voice answered on the other end.
"Frank, Harry Payne here."
"Harry! Where you been hiding?"
"I need a favor."
"Only time you ever call me, you ingrate."
"There's a dame called Paula Ralston. Runs a business called Ralston Personnel Consultants. How soon can you
get anything on her?"
"How soon do you need it?"
"Today, if possible. You can call me at home. Any hour."

After promising Frank to meet him for lunch one day Harry sank into an easy chair and tried to shake the
unnerving effect the seven men had had on him.

Maybe he shouldn't have called Frank. This might be something he should have informed the army about. No.
They'd want to know what business he had seeing the seven men in the first place. He didn't have much of an answer
for that one.

* * * * *

Driving along Woodward Street toward Fourth Avenue, Harry was beset with one nagging question. Why had
Paula Ralston never brought any of her clients to see him before? He was the dispenser of over a hundred good jobs
that offered high salaries. The answer was just as persistent as the question. Lab Technician was the only security
job he handled. She was determined that one of her men get that job at any cost.

It wasn't a very pleasant thought. Harry didn't want to believe it. He didn't want to believe that Paula Ralston
was going to mean trouble for him. And yet he knew that's exactly what she meant.

* * * * *

She was waiting for him at Maria's. She kissed him as he slipped into the booth beside her. Through four drinks
and a six-course dinner he watched her smile. That smile could melt down the door on a bank vault. He noticed how
she laughed at all of his wisecracks. When it was her turn to talk she talked about him. She offered a toast to their
closer friendship, with special emphasis on the word "closer."

But she did not mention the seven men. That was the smart approach, Harry ventured. She'd save that until she
got home and slipped into something more comfortable.

* * * * *

He stood alone in Paula's living room nursing a scotch on the rocks. The night before he had been too
concerned about his progress with this latter-day Aphrodite to give a damn about the place she lived in. He glanced
around the room. Every inch reeked of success. The furniture was sleek, modern, exquisitely contoured ... like its
owner. There wasn't much question about it, Paula Ralston made a lot more dough than he did. But how? That was
the question.

She came out of the bedroom and mixed herself a drink. She was a living dream in a black lace negligee.
Transparent. It figured. A lot of things were beginning to figure.
"Shall I tell you a secret?" she asked.
"I didn't think you had any left." He couldn't take his eyes from the negligee.
"I think Mr. Chase and Mr. Boles are the best of the seven. I think they come closest to what you're looking
for." She lifted her glass and clinked it against his.
Harry smiled. He wasn't looking at her anymore. It was more of an education to look through her. She was good. Damn good. She could lull you into believing the Grand Canyon was brimming over with silver dollars, all yours for the taking. It was next to impossible to doubt the sincerity in her face.

"I liked all seven of them," he said. "But since you know them better than I do I'll take your recommendation that Chase and Boles are the best."

She moved closer to him. He could feel the warmth of her body.

"We're making some progress, Harry. We've narrowed the field down to two candidates."

Harry kept her maneuvering. "Paula, I'm still faced with the problem of finding a way around the regulations. I can't hire either one of them until I solve that."

Nothing stopped this girl. Nothing even slowed her down. She moved still closer to him. "There's a way around anything if a man has the right incentive to look for it."

He knew what the right incentive was. He didn't have to go looking for that. He laid his drink down, put his arms around her and kissed her. They walked to the sofa. Paula stayed close to him, the ever thoughtful, loving female companion. She rubbed his back and neck and sprinkled him with soft moist kisses. She never mentioned her clients again. And Harry promised to hire one of them the following day.

* * * * *

He was anxious to get back to his apartment to find out if Frank Barnes had called. As he drove back along Woodward Street he couldn't put Paula out of his mind. He already had her character pegged. But what was she up to? What was her goal? She wasn't doing all this for a lousy commission. The stakes were bigger than that.

In a way it was too bad she was going to have to settle for less than she bargained for. If her seven clients hadn't been so phoney she might have gotten away with it. But why was it necessary for them to be phoney? Why should a girl as shrewd as Paula send seven men in disguise to see ...

Disguise! Somehow that word threw a different light on the matter. The men had all been disguised in places where hair should grow. They were not bald. There was something abnormal about them. And Harry was ninety percent certain what it was. The answer was incredible. There was still a ten-percent margin for error. For Miss Paula Ralston's sake he hoped he was wrong.

* * * * *

Frank Barnes' message was waiting for him at the switchboard in the lobby. The word "urgent" was written on it.

He raced upstairs and picked up the phone. Frank answered on the first ring. He sounded like a man with a gun at his back.

"Harry, what the hell kind of a mess have you gotten yourself into?"

"Why? Something go wrong?"

"You bet your sweet life. An hour after you called me to check on that Ralston dame a guy came into the office and told me to lay off."

Harry was silent. And scared. His answer looked better all the time.

"What did the guy look like?"

"He looked important, Harry. And he meant business. He had a big bulge in his pocket and he made it very clear I'd be up to my funny bone in hot lead if I relayed any information about this girl to you."

"Frank, was the guy wearing a toupee?"

"A what?"

"A toupee, a hair piece!"

"How the hell should I know. I wasn't interested in his coiffure. He was wearing a black overcoat, he kept his hand on that bulge and he didn't care much for smiling. Harry, you in trouble with this dame?"

"What did you find out about her, Frank?"

"Between the time you called and the time the guy strolled into the office I found out she's only had this Personnel Consultant racket for about three months."

"You didn't learn anything else?"

"After I got warned I decided to wait'll I talked with you."

Harry was silent again. His mind was working.

"Frank, what causes baldness?"

"Baldness! Geez, Harry, you're in a fat mess of trouble and you're worrying about losing your hair?"

"It's important, Frank. I must find out what causes total loss of all hair."

The detective grunted. "Well, let's see, there are three or four diseases I know of. Some people claim it's hereditary. Sometimes a deficiency in the genes ..."

"Okay, Frank, that's enough."
"What do you want me to do about the girl?"
"Just as the man told you. Lay off. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know what this thing is all about."

He hung up the phone and paced in front of his sofa for several minutes. It was inconceivable that the seven men all had the same disease, the same gene deficiency or the same hereditary shortcomings. So his own answer must be much closer to the truth. He'd have to wait until morning to put it to a test. If he was right he would call Colonel Waters and dump the whole bizarre set-up right into the army's lap where it belonged.

Again he found himself hoping he was not right, and, more important, that Paula Ralston wasn't what he was beginning to think she was.

* * * * *

Miss Conway was already in when Harry arrived at the office. He managed a half smile for her.
"Miss Conway, two of the seven men are coming back this morning and ..."
"And Mr. Boles is the one who's getting the job."
"Who called you this time?" he asked with exasperation.
"Colonel Waters."

Harry's stomach muscles contracted. "Colonel Waters?"
"That's right. When you were gone yesterday the colonel dropped in to see you. He asked me if you were working on the replacement for George Fisher ... I told him you were right on the job. And I showed him the information sheets you had on all seven men."
"You did what!!"
"And Colonel Waters liked the man named Boles best of all. So I guess when Mr. Boles comes in you can tell him the job is his."
"You nitwit!" he bellowed. "You brainless, knuckleheaded ..." He stomped into his office, and slammed the door.

It was difficult for him to think clearly. He knew he had to make a move. And fast.

He stood by the window and gazed at the Weapons Development Center across the parade ground. The low gray buildings had a quiet peaceful aura about them. If it weren't for the guards marching in front of the great wire fences anyone might think the place was used for manufacturing can-openers, automobile parts, any one of a thousand harmless products.

But it wasn't. Weapons Development represented a vital link in the country's defense program. He no longer figured they were developing a weapon to counteract Soviet aggression. They were working on something far more important. He was just ninety percent sure of that.

* * * * *

Mr. Boles was the first to arrive. He sat in an easy chair which Harry had moved close to his desk in order to better observe the man.

"Mr. Boles, my secretary tells me Colonel Waters was looking at your qualifications yesterday and was very impressed. I gather from that that the job is yours."
"Thank you, sir."

Harry shoved his chair closer to him. The toupee was intact. So was the mustache.
"Now it'll take the government about two weeks to complete a security check-up."

He could see plainly now that the man was also wearing false eyebrows and had no beard. That did it.
"I understand, sir," Boles replied.
"So all I can tell you at the moment is that you'll be hearing from us as soon as possible." Harry got up thinking the interview was over.

Mr. Boles remained seated.
"Miss Ralston would like to see you, Mr. Payne."
"Oh, yes," Harry chuckled, "I'm going to see her this evening."
"She wants to see you now."
"Afraid I can't make it right now. I have a pile of work to do. Besides I'm expecting another client of hers. Have to let him know he didn't get the job."

"Mr. Chase is waiting for us downstairs in the car. You will come with me, Mr. Payne." The order was clear and firm.

Harry didn't like it. "I don't get it. What's so important that Miss Ralston has to see me ..."

He stopped at the sight of the gun leveled at his chest.
"When we pass your secretary's desk, you will tell her you are taking an early lunch. I will return you in an hour if you cooperate."

Harry Payne knew better than to argue.
Mr. Chase was seated behind the wheel of a blue sedan. Boles and Harry climbed into the back seat. They drove away from Fort Dickson toward the city.

The two men remained silent during the trip. Harry had plenty of time to think. Why this sudden move of Paula’s? He must have done something to motivate it. But what?

The only person he had talked to was Frank Barnes and he hadn’t divulged anything to him. She couldn’t be sore because he had asked Frank to check on her. Routine investigation was part of his job. She knew that. He failed to come up with an answer. He was worried. He knew who the seven men were but he didn’t know where they came from. It could have been any one of a million different places. Heaven only knew what kind of people they were.

The shades were drawn in Paula’s apartment. There was no sign of her. But as soon as Harry entered the room he forgot about her anyway. His gaze rested upon the small, roundish man sitting in the contour chair, the bald man with no eyebrows and no beard.

"Please be seated, Mr. Payne." The man’s tone was soft and courteous.

"Which one are you?" Harry asked.

The man was amused. "I am Mr. Thompson."

"Oh, yeah," said Harry, "you’re the one who kept patting your skull. Couldn’t you find one that fit you?"

Nobody was amused. Boles and Chase took positions on either side of Thompson. Their faces were drawn and sober. They resembled two bankrupt morticians.

"Where is the body beautiful?" Harry asked. "Or is she no longer the body beautiful?"

"Take a look for yourself." It was Paula’s voice. The familiar sultriness was missing.

Harry swung around to see her emerge from the bedroom. "Well, well, well! If it isn’t Miss Lonelyhearts. Mind if I ask why I’m here? I mean the gun and all?"

He had to be flippant. It was the only way he knew to conceal the terror he felt in their presence.

She sat beside him on the sofa. "Harry, you’ve disappointed me. You haven’t been playing the game fair and square."

"If you’re referring to the private eye I put on you ..."

"I’m not, Harry. You put him on, we took him off. Those things even themselves out."

Harry shrugged. "Okay, I give up. What did I do wrong?"

"Show him, Mr. Thompson." She lit a cigarette and folded her legs under her.

Mr. Thompson reached into his pocket and produced a small object. He tossed it into Harry’s lap. Harry examined it.

"Do you recognize it?" Mr. Thompson asked.

"It’s a microphone," Harry replied.

"That’s just what it is." Paula savagely flung her cigarette to the floor. Her own disguise, the one concealing her true, ruthless self, was gone. Her voice was cold and harsh. "How much do you know, Harry? How much?"

Harry folded his hands, rested his full weight on the arm of the sofa and crossed his legs. "How much is it worth to you?"

Paula’s hand struck with fury across his face. His cheek went numb. Blood ran from an uneven gash left by the diamond in her ring. He took out his handkerchief and dabbed at the wound.

"You’re real high class, aren’t you, Paula? They don’t make traitors as high class as you anymore."

She raised her hand and aimed for the other cheek. Thompson bolted out of his chair and grabbed her.

"I suggest you have a drink, Miss Ralston. Let us handle the rest."

Paula was furious. "He’s not going to tell you anymore ..."

"We’ll handle the rest!!"

Thompson didn’t raise his voice. But there was a firmness, a deadly conviction in his inflection. Paula went for a drink.

Harry didn’t like that. Paula had a temper. He could deal with her. But the others ... they displayed very little emotion. He had no idea how to handle them.

Thompson sat down again facing Harry.

"The fact is," he began gracefully, "we discovered this microphone and four others like it here in Miss Ralston’s apartment. One in each room. Now we are very cautious people, Mr. Payne. We are quite certain no one knows our whereabouts. It is logical then that the microphones have not been here long. Miss Ralston’s only visitors are ourselves and you. You have known her two days. So you are the only person who knows this apartment well enough to have planted these tell-tale devices in a hurry."

"Why should I want to plant them?"
"You took the trouble to have Miss Ralston investigated. But more than one means of investigation produces better results. The microphones were wired to a small radio which we located in the basement of this building. We have assumed that everything spoken into them was transmitted over the radio and recorded at your end. That makes sense, doesn't it?"

Harry was confused. "So far, so good."

"We want those recordings, Mr. Payne."

They seemed to be convinced the microphones were his. Only Harry knew it wasn't true. But to admit it might mean he wouldn't leave Paula's place alive. He derived no comfort from the knowledge that someone else was interested in Paula's activities. That wasn't helping him with his problem of the moment. He had to keep stalling. And as long as they were so sure of themselves it might even be to his advantage to maintain a certain arrogance.

"I might as well tell you, Thompson, I have no intention of cooperating until I know a few facts about you and your friends. Like who you are, where you're from, what you're after ..."

"It is not necessary, in order to tell us where the recordings are," smiled Mr. Thompson, "that you know anything more about us."

"It isn't necessary," said Harry, "but I want to know."

Chase started to voice an objection but Harry broke in.

"And don't tell me you have more persuasive ways of making me talk. You can use force but it'll take time. Your time is valuable or you wouldn't have hustled me over here as fast as you did. So let's not waste your time. You tell me, then I'll tell you."

Thompson glanced at his two compatriots. Their faces registered dissatisfaction. Their silence said that Harry was right. Time was valuable. They would follow the path of least resistance.

"Our point of origin," Mr. Thompson began, "is Correylla, roughly seven-eighths the size of Earth, in the Syrybic Galaxy. It is approximately ... in your figures ... seventy-five trillion miles distant."

"Must be quite a trip." Harry tried to be placid.

Mr. Thompson was momentarily amused. "Travel through Time and Space is something we take for granted. The farthest corners of the Universe are ours for the reaching. That is the foremost reason for our visit to your Earth. You might call us Galactic Observers. You see, we already control the twelve inhabited planets in our own Galaxy. And at this time we have no desire to take on any more responsibility than that. But neither do we want interference from another Galaxy ... such as this one!"

* * * * *

Harry was surprised. "You're giving this world a lot of credit. We've barely moved off the Earth. What makes you think we could cause your people any trouble?"

"By merely projecting yourselves into space you have eliminated the major obstacle to space travel. Remember it took thousands of years for someone on your Earth to discover electricity. But observe the wonders you have accomplished with it in the relatively few years since it was discovered. The same principle applies to your conquest of space. We are not here to do you harm, Mr. Payne. It is merely our intention to warn you, when the time comes, of the dangers you face should you decide to venture too far."

"For people who intend no harm I'd say you and your friends are putting on quite an unconvincing show."

"I assure you, Mr. Payne, our visit to Earth was intended purely for observational purposes!"

"What do you mean, was?"

* * * * *

Thompson's face was grim. The easy chair that had accommodated his small, roundish frame so perfectly now appeared to be uncomfortable for him. A redness crept into his cheeks and spread over his smooth, tight scalp.

"The fact is that your government has known about us for six months. Our exact whereabouts has been a well guarded secret ... but they were informed of our presence here on Earth."

"Informed! But who could tell them ..."

Chase broke in impatiently. "We are wasting time! We must get those recordings!"

The interruption was dismissed with a wave of Thompson's hand.

"Your government was informed by George Fisher."

"George Fisher!" Harry gulped.

"You see, Mr. Fisher ... that wasn't really his name, you understand ... was one of us ... a member of our observation team. After we arrived here ... well, you might say he defected, gave your government the benefit of his somewhat limited knowledge."

Harry whistled. "And because of him your mission is no longer observational."

"That remains to be seen."
Harry leaned forward on the sofa. "You have any ideas, Mr. Thompson, about why he defected? I'm curious to know why a man is unhappy enough with his own lot to run away and put himself in the hands of a civilization that is in every way alien to him."

Thompson's answer was brief and deliberately ambiguous. "Mr. Fisher was a traitor. What more can be said of him?"

"So he didn't commit suicide," Harry muttered.
"That's right, Mr. Payne."
"I take it you're not sure of how much Fisher told the government before you got to him."
"Mr. Fisher's limitations were familiar to us. It is the potential of your own scientists now that they have his information that we are most concerned with."

"Keep stalling, Harry reminded himself ... keep speculating, guessing, theorizing, anything for time."
"So you know the project that Weapons Development is working on but you don't know how much progress has been made. And you want to place one of your own people in there to find out."
"Thanks to you, we have succeeded in doing just that." Thompson smiled with satisfaction, having kept his part of a bargain. "Now about those recordings...."
"I'm not through asking questions."
"But I'm through answering them, Mr. Payne. Tell us where the recordings are."
* * * * *

Harry studied the clean, smooth surface of Thompson's face. There was a gentleness in his large, round eyes. There was also an unfriendliness. Harry had to keep stalling. He knew any answer he gave them would shorten his life expectancy by about thirty-five years.

"You've gotten me into a mess of trouble, Mr. Thompson. I think you owe me a little more. My memory might prove clearer if I knew what was going on at Weapons Development."

Thompson glanced at his two companions. They showed no sign of dissent.
"Very well, Mr. Payne. For some years now our people have been working on a method of reversing the polarity of the atom. We have tried to create an electro-magnetic field which would repel rather than attract. Once we are able to accomplish this we can develop an instrument capable of disturbing the molecular structure of any object in the universe."
"In other words ..." Harry frowned at him, "a weapon capable of disintegration?"
"Precisely!"

Harry sat there, stunned. A few moments seemed hardly enough to digest the knowledge that Weapons Development was working on the most incredibly advanced weapon of all time. And Mr. Thompson and company were out to sabotage it. Their people could not afford to allow another world to beat them to the punch. Who controlled this weapon controlled the universe. Stalling the aliens was more important than ever now. He couldn't heighten the danger to his own life. It wasn't worth a lead nickel anyway. If it had been, Thompson wouldn't have consented to tell him this much.

Someone else had wired Paula's apartment. It was reasonable to assume it was someone on his side.
"The recordings, please!!" Boles was becoming very impatient.
Harry looked up and found a gun at his head. "The recordings are at my office," he lied.
Thompson walked to the telephone table and brought the instrument to him. "You will call your secretary," he said, "and tell her you have been detained at lunch. You are sending Mr. Chase to pick up the recordings."

Harry glanced around the room. Paula was sulking at the bar near the door. Drowning her conscience, he thought. They must have paid her a fortune to sell out her own people. Boles and Chase both had their guns poised. Thompson picked up the receiver and extended it to him.

There was no way out, no stalling them any longer. To make a break for it would be suicidal. In the state of confusion his mind was in, he could think of only one thing to do. When he reached Miss Conway, he would have to warn her somehow--a few desperate words and pray that she would be alert enough to realize he was in trouble and get the information to the authorities.

* * * * *

He took the phone and dialed. He gave the Fort Dickson operator his office extension. He waited. The phone rang. It rang again. Then three more times. Damn that girl! Her coffee breaks were extended vacations!
Finally the phone was picked up. But the voice that answered was male.
"Who is this?" Harry demanded.
The voice replied, "Colonel Waters."
"This is Harry. I'm at Paula Ralston's apartment ... emergency...!"
The three men were on top of him. Chase smashed the butt of his gun across Harry's knuckles. The receiver fell
to the floor. Harry let out a pained groan as Boles’ gun butt struck him on the temple. Thompson replaced the receiver. Harry was on the floor. He put his hands to his head for protection as Chase savagely kicked at him. His vision blurred but he managed to see that Paula was still at the bar sipping a drink, sadistically enjoying the whole show.

"He's no longer any use to us," Thompson declared. "You may do your job!"

Harry shook his head, fighting to stay conscious. His vision cleared long enough to see Chase and Boles standing over him, their guns pointed at either side of his head.

There was a volley of deafening shots. There was smoke, voices, people running in every direction. More gunfire. Glass shattering. Furniture knocked over.

But Harry felt no pain.

When he looked again Chase and Boles were no longer to be seen. He caught a glimpse of Thompson running for another position of cover. A final gunshot brought him to the floor.

Harry struggled to a sitting position. Then he saw Chase and Boles dead on the floor beyond the sofa. Half a dozen soldiers were in the process of subduing a swearing, clawing Paula Ralston.

And in the doorway he saw Miss Conway.

She looked incongruous as hell with a smouldering revolver in her hand. She crossed the room and knelt beside him. She pulled him around to let his head rest on the sofa.

"Harry! Harry," she whispered, brushing his hair back, "are you hurt badly? What did they do to you?"

He tried to get up.

"You stay right where you are, honey." Her voice was soothing and gentle. There was a soft, compassionate light in her eyes. No longer that dumb stare. She leaned over and kissed him. "There. You're going to be all right."

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Now you just sit back and relax. I'm just doing my job."

"Your jo ..." A low steady wail rolled off his lips. "Oh, no! Say it isn't so. Tell me I'm really dead. I know I deserve to be."

"I may be the world's lousiest secretary, but I'm considered not bad in the counter-intelligence department."

Harry repeated the wail.

"We were afraid from the time George Fisher turned himself over to the government," she continued, "that his days were numbered. But the longer he remained alive the more apprehensive his people would become. We figured one day they'd make a wrong move. And that would be their big mistake. Well, their move was to kill George Fisher and try to get one of their own agents into Weapons Development. That meant exposing themselves. It also meant you had to be watched ... among others. That's where I came in."

"And playing it about as dumb as I've ever seen."

She laughed. "Sounds like I played the part a little too convincingly."

She stood up and helped him to his feet. "You're coming with me."

"Where to? Hey, what are you doing?"

"There's something about this place that I don't like. I'm no sultry brunette, but I'm not a dumb blonde either."

She kissed him, then took a last look at Paula's place and led him out the door. THE END

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**Contents**

**GROVE OF THE UNBORN**

by LYN VENABLE

Bheel still stood on the patio, transfixed with horror. He heard the terrified cry "Dheb Tyn-Dall"--and then the vigilant Guardians got him....

Tyndall heard the rockets begin to roar, and it seemed as though the very blood in his veins pulsed with the surging of those mighty jets. Going? They couldn't be going. Not yet. Not without him! And he heard the roaring rise to a mighty crescendo, and he felt the trembling of the ground beneath the room in which he lay, and then the great sound grew less, and grew dim, and finally dissipated in a thin hum that dwindled finally into silence. They were gone.

* * * * *

Tyndall threw himself face down on his couch, the feel of the slick, strange fabric cold and unfriendly against
his face. He lay there for a long time, not moving. Tyndall's thoughts during those hours were of very fundamental things, that beneath him, beneath the structure of the building in which he was confined, lay a world that was not Earth, circling a sun that was not Sol, and that the ship had gone and would never come back. He was alone, abandoned. He thought of the ship, a silver streak now in the implacable blackness of space, threading its way homeward through the stars to Sol, to Earth. The utter desolation which swept over him at the impact of his aloneness was more than he could endure, and he forced himself to think of something else.

Why was he here then? John Tyndall, 3rd Engineer of the starship Polaris. It had been such a routine trip, ferrying a group of zoologists and biologists around the galaxy looking for unclassified life-supporting planets. They had found such a world circling an obscure sun half way across the galaxy. An ideal world for research expedition, teeming with life, the scientists were delighted. In a few short months they discovered and cataloged over a thousand varieties of flora and fauna peculiar to this planet, called Arrill, after the native name which sounded something like Ahhrhell. Yes, there were natives, humanoid, civilized and gracious. They had seemed to welcome the strangers, as a matter of fact they had seemed to expect them.

The Arrillians had learned English easily, its basic sounds not being too alien to their own tongue. They had quite a city there on the edge of the jungle, although, in circling the planet before landing, the expedition had noted that this was the only city. On a world only a little smaller than Earth, one city, surrounded completely by the tropical jungle which covered the rest of the world. A city without power, without machinery of any kind, and yet a city that was self-sufficient.

Well-tilled fields stretched to the very edge of the jungle, where high walls kept out the voracious growth. The fields fed the city well, and clothed it well. And there were mines to yield up fine metal and precious gems. The Earthmen had marveled, and yet, it had seemed strange. On all this planet, just one city with perhaps half a million people within its walls. But this was not a problem for the expedition.

The crew of the Polaris and the members of the expedition had spent many an enjoyable evening in the dining hall of the palace-like home of the Rhal, who was something more than a mayor and something less than a king. Actually, Arrill seemed to get along with a minimum of government. All in all, the Earthmen had summed up the Arrillians as being a naive, mild, and courteous people. They probably still thought so, all of them, that is, except Tyndall.

Of course, now that he looked back upon it, there has been a few things ... that business about the Bugs, as the Earthmen had dubbed the oddly ugly creatures who seemed to occupy something of the position of a sacred cow in the Arrillian scheme of things. The Bugs came in all sizes, that is all sizes from a foot or so in length up to the size of a full human.

The Bugs were not permitted to roam the streets and market places, like the sacred cows of the Earthly Hindus. The Bugs were kept in huge pens, which none but a few high-ranking priests were permitted to enter, and although the Earthmen were not prevented from standing outside the pens and watching the ugly beasts munching grass or basking in the sun, the Arrillians always seemed nervous when the strangers were about the pens. The Earthmen had shrugged and reflected that religion was a complexity difficult enough at home, needless to probe too deeply into the Arrillian.

But The Time had been something else again, bringing with it, the first sign of real Arrillian fanaticism and the first hint of violence. Tyndall and four companions were strolling in a downtown section of the city, when all at once a hoarse cry in Arrillian shattered the quiet hum of street activity.

"What did he say?" asked one of Tyndall's companions, who had not learned much Arrillian.

"I--I think, 'A Time! A Time!' What could ..." he never finished the sentence, all about them Arrillians had prostrated themselves in the rather dirty street, covering their faces with their hands, lying face down. The Earthmen hesitated a moment, and a priest of Arrill appeared as though from nowhere, a wicked scimitar-like weapon in his hand and a face tense with anger.

"Dare you," he hissed in Arrillian, "dare you not hide your eyes at A Time!" He pushed one of the Earthmen with surprising strength, and the latter stumbled to his knees. All five men hastened to ape the position of the prostrate Arrillians; they knew better to risk committing sacrilege on a strange planet. As Tyndall sank to the ground and covered his eyes, he heard that priest mutter another sentence, in which his own name was included. He thought it was "You, Tyn-Dall ... even you."

A few moments later a bell sounded from somewhere, and the buzzing of conversation began around them, along with the shuffling, scraping sound of many people getting to their feet at once. A hand touched Tyndall's shoulder and an Arrillian voice, laughing now, purred, "Up stranger, up, The Time is past."

The Earthmen got to their feet. Everything about them was the same as though nothing had happened, people strolling along the street, going in and out of shops, stopping to chat.

"I guess that was the all-clear," commented one wryly.
The others laughed nervously, but Tyndall was strangely troubled, he was thinking of the strange words of the priest, "You, Tyn-Dall, even you." Why should he have known, and not the others? He tried to forget it. Arrillian was a complex tongue with confusing syntax, perhaps the priest had said something else. But Tyndall knew one thing for certain, the mention of his name had been unmistakable.

The mood hung on, and quite suddenly Tyndall had asked, "I wonder about the children. Why do you suppose it is?"

One of the men laughed, "Maybe they feed them to the Bugs." At no time, during their stay on Arrill, had they seen a single child, or young person under the age of about twenty-one. The crew had speculated upon this at great length, coming to the conclusion that the youngsters were kept secluded for some reason known only to the Arrillians, probably some part of their religion. One of them had made so bold as to ask one of the scientists who politely told him that since his group was not composed of ethnologists or theologists, but of biologists and zoologists, they were interested neither in the Arrillians, their offspring nor their religion, but merely in the flora and fauna of the planet, both of which seemed to be rather deadly. The expedition had had several close calls in the jungle, and some of the plants seemed as violently carnivorous as the animals.

It was just a few days after the incident that the Arrillians kidnapped Tyndall. It had been a simple, old-fashioned sort of job, pulled off with efficiency and dispatch as he wandered a few hundred feet away from the ship. It was late, and he had been unable to sleep, so he had strolled out for a smoke. The nightwatch must have been somewhere about on patrol, probably only a few hundred feet away, on the other side of the ship. It happened suddenly and silently, the hand clapped over his mouth, the forearm constricting his windpipe, his legs jerked out from under him, and a rag smelling sickly-sweet shoved under his nose, bringing oblivion.

When he came to consciousness, he found himself in this room, and he knew that since then, many days and nights had passed. His wants were meticulously attended to, his bath prepared, his food brought to him regularly, delicious and steaming, with a generous supply of full-bodied Arrillian wine to wash it down. Fresh clothes were brought to him daily, the loose-flowing, highly ornamented robe of the Arrillian noble. Tyndall knew he was no ordinary prisoner, and somehow, this fact made him doubly uneasy.

And then, tonight, the ship had blasted off without him. Tyndall could easily reconstruct what had happened when his crewmates had inquired about him, at the palace and in town. "Tyn-Dall?" Then, a sorrowful expression, a shrugging of the shoulders, a pointing toward the death-infested jungle, and a mournful shaking of the head, sign language which in any tongue meant, "Tyn-Dall wanders too far from your ship. He becomes lost. Alas, he does not know our jungle and its perils." Those who spoke a little English would make some expression of sympathy.

Maybe the crew was a little suspicious, maybe they thought there was something fishy about the thing, and then they thought of the unhappy results of what was commonly referred to as an "interplanetary incident." Ever since the people of the second planet of Alpha Centauri, in the early days of extraterrestrial exploration, had massacred an entire expedition because the captain had mortally insulted a tribal leader by refusing a sacred fruit, such incidents had been avoided at all costs.

And so, they dared not offend the Arrillians by questioning the veracity of their statements. And the jungle was deadly, so they looked a little longer, and asked a few more questions. After a little while, the scientists had completed their work and were anxious to get home, and so, the ship blasted off, without him.

All this had passed kaleidoscopically in Tyndall's mind as he lay on the couch in his luxurious prison, too numb to weep or even curse. His reverie was broken by the clicking of the lock and he raised up to see the door opening. An Arrillian servant stood there, his silver hair done up in the complicated style which denoted male house servants. He was unarmed. The houseman smiled, roared in imitation of a rocket, made a swooping gesture with one hand to indicate the departing ship, then pointed at Tyndall and at the open door. The servant bowed and departed, leaving the door slightly ajar. Now that the ship was gone, he was free to leave his room.

Tyndall stepped cautiously out of the room and found himself in a long hall, with many doors opening from it on either side, much like a hotel corridor. One end of the hall seemed to open out onto a garden and he started in that direction.

The doorway opened out into a patio which overlooked a vast and perfectly tended garden. The verdant perfection of the scene was marred only by one of the Bugs, sunning itself and gnawing on the stem of a flower. Tyndall was impressed again with the repulsive ugliness of the thing. This one was the size of a small adult human, and even vaguely human in outline, although the brownish armored body was still more suggestive of a big bug than anything else known to him. There were even rudimentary wings furled close to the curving back, and the underside was a dirty, striped gray. Tyndall shuddered, wondering why the Arrillians, who so loved to surround themselves with beauty, should choose so horrendous a creature as the object of their worship, or protection.

He heard running footsteps behind him, and turned to see the Arrillian houseman, breathless, with an
expression of greatest concern on his face. The servant bowed respectfully before Tyndall, then gestured at the
garden, shook his head vigorously from side to side and tugged at the Earthman's sleeve.

"Forbidden territory, eh? Okay, old fellow, what now?"

The servant motioned for Tyndall to follow him, and ushered him down the hall from whence he had just come, and
into another of the rooms opening off from it. The very old man reclining upon the low, Roman-like couch, Tyndall recognized at once as his host, the Rhal of Arrill.

The Rhal touched the fingertips of both hands to his forehead in the Arrillian gesture of greeting, and Tyndall did the same. He noticed several male Arrillians standing near the back of the room, although the servant had bowed and retired.

"Well, Tyn-Dall, how do you enjoy the hospitality of Ahhreel?" He, of course, gave the native pronunciation to
the name which was almost Teutonic in sound and unpronounceable for Tyndall because of the sound given to the
double aspirate, for which he knew no equivalent.

"Your English, Dheb Rhal, has improved greatly since our last meeting," commented Tyndall guardedly, using
the Arrillian prefix of extreme respect.

The old man smiled. "Your friends were kind enough to lend me books and also the little grooved disks that
make voice." He gestured toward an old-fashioned wind-up type phonograph which Tyndall recognized at once as
being standard aboard interstellar vessels, and for just such a purpose. The Rhal continued, "For teaching English
very fine. How are you enjoying our hospitality, I ask again?"

Tyndall was stuck on Arrill and he knew it. There was no need to cook his own goose by being deliberately
offensive. "I appreciate the hospitality of Arrill, I express my thanks for the consideration of my hosts but--if I may
ask a question?"

"Yes?"

"What, in the wisdom of the Dheb Rhal, is the reason for my--er--detainment?"

"To answer that, Tyn-Dall, I must tell you something of the past of Ahhreel, and of her destiny." At these
words, the other Arrillians in the room drew closer, and the Rhal motioned them to a couch at his feet and nodded
toward Tyndall, requesting that he join them. Tyndall noticed that the others were gazing up into the old man's face
with an expression of raptness, even of reverence. He knew that the Rhal did not possess an especially exalted
position politically, even though he was head of the city. He guessed therefore that the Rhal must be the religious
ruler of Arrill as well.

The Rhal began, intoning the words as though he were reciting a ritual, "There was a time, many thousands of
Khreelas ago, when the kingdom of Ahhreel was not one small city, as you see it now, but a mighty empire, girdling
the world in her vastness. But the people of Ahhreel had become evil in their ways, and her cities were black with
sin. It was then that Xheev himself left his kingdom in paradise and appeared to the people of Ahhreel, and he told
them that he was displeased, and that bad times would fall upon Ahhreel, and that her people would dwindle in
number, and became exceedingly few, and the jungle would reclaim her emptied cities. One city, and only one,
would survive and prosper, and the people of that city would be given the chance to redeem Ahhreel, and remove
the heavy hand of Xheev's terrible punishment.

"All this came to pass, and in the dark Khreelas that followed, all of Ahhreel vanished except this city. Now,
for many, many thousands of Khreelas, the people of this city have striven to redeem Ahhreel by obeying the sacred
laws of Xheev.

"Xheev had promised that when the punishment was ended, he would send a sign, and his sign would be that a
great silver shell should fall from the heavens, and within would be Xheev's own emissary, who must wed the
ranking priestess of Xheev, establishing again the rapport between the kingdom of paradise and the world of
Ahhreel."

When the Rhal had finished, the other Arrillians in the room fastened the same look of reverence upon Tyndall
which they had formerly reserved for the Rhal.

Tyndall chose his words carefully. "But there were many aboard my vessel. Why did you, Dheb Rhal, select me
as the emissary of Xheev?"

"Xheev selected you, I recognized you, as of all your companions, you and you alone have the sun-colored hair,
which is the sacred color of Xheev."

Tyndall was able to question the Rhal almost coolly, the trap was already sprung, the ship was gone. Now, he
only wanted to know the how, and the why. An accident of pigmentation, only that had brought him to this. Sun-
colored hair!

"But, Dheb Rhal, did my friends and I not often tell you of ourselves, of the place from which we came? A
world, a world like your own?"

The old man smiled. "Do not think me naive, Tyn-Dall. I am quite aware that you are but a man, a man from
another world, although quite an incredible world it must be. I know also that you were, until this hour, unaware of your destiny. I knew that when my priest reported that you ignored the Ritual Of The Time, until literally forced to obey. That is why we had to use ... devious means to make certain that your companions would not prevent the fulfillment of the prophesy. Now, of course, you understand.

"I do not think the priestess Lhyreesa will make you unhappy, Tyn-Dall."

This was not Earth and these people were not Earthmen. The thought now did not bring the bitter pain it had at first, right after the ship left. Earth already was becoming hazy in Tyndall's mind, a lovely globe of green somewhere ... somewhere far, and home once, a long time ago.

No, the Arrillians were not Earthmen, but they were human, and an attractive, gracious race. Life would not be bad, among the Arrillians, especially as the espoused of the ranking priestess of Arrill. Tyndall fingered the rich material of his Arrillian robe; he thought of the food, the wine, the servants. No, he decided, not bad at all. One thing, though--this priestess Lhyreesa ...

"I have, then, but one request to make, Dheb Rhal, I would like to see the priestess Lhyreesa."

The old man almost chuckled, "That is understandable, Tyn-Dall, but it is not yet The Time."

Tyndall, reveling in the strength of his position, grew bolder. "I would like very much, Dheb Rhal, to see her now."

"Do as I command," snapped the Rhal.

Bheel turned silently, motioning for Tyndall to follow. The young Arrillian led Tyndall the length of the corridor, back to the patio he had stepped onto by mistake earlier in the day. Bheel stepped respectfully aside.

Tyndall looked out into the garden: the sun was beginning to set, the long shadows stretched across the dim recesses of tropic greenery. The huge insect-like thing was still there, stretched out in a narrow strip of sunlight, catching the last failing waves of warmth from the sinking sun.

"Where might I find the priestess Lhyreesa?" he asked.

"There, Dheb Tyn-Dall.""I see no one. Where do you say?"

Bheel pointed. "There, Dheb Tyn-Dall, where I point, you see the priestess Lhyreesa taking the late afternoon sun ... unless your eyesight is exceedingly bad, Dheb Tyn-Dall, you cannot fail to see...."

Tyndall's eyesight was exceedingly good. He followed that pointing finger, past the pillar that supported the roof of the patio, past the first row of alien green plants, past the second and third rows, to the clearing, to the little patch of sunlight, to the thing lying there. That monstrous, misshapen Bug.... The Bug.... The Priestess Lhyreesa!

"A Time! A Time!" The voice came from the patio. Tyndall saw Bheel throw himself face down on the floor, covering his eyes with his hands. He heard the cry echoed within the palace, and then like a mighty roar outside in
the city. And then there was silence, silence broken only by the sound of his own breathing as he dragged his tortured lungs across his shattered ribs.

He saw the Bug give a great heave, and then it seemed to split open, the entire skin splitting in a dozen places and a hand ... A HAND reached from within that dying hulk and grasped the bush to which it clung. A white slender hand on a fragile wrist, and then the arm was free, a woman's arm, a beautiful arm.

Tyndall began, dimly, and too late, to understand.

A leg kicked free ... the slender ankle ... the amply fleshed thigh.

Tyndall clung to consciousness doggedly. The Guardian was crushing the last dregs of life out of him now, and even the pain seemed to recede. His mind was very, very clear. So that was it. A word once heard in a long forgotten classroom, and then the scientists of the expedition. Metamorphosis ... he had meant to ask them what ... but he remembered now ... what it meant. A passing from one form into another.... Had he failed a biology test once because he didn't know what metamorphosis meant ... dimly ... dimly ... he saw ...

The last thing Tyndall ever saw was the Priestess Lhyreesa as she stepped out of the empty hulk, kicking it away with a disdainful toe. Breathless from her ordeal, she sank to the grass, her breasts heaving with exhaustion.

She sat there for a few minutes in the sunlight, then she tossed her head and spread her long raven hair out on her shoulders, the better to dry it in the waning sun.

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**Contents**

**GRAY DENIM**

By Harl Vincent

_The blood of the Van Dorn's ran in Karl's veins. He rode the skies like an avenging god._

Beneath the huge central arch in Cooper Square a meeting was in progress--a gathering of the gray-clad workers of the lower levels of New York. Less than two hundred of their number were in evidence, and these huddled in dejected groups around the pedestal from which a fiery-tongued orator was addressing them. Lounging negligently at the edge of the small crowd were a dozen of the red police.

"I tell you, comrades," the speaker was shouting, "the time has come when we must revolt. We must battle to the death with the wearers of the purple. Why work out our lives down here so they can live in the lap of luxury over our heads? Why labor day after day at the oxygen generators to give them the fresh air they breathe?"

The speaker paused uncertainly as a chorus of raucous laughter came to his ears. He glared belligerently at a group of newcomers who stood aloof from his own gathering. Seven or eight of them there were, and they wore the gray with obvious discomfort. Slummers! Well, they'd hear something they could carry back with them when they returned to their homes!

"Why," he continued in rising tones, "do we sit at the controls of the pneumatic tubes which carry thousands of our fellows to tasks equally irksome, while they of the purple ride their air yachts to the pleasure cities of the sky lanes? Never in the history of mankind have the poor been poorer and the rich richer!"

"Yah!" shouted a disrespectful voice from among the newcomers. "You're full o' bunk! Nothing but bunk!"

An ominous murmur swelled from the crowd and the red police roused from their lethargy. The mounting scream of a siren echoed in the vaulted recesses above and re-echoed from the surrounding columns--the call for reserves.

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All was confusion in the Square. The little group of newcomers immediately became the center of a mêlée of dangerous proportions. Some of the more timid of the wearers of the gray struggled to get out of the crowd and away. Others, not in sympathy with the speaker, rushed to the support of the besieged visitors. The police were, for the moment, overwhelmed.

The orator, mad with resentment and injured pride, hurled himself into the group. A knife flashed in his hand; rose and fell. A scream of agony shrilled piercingly above the din of the fighting.

Then came the reserves, and the wielder of the knife turned to escape. He broke away from the milling combatants and made speedily for the shadows that lay beyond the great pillars of the Square. But he never reached them, for one of the red guards raised his riot pistol and fired. There was a dull plop, and a rubbery something struck the fleeing man and wrapped powerful tentacles around his body, binding him hand and foot in their swift embrace. He fell crashing to the pavement.
A lieutenant of the red police was shouting his orders and the din in the Square was deafening. With their numbers greatly augmented, the guards were now in control of the situation and their maces struck left and right. Groans and curses came from the gray-clad workers, who now fought desperately to escape.

Then, with startling suddenness, the artificial sunlight of the cavernous Square was gone, leaving the battle to continue in utter darkness.

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Cooper Square, in the year 2108, was the one gathering place in New York City where the wearers of the gray denim were permitted to assemble and discuss their grievances publicly. Deep in the maze of lower-level ways seldom visited by wearers of the purple, the grottolike enclosure bore the name of a philanthropist of the late nineteenth century and still carried a musty air of certain of the traditions of that period.

In Astor Way, on the lowest level of all, there was a tiny book shop. Nestled between two of the great columns that provided foundation support for the eighty levels above, it was safely hidden from the gaze of curious passersby in the Square. Slumming parties from afar, their purple temporarily discarded for the gray, occasionally passed within a stone's throw of the little shop, never suspecting the existence of such a retreat amidst the dark shadows of the pillars. But to the initiated few amongst the wearers of the gray, and to certain of the red police, it was well known.

Rudolph Krassin, proprietor of the establishment, was a bent and withered ancient. His jacket of gray denim hung loosely from his spare frame and his hollow cough bespoke a deep-seated ailment. Looking out from behind thick lenses set in his square-rimmed spectacles, the watery eyes seemed vacant; uncomprehending. But old Rudolph was a scholar--keen-witted--and a gentleman besides. To his many friends of the gray-clad multitude he was an anomaly; they could not understand his devotion to his well-thumbed volumes. But they listened to his words of wisdom and, more frequently than they could afford, parted with precious labor tickets in exchange for reading matter that was usually of the lighter variety.

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When the fighting started in the Square, Rudolph was watching and listening from a point of vantage in the shadows near his shop. This fellow Leontardo, who was the speaker, was an agitator of the worst sort. His arguments always were calculated to arouse the passions of his hearers; to inflame them against the wearers of the purple. He had nothing constructive to offer. Always he spoke of destruction; war; bloodshed. Rudolph marveled at the patience of the red police. To-day, these newcomers, obviously a slumming party of youngsters bent on whatever mischief they could find, were interfering with the speaker. The old man chuckled at the first interruption. But at signs of real trouble he scurried into the shadows and vanished in the blackness of first-level passages known only to himself. He knew where to find the automatic sub-station of the Power Syndicate.

Returning to the darkness he had created in the Square, he was relieved to find that the sounds of the fighting had subsided. Apparently most of the wearers of the gray had escaped. He skirted the avenue of pillars along Astor Way, feeling his way from one to another as he progressed toward his little shop. Peering into the blackness of the square he saw the feeble beams of several flash-lamps in the hands of the police. They were searching for survivors of the fracas, maces and riot pistols held ready for use. A sobbing gasp from close by set his pulses throbbing. He crept stealthily in the direction from which the sound had come.

"Steady now," came a whispered voice. "My uncle's shop is close by. He'll take you in. Here--let me lift you."

* * * * *

There was a shuffling on the opposite side of the pillar at which Rudolph had halted; another grunt of pain. "Karl!" heissed the old man. It was his nephew. "Uncle Rudolph?" came the guarded response. "Yes. Can I help you?"

"Quick--yes--he's fainted."

The old man was around the huge base of the column in an instant. He groped in the darkness and his hands encountered human bodies.

"Who is it?" he breathed.

"One of the hecklers, Uncle. A young lad; and of the purple I think. He's been knifed."

Together they dragged the inert form into the shelter of the long line of pillars. There was a trampling of many men in the square. That would be a second detachment of reserves. A ray of light filtered through and dancing shadows of the giant columns made grotesque outlines against the walls of the Way. A portable searchlight had been brought to the scene. They must hurry.

Impeded by the dead weight of their burden, they made sorry progress and several times found it necessary to halt in the shadow of a pillar while the red police passed by in their search of the Square. It was with a sigh of relief that Rudolph opened the door of his shop and with still greater satisfaction closed and bolted it securely. His nephew
shouldered the limp form of the unconscious youth and carried it to his own bed in one of the rear rooms.

"Ugh!" exclaimed old Rudolph as he ripped open the young man's shirt, "it's a nasty cut. Warm water, Karl."

The gaping wound was washed and bound tightly. Rudolph's experienced fingers told him the knife had not reached a vital spot. The youth would recover.

"But Karl," he objected, "he wears the purple. Under the gray. See! It'll get us in trouble if we keep him."

He was stripping the young man of his clothing to prepare him for bed. Suddenly there was revealed on the white skin a triangular mark. Bright scarlet it was and just over the right hip. He made a hasty attempt to hide it from the watching eyes of Karl.

"Uncle!" snapped his nephew, "--the mark you call cursed! He has it, too!"

* * * * *

The tall young man in gray was on his knees, tearing the hands of the old man away. He saw the mark clearly now. There was no further use of attempting to conceal it. Rudolph rose and faced his angered nephew, his watery eyes inscrutable.

"You told me, Rudolph, that it was a brand that cursed me. I have seen it on him, too. You have lied to me."

The old man's eyes wavered. He trembled violently."

"Why did you lie?" demanded Karl. "Am I not your nephew? Am I not really cursed as you've maintained? Tell me--tell me!"

He had the old man by the shoulders, shaking him cruelly.

"Karl--Karl," begged the helpless ancient, "it was for your good. I swear it. You were born to the purple. That's what that mark means--not that you're degraded to the gray, as I said. But there's a reason. Let me explain."

"Bah! A reason! You've kept me in this misery and squalor for a reason! Who's my father?"

He flung Rudolph to the floor, where the old man crouched in apprehensive misery.

"Please Karl--don't! I can explain. Just give me time. It's a long story."

"Time! Time! For twenty-odd years you've lied to me; cheated me. My birthright--where is it?"

He menaced his supposed uncle; was about to strike him. Then suddenly he was ashamed. He turned on his heel.

"I'm leaving," he said shortly.

"Karl--my boy," begged Rudolph Krassin, struggling to his feet. "You can't! That lad in there--he--"

But Karl was too angry to reason.

"To hell with him!" he raged, "and to hell with you! I'm through!"

He stamped from the room and out into the eerie shadows of the Way. Karl was done with his old life. He'd go to the upper levels and claim his rights. Some day, too, he'd punish the man who'd stolen them away. God! Born to the purple! To think he'd missed it all! Probably was kidnapped by the old rascal he'd been calling uncle. But he'd find out. Rudolph didn't have to explain. Fingerprint records would clear his name; establish his rightful station in life. He dived into a passage that would lead him to one of the express lifts. He'd soon be overhead.

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A sergeant of the red police looked up startled from his desk as a tall youth in the gray denim of forty levels below appeared before him.

"Well?" he growled. The stalwart young worker had stared belligerently and insolently, he thought.

"I want to check my fingerprint record, Sergeant."

"Hm. Pretty cocky, aren't you? The records for such as you are down below, where you belong."

"Not mine, I think."

"So? And who the devil are you?"

"That's what I'm here to find out. I've got a triangle branded on my right hip."

"A what?"

"Triangle. Here--look!"

The amazing youngster had raised his jacket and was pulling at his shirt. The sergeant stared at what was revealed, his eyes bulging as he looked.

"Lord!" he gasped, "a Van Dorn--in the gray!"

Quickly he turned to the radiovision and made rapid connection with several persons in turn--important ones, by the appearance of the features of each in the brilliant disc of the instrument.

Karl was confused by the sudden turn of things. The sergeant talked so rapidly he could not catch the sense of his words. And that name, Van Dorn, eluded him. He knew he had heard it before, in the little shop down there in Astor Way. But he could not place it. He wished fervently that he had paid more attention to the desires of old Rudolph; had studied more and read the books the old man had begged him to read. His new surroundings confused him, too, and he knew that he was the center of some great new excitement.
Then they were in the room; two individuals, one in the red uniform of a captain of police, the other a
pompous, whiskered man in purple. Others followed and it seemed to Karl that the room was filled with them,
strangers all, and they stared at him and chattered incessantly. He experienced an overwhelming impulse to run, but
mastered it and faced them boldly.

A square of plate glass was placed under his outstretched fingers. It was smeared with something sticky and he
watched the whiskered man as he held it up to the light and studied the impressions. Then there was more confusion.
Everyone talked at once and the pompous one in purple made use of the radiovision, holding the square of glass near
its disc for observation by the person he had called. The identification number was repeated aloud, a string of figures
and letters that were a meaningless jumble to Karl. The room became quiet while the police captain thumbed the
pages of a huge book he had taken from among many similar ones that filled a rack behind the desk.

Karl's blood froze in his veins at the rumbling swish of a car speeding through the pneumatic tube beneath their
feet. His nerves were on edge. Then the captain of police looked up from the book and there was a peculiar glint in
his eyes as he spoke.

"Peter Van Dorn. Missing since 2085. Wanted by Continental Government. Ha!"

The words came to Karl's ears through a growing sensation of unreality. It seemed that the speaker was miles
away and that his voice and features were those of a radiovision likeness. Wanted by the great power across the
Atlantic! It was unthinkable. Why, he had been but an infant in 2085! What possible crime could he have
committed? But the red police captain was speaking again, this time in a chill voice. And the room of the police,
thick with the smoke of a dozen cigars, became suddenly stifling.

"Where have you been these twenty-three years, Peter Van Dorn?" asked the captain. "Who have you lived
with, I mean?"

Something warned him to protect old Rudolph. And somehow he wished he had not treated the old fellow as he
did when he left. His self-possession returned. A wave of hot resentment swept over him.

"That's my affair," he said defiantly.

The captain shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, well," he said, "you needn't answer--now. We'll find out when it's
necessary. In the meanwhile we'll have to turn you over to the Continental Ambassador."

Two of the red police advanced toward him and the rest drew back.

"You mean I'm under arrest?" asked Karl incredulously.

"Certainly. Of course you're not to be harmed."

One of the guards had him by the arm and he saw the glint of handcuffs. They couldn't do this! If it had been
for rioting in the Square it would be different. But this! It meant he was a prisoner of a foreign government, for what
reason he could not guess. He lost his head completely.

The captain cried out in amazement as one of his huskiest guards went sprawling under a well-planted punch.
This youngster must be as crazy as was his father before him. But he was a whirlwind. Before he could be stopped
he had tackled the other guard and with a mighty heave flung him halfway across the room where he fell with a thud
that left him dazed and gasping. The pompous little man in the purple crawled under the desk as the sergeant leveled
a slender tube at the young giant in gray.

Karl ducked instinctively at sight of the weapon, but the spiteful crackle of its mechanism was too quick for
him. A faintly luminous ray struck him full in the breast and stopped him in his tracks. A thrill of intense cold
chased up his spine and a thunderbolt crashed in his brain. The captain caught his stiffened body as he fell.

Karl--refusing to think of himself as Peter Van Dorn--came to his senses as from a troubled sleep. His head
ached miserably and he turned it slowly to view his surroundings. Then, in a flash, he remembered. The paralyzing
ray of the red police! They never used it in the lower levels; but overhead--why, the swine! He sat suddenly erect
and glared into a pair of green eyes that regarded him curiously.

A quick glance showed him that he was in a small padded compartment like that of the pneumatic tube cars. At
one end there was an amazing array of machinery with glittering levers and handwheels--a control board on which
numberless tiny lights blinked and flickered in rapid succession. At these controls squatted the twisted figure of a
dwarf. A second of the creatures sat at his side and stared with those horrible green eyes.

"Lord!" he muttered. "Am I still asleep?"

"No," smiled the dwarf, "you're awake, Peter Van Dorn." The misshapen creature did not seem unfriendly.

"Then where am I, and who are you?"

"You're in one of the Zar's rocket cars, speeding toward Dorn. We are but two of the Zar's servants--Moon
men."
"Rocket car? Moon men?" Karl was aghast. He wanted to pinch himself. But a hollow roar to the rear told him he was in a rapidly moving vessel of some sort. Certainly, too, these dwarfs were not figments of his imagination.

"You've been kept completely ignorant?" asked the dwarf.

"It--it seems so." Karl was bewildered. "You mean we are out in the open--traveling in space--to the Moon perhaps?"

The dwarf laughed. "No, I wish we were," he replied. "But we are about halfway to the capital of the Continental Empire, greatest of world powers. We'll be there in an hour."

"But I don't understand."

"Stupid. Didn't you ever hear of the rocket ships that cross the ocean like a projectile, mounting a thousand miles from the surface and making the trip in two hours?"

"No!" Karl was aghast. "Are we really in such a contraption?" he faltered.

"Say! Are you kidding me?" The dwarf was incredulous. "Do you mean to tell me you know so little of your world as that? Have you never read anything? The news broadcasts, the thought exchangers--don't you follow them at all?"

Karl shook his head in growing wonder. Truly Rudolph had kept him in ignorance. Or was it his own fault? He had refused to dig into the volumes old Krassin had begged him to read. The broadcasts and the thought machines--well, only those of the purple had access to those.

"Hey, Laro!" called the dwarf to his companion, "this mole is as dumb as can be. Doesn't know he's alive hardly. And a Van Dorn!"

The two laughed uproariously and Karl raged inwardly. Mole! So that's what they called wearers of the gray! He clenched his fists and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Sorry," apologized his tormentor. "Mustn't get sore now. It seems so funny to us though. And listen, kid, you'll never have another chance to hear it all. So, if you'll sit down and calm yourself a bit I'll give you an earful."

Mollified, Karl listened. A marvelous tale it was, of a disgruntled scientist of the Eastern Hemisphere who had conquered that portion of the world with the aid of the inhabitants he had found on the outer side of the Moon; of the scientist who still ruled the East--Zar of the Continental Empire. A horrible war--in 2085, the year of his own birth--depopulated the countries of Asia, Europe and Africa and reduced them to subjection. There was no combating the destructive rays and chemical warfare of the Moon men. The United Americas, still weakened from a civil war of their own, remained aloof and, for some strange reason, the Zar left them in peace, contenting himself with his conquest of practically all of the rest of the world. Now, it seemed, the two major powers were as separate as if on different planets, there being no traffic between them save by governmental sanction; and that was rarely given.

It grew uncomfortably warm in the compartment as the rocket car entered the lower atmosphere but Karl listened spellbound to the astounding revelations of the Moon man. There came a pause in the discourse of the dwarf as a number of relays clicked furiously on the control board and the vessel slackened its speed perceptibly.

"But," said Karl, thinking aloud rather than meaning to interrupt, "what has all this to do with me? Why does the government of this Zar want me?"

The dwarf bent close and eyed him cautiously. "Poor kid!" he whispered, "it doesn't seem right that you should suffer for something that happened when you were born; something you know nothing about. But the Zar knows best. You--"

There came a stabbing pencil of light from over Karl's shoulder and the green eyes of the dwarf went wide with horrified surprise. He clutched at his breast where the flame had contacted, then slowly collapsed in a pitiful, distorted heap. Karl recoiled from the odor of putrefaction that immediately filled the compartment. He whirled to face the new danger but saw nothing but the padded walls.

Then they were in darkness save for the blinking lights of the control board. He was thrown forward violently and the piercing screech of compressed air rushing past the vessel told him they had entered the receiving tube at their destination and were being retarded in speed for the landing. This much he had gathered from the explanations of the now silenced dwarf.

Laro, the other Moon man, remained mute at the controls. His companion evidently had talked too much.

The vessel had stopped and a section of the padded rear wall of the compartment moved back to reveal a second chamber. There were three other occupants of the ship and Karl knew now at whose hands the talkative Moon man had met his death. One of the three--all wearers of the purple--still held the generator of the dazzling ray in his hands. He decided wisely that resistance was useless and followed meekly when he was led from the ship.

Endlessly they rode upward in a high-speed lift, dismounting finally at a pneumatic tube entrance. A special car
whisked them roaring into the blackness. Then they were shot forth into the open and Karl saw the light of the sun for the first time in many years. They were on the upper surface of a great city, Dorn, the capital the Continental Empire.

The air was filled with darting ships of all sorts and sizes, most of them being pleasure craft of the wearers of the purple. To Karl it was the sudden realization of his dreams. He was one of them. He, too, should be wearing the purple. Then his heart sank as one of his guards prodded him into action. His dream already was shattered for they stood at the entrance to a great crystal pyramid that rose from the flat expanse of the roofs of Dorn. It was the palace of the Zar.

It seemed then that fairyland had opened its gates to the young man in gray denim. He immediately fell under its influence when they traversed a long lane between rows of brightly colored growing things which filled the air with sweet odors. Feathered creatures fluttered about and twittered and caroled in the sheer joy of being alive. It was sweeter music than he had ever believed possible or even imagined as existing. Again he forgot the menace of the imperial edict which had brought him from the other side of the world.

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Then rudely, he was brought back to earth. He was in the presence of the mighty Zar and his three escorts were bowing themselves from the huge room in which the wizened monarch sat enthroned. They had finished their duties. A shriveled face; beady eyes; trembling hands with abnormally large knuckles; a cruel and determined mouth—these were the features that most impressed Karl as he stared wordlessly at this Zar of the Eastern Hemisphere. The magnificence of the royal robe was lost on the young wearer of the gray.

"Well, well, so this is Peter Van Dorn, my beloved nephew." The Zar was speaking and the chilly sarcasm in which the words were uttered belied the friendliness they otherwise might have implied.

"That's what I'm told," replied Karl, "though I didn't know I'm supposed to be the nephew of so great a figure as yourself."

Not bad that, for an humble wearer of the gray.

"Oh, yes, yes, indeed. Why else should I have sent for you?"

"I have wondered why—and still wonder."

"Oh, you wonder, eh?" The Zar inspected him carefully and then broke into a cackle of horrible laughter. "A Van Dorn in gray denim!" he chortled. "A mole of the Americas! And to think that even the Zar has been unable to find him in all these years!"

"Stop!" bellowed Karl. "I'll not have your ridicule. Come to the point now and have it over with. Kill me if you will, but tell me the story!" He had seen the slender tube in the Zar's hand.

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An expression of surprise, almost of admiration, flickered in the beady eyes of the Zar and was gone. He spoke coldly.

"Very well, I shall explain. You, Peter, are actually my nephew. Your father, Derek Van Dorn, was my brother; he a king of Belravia and I a poor but experienced scientist. He scorned me and he paid, for I learned of the ancient race of the other side of the Moon, the side we can not see from the earth. I went to them and enlisted their aid in warring upon my brother. When we returned to carry on this war I learned that I had a son. So, too, did Derek. But my son was born in obscurity and Derek's son—you, Peter—in the lap of luxury. The war was short and, to me, sweet. Belravia was first to fall, and I had your father removed from this life by the vibrating death."

"You monster!" cried Karl. But the slender rod menaced him.

"A moment, my hot-headed nephew. I vowed I'd have your life, Peter, but your father had a few friends and one of these spirited you away. So temporarily you escaped. But now I have you where I can keep that vow. You, too, shall die. By the vibration. But first—ha! ha!—I'll give you a taste of the purple. Just so the going will be harder."

Karl kept his temper as best he could. He thought, conscience-stricken, of old Rudolph, that good friend of his father. Then he thought of that youth he had taken from the Square.

"Your son?" he asked gently. "Has he the triangular brand?"

The Zar was taken aback. "He has, yes. Why?" he asked.

"I have seen him in the Americas. He now lies wounded and in peril of his life. What do you think of that?"

Karl was triumphant as the Zar paled.

"You lie, Peter Van Dorn!"

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But the beady eyes saw that the young man was truthful. Sudden fury assailed the monarch of the East. A bell pealed its mellow summons and three Moon men entered the Presence.

"Quick, Taru--the radiovision! Our ambassador in the Americas!" The Zar was on his feet, his hard features terrible in fear and anger. "By God!" he vowed, "I'll lay waste the Americas if harm has come to my son. And you"--
turning to Karl--"I'll reserve for you an even more terrible fate than the vibrating death!"

The radiovision was wheeled in and in operation. A frightened face appeared in its disc: the Zar's ambassador across the sea.

"Moreau--my son!" snapped the Zar. "Where is he?"

"Majesty! Have mercy!" gasped Moreau. "Paul has eluded us. He was skylarking--in the lower levels of New York. But our secret agents are combing the passages. We'll have him in twenty-four hours. I promise!"

The rage of the Zar was terrible to see. Karl expected momentarily that the white flame would lay him low, for the anger of the mad ruler was directed first at Moreau, then at himself. But a quick, evil calm succeeded the storm.

"You, Peter," he stated, in tones suddenly silky, "shall have that twenty-four hours--no more. If Moreau has not produced my son in that time you shall be dismembered slowly. A finger; an ear; your tongue; a hand--until you reveal the whereabouts of the heir to my throne!"

"Never! You scum!" Karl was on the dais in a single bound. He had the Zar by the throat, his fingers twisting in the flabby flesh. Might as well have it over at once. "Fratricide--murderer of my father, I'll take you with me!"

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But it was not to be. The throne room was filled with retainers of the mad emperor. Strong hands tore him away and he was borne, struggling and fighting, to the floor. A sharp pain in his forearm. A deadening of the muscles. He was powerless, save for the painful ability to crawl to his knees, swaying drunkenly. A delicious languor overcame him. Nothing mattered now. He saw that a tall man in the purple had withdrawn the needle of the hypodermic and was replacing the instrument in its case. Ever so slowly, it seemed.

The Zar was laughing. That horrible cackle. But Karl didn't care. They'd have their sport with him. Let 'em! Then it'd be over. Lord! If only he had been a little quicker. He'd have torn the old Zar's windpipe from its place!

"My word," laughed the Zar. "The sacred word of a Van Dorn. I gave it. He'll wear the purple for a day. Take him from my sight!"

Karl was walking, quite willingly now. The effects of the drug were altering. His muscular strength returned but his mental state underwent a complete change. Always he'd wanted a taste of the purple. For years he'd listened to the orators of the Square, to the conflicting statements of old Krassin. But now he'd see. He'd know the joys of the upper levels; the pleasure cities, perhaps. For one day. But what did it matter? He found himself laughing and joking with his companion, a heavy-set wearer of the purple. They were in a luxurious apartment. Servants! Moon men all of them, but so efficient. They stripped him of his gray denim; discarded it contemptuously. Karl kicked the heap into a corner and laughed delightedly. His bath was waiting.

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Much can happen in a day. Clothened in the purple, Karl--Peter Van Dorn, he was, now--expanded. Turgid emotions surged through his new being. He was a new man. In his rightful place. He was delighted with the companionship of his new friend of the purple, Leon Lemaire. An euphonious name! A fine fellow! Fool that the Zar must be, to leave him in the care of so amiable a man. Why, Leon couldn't hold him! None of them could. He'd escape them all--if he wished. Twenty-four hours, indeed!

They were in the midst of a gay company. Wine flowed freely, and Leon had attached to their party a pair of beautiful damsels, young, and easy to know. There was music and dancing. Lights of marvelous color played over the assemblage in the huge hall, swaying their senses at the will of some expert manipulator. Peter was a different person now. He was exhilarated to the point of intoxication, but not by the wine. Somehow he couldn't bear the taste of the amber fluid the others were imbibing with such gusto. The effects of the drug had left a coppery taste in his mouth. But no matter! Rhoda, his lovely companion at the table leaned close. Her breath was hot at his throat. He swept her into his arms. Leon and the other girl laughed approvingly.

There were many such places in the upper levels of Dorn and they traveled from one to another. Now their party was larger, it having been augmented by the appearance of other of Leon's friends. Fine companions, these men of the purple, and the women were incomparable. Especially Rhoda. They understood one another perfectly now. It was all as he had pictured it.

Someone proposed that they visit the intermediate levels. It would be such a lark to watch the mechanicals. They made the drop in a lift. A laughing, riotous party. And Peter was one of them! He felt that he had known them for years. Rhoda clung to his arm, and the languorous glances from under her long lashes set the blood racing madly in his veins.

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In the levels of the mechanicals they romped boisterously. To them the strange robots--creatures of steel and glass and copper--were objects of ridicule. Poor, senseless mechanisms that performed the tasks that made the wearers of the purple independent of labor. Here they saw the preparation of their synthetic food, untouched by human hands. In one chamber a group of mechanicals, soulless and brainless, engaged in the delicate chemical
compounding of raw materials that went into the making of their clothing. Here was a nursery, where tiny tots born to the purple were reared to adolescence by unfeeling but efficient mechanical nurses. The mothers of the purple could not be bothered with their offspring until they had reached the age of reason. The whirring machinery of a huge power plant provided much amusement for the feminine members of the party. It was all so massive; throbbing with energy. But dirty! Ugh! Lucky the attendants could be mechanicals.

"We have visited the lower levels," whispered Rhoda in his ear, "but not often. It isn't pleasant. Ignorant fools in the gray denim--too many of them. I don't know why we permit their existence. Fools who will not learn. Education made us as we are, and they won't take it. Sullen looks and evil leers are all that they have for us. Hope nobody suggests going down there now."

"Me, too," said Peter. He had forgotten that once he was Karl Krassin, a wearer of the despised gray.

Someone in the party was becoming restless. They must move on.

"Where to?" asked Peter.

"Sans Dolor, sweet boy. A pleasure city within a hundred kilometers of Dorn. You'll love it, Peter."

A pleasure city! Fondest dream of the wearers of the gray! In the dim past, when he was Karl, he had dreamed it often. Now he was to visit one!

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They were atop the city now and the crystal palace of the Zar shimmered in the sunlight off there across the flat upper surface of Dorn. But it seemed so far away that Peter did not give it a second thought. He was living in the present.

A swift aero took them into the skies and they roared out above the wilderness that was everywhere between the great cities of earth. Funny nobody thought of leaving the cities and exploring the jungles of the outside. But, of course, it wasn't necessary. They had everything they needed within the cities. All of their wants were supplied by the mechanicals and by the few toilers in the gray who still persisted in ignorance and in some perverse ideas that they must work in order to live. Besides, the jungle was dangerous.

Sans Dolor loomed into view, a great island floating in the air a thousand meters above the tossing waters of the ocean. Peter gave not a thought to the forces that kept it suspended. Dimly he recalled certain words of old Rudolph, words regarding the artificial emanations that had been discovered as capable of counteracting the force of gravity. But his mind was intent on the pleasures to come.

They were over the city. Carefully tended foliage lined its streets and a smooth lagoon glistened in its center. Its towers and spires were decorated with gay colors. The streets were filled with wearers of the purple and the nude bodies of bathers in the lagoon gleamed white in the strong sunlight.

He sensed anew the nearness of Rhoda. Her soft warm hand nestled in his and she responded instantly to his sudden embrace.

There came a shock and the party was stilled in dismay. The aero careened violently and the pilot struggled with controls that were dead. Sans Dolor dropped rapidly away beneath them. They were shooting skyward, drawn by some inexplicable and invisible energy from above.

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Rhoda screamed and held him close, trembling violently. All of the women screamed and the men cursed. Leon arose to his feet and stared at Peter. The friendliness was gone from his features and he spat forth an accusation. A glistening mechanism appeared in his hand as if by magic. A ray generator! He had been appointed by the Zar to guard this upstart and, whatever happened, he'd not let him escape with his life. The girl shuddered at sight of the weapon and extricated herself from his arms. Her affection too had been a pose.

Peter's mind was clearing from the effects of the drug. He had not the slightest idea of what might have caused the quick change in the situation but he resolved he would die fighting, if die he must. Leon fumbled with the catch of the generator. It refused to operate. The force that was drawing them upward had paralyzed all mechanisms aboard the little aero. Flinging it from him in disgust he sprang for Peter.

Their minds befuddled, the rest of the men watched dully. The women huddled together in a corner, whimpering. They were a sorry lot after all, thought Karl. He was no longer Peter Van Dorn, and he thrilled to the joy of battle.

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Leon Lemaire was no mean antagonist. His flailing arms were everywhere and a huge fist caught Karl on the side of his head and sent him reeling. But this only served to clear his mind further and to fill him with a cold rage. He bored in unmercifully and Lemaire soon was on the defensive. A blow to his midsection had him puffing and Karl hammered in rights and lefts to the now sinister face that rocked his opponent to his heels. But the minion of the Zar was crafty. He slid to the floor as if groggy, then with catlike agility, dove for Karl's knees, bringing him down with a crash.
The air whistled by them as the ship was drawn upward with ever-increasing speed. The other passengers cowered in fright as the two men rolled over and over on the floor, banging at each other indiscriminately. Both were hurt. Karl's lip was split, and bleeding profusely. One eye was closing. But now he was on top and he pummeled his opponent to a pulp. Long after he ceased resisting them, the blows continued until the features of Leon Lemaire were unrecognizable. The infuriated Karl did not see that one of the members of the party was creeping up on him from behind. Neither was he aware that the upward motion of the aero had ceased and that they now hung motionless in space. A terrific blow at the base of his skull sent him sprawling. Must have been struck by a rocket, one of those funny ships that crossed the ocean so quickly. A million lights danced before his aching eyeballs.

Lying prone across the inert body of his foe, dimly conscious and fingers clutching weakly, he knew that the cabin was filled with people. Alien voices bellowed commands. There was the screaming of women; the sound of blows; curses ... then all was silence and darkness.

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It was a far cry to the little book shop off Cooper Square, but Karl was calling for Rudolph when he next awoke to the realization that he was still in the land of the living. His head was bandaged and his tongue furry. A terrible hangover. Then he heard voices and they were discussing Peter Van Dorn. He opened one eye as an experiment. The other refused to open. But it might have been worse. At least he was alive; he could see well enough with the one good optic.

"Sh-h!" whispered one of the voices. "He's recovering!"

He looked solemnly into the eyes of an old man; a pair of wise and gentle eyes that reminded him somehow of Rudolph's.

"Quiet now, Peter," said the old man. "You'll be all right in a few minutes. Banged up a bit, you are, but nothing serious."

"Don't call me Peter," objected Karl. He loathed the sound of the name; loathed himself for his recent thoughts and actions. "I am Karl Krassin," he continued, "and as such will remain until I die."

There were others in the room and he saw glances of satisfaction pass between them. This was a strange situation. These men were not of the purple. Neither were they of the gray. Their garments shone with the whiteness of pure silver. And that's what they were; of finely woven metallic cloth. Was he in another world?

"Very well, Karl." The kind old man was speaking once more. "I merely want you to know that you are among friends--your father's friends."

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Surprised into complete wakefulness, Karl struggled to a seated position and surveyed the group that faced him. They were a fine looking lot, mostly older men, but there was a refreshing wholesomeness about them.

"My father?" he faltered. "He's not alive."

"No, my poor boy. Derek Van Dorn left this life at the hands of your uncle, Zar Boris. But we, his friends, are here to avenge him and to restore to you his throne."

"But--but--I still do not understand."

"Of course not, because we've kept ourselves hidden from the world for more than twenty-two years, waiting for this very moment. There are forty-one of us, including Rudolph, my brother. We have lived in the jungle since Boris conquered the Eastern Hemisphere. But amongst our numbers were several scientists, two greater than was Boris, even in his heyday. They have done wonderful things and we are now prepared to take back what was taken from Derek--and more. His life we can not restore--Heaven rest him--but his kingdom we can. And to his son it shall be returned.

"You were given into Rudolph's care when little more than a babe in arms and he has cared for you well. We've watched, you know, in the detectoscopes--long range radiovision mechanisms that can penetrate solid walls, the earth itself, to bring to us the images and voices of persons who may be on the other side of the world. We've followed your every move, my boy, and the first time we feared for you was yesterday when the drug of the Zar's physician stole away your sense of right and wrong. But we were in time to save you, and now we are ready to kneel at your feet and proclaim you our king. First there is the Zar to be dealt with and then we shall set up the new regime. Are you with us?"

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Karl gazed at the speaker in wonder. He a king? Always to live amongst the wearers of the purple? To be responsible for the welfare of half the world? It was unthinkable! But Zar Boris, the murderer of his own father--he must be punished, and at the hands of the son!

"I'll do it," he said simply. "That is, I'll do whatever you have planned in the way of exterminating the Zar. Then we'll talk of the new empire. But how is the Zar to be overcome? I thought he was invincible, with his Moon
"Ah! That, my boy, is where our scientists have triumphed. True, his rays were terrible. They could not be combatted when he first returned. The strange chemicals and gases of the Moon men defied analysis or duplication. His citadel atop the city of Dorn is proof against them all; proof against explosives and rays of all kinds known to him. The disintegration and decomposition rays have no effect on the crystal of its walls. It is hermetically sealed from the outer air so can not be gassed. The vibration impulses have no effect upon its reinforced structure. But there is a ray, a powerful destructive agent, against which it is not proof. And our scientists have developed this agency. You shall have the privilege of pressing the release of the energy that destroys the arch-fiend in his lair. His dominance over, the empire will fall. We shall take it--for you."

A strange exaltation shone from the faces of those in the room, and Karl found that it was contagious. His bosom swelled and he itched to handle the controls of this wonderful ray.

"This ray," continued the brother of old Rudolph, "carries the longest vibrations ever measured, the vibrations of infra-red, the heat-ray. We have succeeded in concentrating a terrific amount of power in its production, and with it are able to produce temperatures in excess of that of the interior of the earth, where all substances are molten or gaseous. The Zar's crystal palace cannot withstand it for a second. He cannot escape!"

"How'll you know he's there at the time?" Karl was greatly excited, but he was curious too.

"Come with me, my boy. I'll show you." The old man led him from the room and the others followed respectfully.

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They stopped at a circular port and Karl saw that they were high above the earth in a vessel that hovered motionless, quivering with what seemed like human eagerness to be off.

"This vessel?" he asked.

"It's a huge sphere; the base of our operations. To it we drew the aero on which you were fighting. A magnetic force discovered by our scientists and differing only slightly from that used in counteracting gravity. We let the rest of them go; foolishly I think. But it's done now and we have no fear. From this larger vessel we shall send forth smaller ones, armed with the heat-ray. The flagship of the fleet is to be yours and you'll lead the attack on Dorn. Here--I'll show you the Zar."

They had reached the room of the detectoscopes--a mass of mechanisms that reminded Karl of nothing so much as the vitals of the intermediate levels which he had visited with Leon--and Rhoda. He knew that he flushed when he thought of her. What a fool he had been!

A disc glowed as one of the silver-robed strangers manipulated the controls. The upper surface of Dorn swung into view. Rapidly the image drew nearer and they were looking at the crystal pyramid that was the Zar's palace. Down, down to its very tip they passed. Karl recoiled from the image as it seemed they were falling to its glistening sides. The sensation passed. They were through, penetrating solid crystal, masonry, steel and duralumin girders. Room after room was opened to their view. It was magic--the magic of the upper levels.

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Now they were in the throne room. A group of purple-clad men and women stood before the dais. Leon, Rhoda--all of his wild companions were there, facing the dais. The Zar was raging and the words of his speech came raucously to their ears through the sound-producing mechanism.

"You've failed miserably, all of you," he screamed. "He's gotten away and you know the penalty. Taru--the vibrating ray!"

The Moon man already was fussing with a gleaming machine, a machine with bristling appendages having metallic spheres on their ends, a machine in which dozens of vacuum tubes glowed suddenly.

Rhoda screamed. It was a familiar sound to Karl. He noted with satisfaction that Leon could hardly stand on his feet and that his face was covered with plasters. Then, startled, he saw that Leon was shivering as with the ague. His outline on the screen grew dim and indistinct as the rate of vibration increased. Then the body bloated and became misty. He could see through it. The vibrating death! His father had gone the same way!

Karl groaned at the thought. The whine of the distant machine rose in pitch until it passed the limit of audibility. Tiny pin-points of incandescence glowed here and there from the Zar's victims as periods of vibration were reached that coincided with the natural periods of certain of the molecules of their structure. They were no longer recognizable as human beings. Shimmering auras surrounded them. Suddenly they were torches of cold fire, weaving, oscillating with inconceivable rapidity. Then they were gone; vanished utterly.

The Zar laughed--that horrible cackle again.

"Great God!" exclaimed Karl, "let's go! The fiend must not live a moment longer than necessary. Are you ready?"

Rudolph's brother smiled. "We're ready Karl," he said.
The great vessel hummed with activity. The five torpedo-shaped aeros of the battle fleet were ready to take off from the cavities in the hull. In the flagship Karl was stationed at the control of the heat-ray. His instructions in its operation had been simple. A telescopic sight with crosshairs for the centering of the object to be attacked; a small lever. That was all. He burned with impatience.

Then they were dropping; falling clear of the mother ship. The pilot pressed a button and the electronic motors started. A burst of roaring energy streamed from the tapered stern of their vessel and the earth lurched violently to meet them. Down, down they dived until the rocking surface of Dorn was just beneath them. Then they flattened out and circled the vast upper surface. From the corner of his eye Karl saw that the other four vessels of his fleet were just behind. There was a flurry among the wasplike clouds of pleasure craft over the city. They scurried for cover. Something was amiss!

"Hurry!" shouted Karl. "The warning is out! There is no time to lose!"

He pressed his face to the eye-piece of his sight, his finger on the release lever of the ray. The crystal pyramid crossed his view and was gone. Again it crossed, more slowly this time. And now his sight was dead on it, the gleaming wall rushing toward him. Pressure on the tiny button. They'd crash into the palace in another second! But no, a brilliant flash obscured his vision, a blinding light that made the sun seem dark by comparison. They roared on and upward. He took his eye from the telescope and stared ahead, down. The city was dropping away, and, where the crystal palace had stood, there was a spreading blob of molten material from which searing vapors were drifting. The roofs of the city were sagging all around and great streams of the sparkling, sputtering liquid dripped into the openings that suddenly appeared. Derek Van Dorn was avenged.

"Destroy! Destroy!" yelled Karl madly. A microphone hung before him and his words rang through every vessel of his convoy.

The lust of battle was upon him. A fleet of the Zar's aeros had risen from below; twenty of them at least. These would be manned by Moon creatures, he knew, and would carry all of the dreadful weapons which had originated on that strange body. But he did not know that his own ships were insulated against most of the rays used by the Zar's forces. He knew only that he must fight; fight and kill; exterminate every last one of the Zar's adherents or be exterminated in the attempt.

Kill! Kill! The madness was contagious. His pilot was a marvel and drove his ship straight for the massed ships of the foe. The air was vivid with light-streamers. A ray from an enemy vessel struck the thick glass of the port through which he looked and the outer surface was shattered and pock-marked. But a cloud of vapor and a dripping stream of fiery liquid told him his own ray had taken effect on a vessel of the enemy. One! They wheeled about and spiraled, coming up under another of the Zar's aeros. It vanished in a puff of steam and they narrowly missed being covered by the falling remnants of incandescent liquid. Two! Karl's aim was good and he gloated in the fact. Three! They climbed and turned over, dropping again into the fray. Four!

The air grew stifling, for the expended energy of the enemies' rays must needs be absorbed. It could not disintegrate them nor decompose their bodies, but the contacts were many and the liberation of heat enormous. They were suffocating! But Karl would not desist. They drove on, now beneath, now above an enemy ship. He lost count.

One of his own vessels was in trouble. The report came to him from the little speaker at his ear. He looked around in alarm. A glowing object reeled uncertainly over there between two of the aeros of the Zar. The concentration of beams of vibrations was too much for the sturdy craft. It was red hot and its occupants burned alive where they sat. Suddenly it slipped into a spin and went slithering down into the city, leaving a gaping opening where it fell. This sobered him somewhat, but he went into the battle with renewed fury.

How many had they brought down? Fifteen? Sixteen? He tore his purple jacket from his body. The perspiration rolled from his pores. His own ship would be next. But what did it matter? Kill! Kill! He shouted once more into the microphone, then dived into battle. Another and another! In Heaven's name, how many were there? It was maddening. If only he could breathe. His lungs were seared; his eyes smarting from the heat. And then it was over.

Three of the Zar's aeros remained, and these turned tail to run for it. No! They were falling, nose down, under full power; diving into the city from which they had come. Suicide? Yes. They couldn't face the recriminations that must come to them. And anything was better than facing that burning death from the strange little fighters which had come from out the skies. Dorn was a mass of wreckage.

Karl tore at the fastenings of the ports, searing his fingers on the heated metal. His pilot had collapsed, the little aero heading madly skyward with no guiding hand. Air! They must have air! He loosened the pilot's jacket; slapped frantically at his wrists in the effort to bring him to consciousness. Then he was at the controls of the vessel, tugging on first one, then the other. The aero circled and spun, executing the most dangerous of sideslips and dives. A little
voice was speaking to him--the voice of the radio--instructing him. In a daze he followed instructions as best he could. The whirlings of the earth stabilized after a time and he found he was flying the vessel; climbing rapidly.

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A sense of power came to him as the little voice of the radio continued to instruct. Here were the controls of the electronic motor; there the gravity-energy. He was proceeding in the wrong direction. But what did it matter? He learned the meaning of the tiny figures of the altimeter; the difference between the points of the compass. Still he drove on.

"East! Turn East!" begged the little voice from the radio. "You're heading west. Your speed--a thousand kilometers an hour--it's too fast. Turn back, Zar Peter!"

He tore the loud speaker of the radio from its fastenings. West! He wanted to go west! On and on he sped, becoming more and more familiar with the workings of the little vessel as he progressed. A cooling breeze whistled from the opened ports, a breeze that smelled of the sea. His heart sang with the wonder of it all. He could fly. And fly he did. Zar Peter? Never! He knew now where he belonged; knew what he wanted. He'd find the coast of North America. Follow it until he located New York. A landing would be easy, for had not the voice instructed him in the use of the gravity-energy? He'd make his way to the lower levels, to the little book shop of Rudolph Krassin. A suit of gray denim awaited him there and he'd never discard it.

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Onward he sped into the night, which was falling fast. He held to his westward course like a veteran of the air lanes. The pilot had ceased to breathe and Karl was sorry. Game little devil, that pilot. Have to shove his body overboard. Too bad.

Rudolph's brother would understand. He'd be watching in the detectoscope. And the others--those who had wished to seat him on a throne--they'd understand, too. They'd have to!

Rudolph would forgive him, he knew. Paul Van Dorn--his own cousin--the secret agents of the Zar would never locate him! Too many friends of Rudolph's were of the red police.

He gave himself over to happy thoughts as the little aero sped on in the darkness. Home! He was going home! Back to the gray denim, where he belonged and where now he would remain content.
Lenville! Bert Redmond had never heard of the place until he received Joan's letter. But here it was, a tiny straggling village cuddled amongst the Ramapo hills of lower New York State, only a few miles from Tuxedo. There was a prim, white-painted church, a general store with the inevitable gasoline pump at the curb, and a dozen or so of weatherbeaten frame houses. That was all. It was a typical, dusty cross-roads hamlet of the vintage of thirty years before, utterly isolated and apart from the rushing life of the broad concrete highway so short a distance away.

Bert stopped his ancient and battered flivver at the corner where a group of overalled loungers was gathered. Its asthmatic motor died with a despairing cough as he cut the ignition.

"Anyone tell me where to find the Carmody place?" he sang out.

No one answered, and for a moment there was no movement amongst his listeners. Then one of the loungers, an old man with a stubble of gray beard, drew near and regarded him through thick spectacles.

"You ain't aimin' to go up there alone, be you?" the old fellow asked in a thin cracked voice.

"Certainly. Why?" Bert caught a peculiar gleam in the watery old eyes that were enlarged so enormously by the thick lenses. It was fear of the supernatural that lurked there, stark terror, almost.

"Don't you go up to the Carmody place, young feller. They's queer doin's in the big house, is why. Blue lights at night, an' noises inside--an' cracklin' like thunder overhead--"

"Aw shet up, Gramp!" Another of the idlers, a youngster with chubby features, and downy of lip and chin, sauntered over from the group, interrupting the old man's discourse. "Don't listen to him," he said to Bert. "He's cracked a mite--been seein' things. The big house is up yonder on the hill. See, with the red chimbley showin' through the trees. They's a windin' road down here a piece."

Bert followed the pointing finger with suddenly anxious gaze. It was not an inviting spot, that tangle of second-growth timber and underbrush that hid the big house on the lonely hillside; it might conceal almost anything. And Joan Parker was there!

The one called Gramp was screeching invectives at the grinning bystanders. "You passel o' young idjits!" he stormed. "I seen it, I tell you. An' heard things, too. The devil hisself is up there--an' his imps. We'd oughtn't to let this feller go...."

Bert waited to hear no more. Unreasoning fear came to him that something was very much amiss up there at the big house, and he started the flivver with a thunderous barrage of its exhaust.

The words of Joan's note were vivid in his mind: "Come to me, Bert, at the Carmody place in Lenville. Believe me, I need you." Only that, but it had been sufficient to bring young Redmond across three states to this measly town that wasn't even on the road maps.

Bert yanked the bouncing car into the winding road that led up the hill, and thought grimly of the quarrel with Joan two years before. He had told her then, arrogantly, that she'd need him some day. But now that his words had proved true the fact brought him no consolation nor the slightest elation. Joan was there in this lonely spot, and she did need him. That was enough.

He ran nervous fingers through his already tousled mop of sandy hair—a habit he had when disturbed—and nearly wrecked the car on a gray boulder that encroached on one of the two ruts which, together, had been termed a road.

Stupid, that quarrel of theirs. And how stubborn both had been! Joan had insisted on going to the big city to follow the career her brother had chosen for her. Chemistry, biology, laboratory work! Bert sniffed, even now. But he had been equally stubborn in his insistence that she marry him instead and settle down on the middle-Western fruit farm.

With a sudden twist, the road turned in at the entrance of a sadly neglected estate. The grounds of the place were overrun with rank growths and the driveway was covered with weeds. The tumble-down gables of a descrepit frame house peeped out through the trees. It was a rambling old building that once had been a mansion—the "big house" of the natives. A musty air of decay was upon it, and crazily askew window shutters proclaimed deep-shrouded mystery within.

Bert drew up at the rickety porch and stopped the flivver with its usual shuddering jerk.

As if his coming had been watched for through the stained glass of its windows, the door was flung violently open. A white-clad figure darted across the porch, but not before Bert had untangled the lean six feet of him from under the flivver's wheel and bounded up the steps.
"Joan!"
"Bert! I--I'm sorry."
"Me too." Swallowing hard, Bert Redmond held her close.
"But I won't go back to Indiana!" The girl raised her chin and the old defiance was in her tearful gaze.
Bert stared. Joan was white and wan, a mere shadow of her old self. And she was trembling, hysterical.
"That's all right," he whispered. "But tell me now, what is it? What's wrong?"
With sudden vigor she was drawing him into the house. "It's Tom," she quavered. "I can't do a thing with him; can't get him to leave here. And something terrible is about to happen, I know. I thought perhaps you could help, even if--"
"Tom Parker here?" Bert was surprised that the fastidious older brother should leave his comfortable city quarters and lose himself in this God-forsaken place. "Sure, I'll help, dear--if I can."
"You can; oh, I'm sure you can," the girl went on tremulously. A spot of color flared in either cheek. "It's his experiments. He came over from New York about a year ago and rented this old house. The city laboratory wasn't secluded enough. And I've helped him until now in everything. But I'm frightened; he's playing with dangerous forces. He doesn't understand--won't understand. But I saw...."
And then Joan Parker slumped into a high-backed chair that stood in the ancient paneled hall. Soft waves of her chestnut hair framed the pinched, terrified face, and wide eyes looked up at Bert, with the same horror he had seen in those of the old fellow the village. A surge of the old tenderness welled up in him and he wanted to take her in his arms.
"Wait," she said, swiftly rising. "I'll let you judge for yourself. Here--go into the laboratory and talk with Tom."
She pushed him forward and through a door that closed softly behind him. He was in a large room that was cluttered with the most bewildering array of electrical mechanisms he had ever seen. Joan had remained outside.

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Tom Parker, his hair grayer and forehead higher than when Bert had seen him last, rose from where he was stooping over a work bench. He advanced, smiling, and his black eyes were alight with genuine pleasure. Bert had anticipated a less cordial welcome.

"Albert Redmond!" exclaimed the older man. "This is a surprise. Glad to see you, boy, glad to see you."
He meant it, Tom did, and Bert wrung the extended hand heartily. Yet he dared not tell of Joan's note. The two men had always been the very best of friends--except in the matter of Joan's future.
"You haven't changed much," Bert ventured.
Tom Parker laughed. "Not about Joan, if that is what you mean. She likes the work and will go far in it. Why, Bert--"
"Sa-ay, wait a minute." Bert Redmond's mien was solemn. "I saw her outside, Tom, and was shocked. She isn't herself--doesn't look at all well. Haven't you noticed, man?"
The older man sobered and a puzzled frown crossed his brow. "I have noticed, yes. But it's nonsense, Bert, I swear it is. She has been having dreams--worrying a lot, it seems. Guess I'll have to send her to the doctor?"
"Dreams? Worry?" Bert thought of the old man called Gramp.
"Yes. I'll tell you all about it--what we're working on here--and show you. It's no wonder she gets that way, I guess. I've been a bit loony with the marvel of it myself at times. Come here."
Tom led him to an intricate apparatus which bore some resemblance to a television radio. There were countless vacuum tubes and their controls, tiny motors belted to slotted disks that would spin when power was applied, and a double eyepiece.
"Before I let you look," Tom was saying, "I'll give you an idea of it, to prepare you. This is a mechanism I've developed for a study of the less-understood dimensions. The results have more than justified my expectations--they're astounding. Bert, we can actually see into these realms that were hitherto unexplored. We can examine at close range the life of these other planes. Think of it!"
"Life--plane--dimensions?" said Bert blankly. "Remember, I know very little about this science of yours."

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"Haven't you read the newspaper accounts of Einstein's researches and of others who have delved into the theory of relativity?"
"Sa-ay! I read them, but they don't tell me a thing. It's over my head a mile."
"Well, listen: this universe of ours--space and all it contains--is a thing of five dimensions, a continuum we have never begun to contemplate in its true complexity and immensity. There are three of its dimensions with which we are familiar. Our normal senses perceive and understand them--length, breadth and thickness. The fourth dimension, time, or, more properly, the time-space interval, we have only recently understood. And this fifth dimension, Bert, is something no man on earth has delved into--excepting myself."
"You don't say." Bert was properly impressed; the old gleam of the enthusiastic scientist was in Tom's keen eyes.

"Surest thing. I have called this fifth dimension the interval of oscillation, though the term is not precisely correct. It has to do with the arrangement, the speed and direction of movement, and the polarity of protonic and electronic energy charges of which matter is comprised. It upsets some of our old and accepted natural laws—one in particular. Bert, two objects can occupy the same space at the same time, though only one is perceptible to our earthbound senses. Their differently constituted atoms exist in the same location without interference—merely vibrating in different planes. There are many such planes in this fifth dimension of space, all around us, some actually inhabited. Each plane has a different atomic structure of matter, its own oscillation interval of the energy that is matter, and a set of natural laws peculiar to itself. I can't begin to tell you; in fact, I've explored only a fraction. But here—look!"

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Tom's instrument set up a soft purring at his touch of a lever, and eerie blue light flickered from behind the double eyepiece, casting grotesque shadows on walls and ceiling, and paling to insignificance the light of day that filtered through the long-unwashed windows.

Bert squinted through the hooded twin lenses. At first he was dazzled and confused by the rapidly whirling light-images, but these quickly resolved into geometric figures, an inconceivable number of them, extending off into limitless space in a huge arc, revolving and tumbling like the colored particles in an old-fashioned kaleidoscope. Cubes, pyramids and cones of variegated hues. Swift-rushing spheres and long slim cylinders of brilliant blue-white; gleaming disks of polished jet, spinning....

Abruptly the view stabilized, and clear-cut stationary objects sprang into being. An unbroken vista of seamed chalky cliffs beside an inky sea whose waters rose and fell rhythmically yet did not break against the towering palisade. Wave-less, glass-smooth, these waters. A huge blood-red sun hanging low in a leaden though cloudless sky, reflecting scintillating flecks of gold and purple brilliance from the ocean's black surface.

At first there was no sign of life to be seen. Then a mound was rising up from the sea near the cliff, a huge tortoiselike shape that stretched forth several flat members which adhered to the vertical white wall is if held by suction disks. Ponderously the thing turned over and headed up from the inky depths, spewing out from its concave under side an army of furry brown bipeds. Creatures with bloated torsos in which head and body merged so closely as to be indistinguishable one from the other, balanced precariously on two spindly legs, and with long thin arms like tentacles, waving and coiling. Spiderlike beings ran out over the smooth dark surface of the sea as if it were solid ground.

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"Jupiter!" Bert looked up from the eyepiece, blinking into the triumphant grinning face of Tom Parker. "You mean to tell me these creatures are real?" he demanded. "Living here, all around us, in another plane where we can't see them without this machine of yours?"

"Surest thing. And this is but one of many such planes."

"They can't get through, to our plane?"

"Lord no, man, how could they?"

A sharp crackling peal of thunder rang out overhead and Tom Parker went suddenly white. Outside, the sky was cloudless.

"And that--what's that?" Bert remembered the warning of the old man of the village, and Joan's obvious fear.

"It—it's only a physical manifestation of the forces I use in obtaining visual connection, one of the things that worries Joan. Yet I can't find any cause for alarm...."

The scientist's voice droned on endlessly, technically. But Bert knew there was something Tom did not understand, something he was trying desperately to explain to himself.

Thunder rumbled once more, and Bert returned his eyes to the instrument. Directly before him in the field of vision a group of the spider men advanced over the pitchy sea with a curiously constructed cage of woven transparent material which they set down at a point so close by that it seemed he could touch it if he stretched out his hand. The illusion of physical nearness was perfect. The evil eyes of the creatures were fastened upon him; tentacle arms uncoiled and reached forth as if to break down the barrier that separated them.

And then a scream penetrated his consciousness, wrenching him back to consideration of his immediate surroundings. The laboratory door burst open and Joan, pale and disheveled, dashed into the room.

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Tom shouted, running forward to intercept her, and Bert saw what he had not seen before, a ten-foot circle of blue-white metal set in the floor and illuminated by a shaft of light from a reflector on the ceiling above Tom's machine.
"Joan--the force area!" Tom was yelling. "Keep away!"

Tom had reached the distraught girl and was struggling with her over on the far side of the disk.

There came a throbbing of the very air surrounding them, and Bert saw Tom and Joan on the other side of the force area, their white faces indistinct and wavering as if blurred by heat waves rising between. The rumblings and cracklings overhead increased in intensity until the old house swayed and creaked with the concussions. Hazy forms materialized on the lighted disk--the cage of the transparent, woven basket--dark spidery forms within. The creatures from that other plane!

"Joan! Tom!" Bert's voice was soundless as he tried to shout, and his muscles were paralyzed when he attempted to hurl himself across to them. The blue-white light had spread and formed a huge bubble of white brilliance, a transparent elastic solid that flung him back when he attacked it in vain with his fists.

Within its confines he saw Joan and her brother scuffling with the spider men, tearing at the tentacle arms that encircled them and drew them relentlessly into the basket-weave cage. There was a tremendous thump and the warping of the very universe about them all. Bert Redmond, his body racked by insupportable tortures, was hurled into the black abyss of infinity....

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This was not death nor was it a dream from which he would awaken. After that moment of mental agony and ghastly physical pain, after a dizzying rush through inky nothingness, Bert knew suddenly that he was very much alive. If he had lost consciousness at all, it had been for no great length of time. And yet there was this sense of strangeness in his surroundings, a feeling that he had been transported over some nameless gulf of space. He had dropped to his knees, but with the swift return of normal faculties he jumped to his feet.

A tall stranger confronted him, a half-nude giant with bronzed skin and of solemn visage. The stalwart build of him and the smooth contours of cheek and jaw proclaimed him a man not yet past middle age, but his uncropped hair was white as the driven snow.

They stood in a spherical chamber of silvery metal, Bert and this giant, and the gentle vibration of delicately balanced machinery made itself felt in the structure. Of Joan and Tom there was no sign.

"Where am I?" Bert demanded. "And where are my friends? Why am I with you, without them?"

Compassion was in the tall stranger's gaze--and something more. The pain of a great sorrow filled the brown eyes that looked down at Bert, and resignation to a fate that was shrouded in ineffable mystery.

"Trust me," he said in a mellow slurring voice. "Where you are, you shall soon learn. You are safe. And your friends will be located."

"Will be located! Don't you know where they are?" Bert laid hands on the big man's wrists and shook him impatiently. The stranger was too calm and unmoved in the face of this tremendous thing which had come to pass.

"I know where they have been taken, yes. But there is no need of haste out here in infra-dimensional space, for time stands still. We will find it a simple matter to reach the plane of their captors, the Bardeks, within a few seconds after your friends arrive there. My plane segregator--this sphere--will accomplish this in due season."

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Strangely, Bert believed him. This talk of dimensions and planes and of the halting of time was incomprehensible, but somehow there was communicated to his own restless nature something of the placid serenity of the white-haired stranger. He regarded the man more closely, saw there was an alien look about him that marked him as different and apart from the men of Earth. His sole garment was a wide breech clout of silvery stuff that glinted with changing colors--hues foreign to nature on Earth. His was a superhuman perfection of muscular development, and there was an indescribable mingling of gentleness and sternness in his demeanor. With a start, Bert noted that his fingers were webbed, as were his toes.

"Sa-ay," Bert exclaimed, "who are you, anyway?"

The stranger permitted himself the merest ghost of a smile. "You may call me Wanderer," he said. "I am the Wanderer of Infinity."

"Infinity! You are not of my world?"

"But no."

"You speak my language."

"It is one of many with which I am familiar."

"I--I don't understand." Bert Redmond was like a man in a trance, completely under the spell of his amazing host's personality.

"It is given to few men, to understand." The Wanderer fell silent, his arms folded across his broad chest. And his great shoulders bowed as under the weight of centuries of mankind's cares. "Yet I would have you understand, O Man-Called-Bert, for the tale is a strange one and is heavy upon me."

It was uncanny that this Wanderer should address him by name. Bert thrilled to a new sense of awe.
"But," he objected, "my friends are in the hands of the spider men. You said we'd go to them. Good Lord, man, I've got to do it!"

"You forget that time means nothing here. We will go to them in precise synchronism with the proper time as existent in that plane."

The Wanderer's intense gaze held Bert speechless, hypnotized. A swift dimming of the sphere's diffused illumination came immediately, and darkness swept down like a blanket, thick and stifling. This was no ordinary darkness, but utter absence of light--the total obscurity of Erebus. And the hidden motors throbbed with sudden new vigor.

"Behold!" At the Wanderer's exclamation the enclosing sphere became transparent and they were in the midst of a dizzying maelstrom of flashing color. Brilliant geometric shapes, there were, whirling off into the vastness of space; as Bert had seen them in Tom Parker's instrument. A gigantic arc of rushing light-forms spanning the black gulf of an unknown cosmos. And in the foreground directly under the sphere was a blue-white disk, horizontally fixed--a substantial and familiar object, with hazy surroundings likewise familiar.

"Isn't that the metal platform in my friend's laboratory?" asked Bert, marveling.

"It is indeed." The mellow voice of the Wanderer was grave, and he laid a hand on Bert's arm. "And for so long as it exists it constitutes a serious menace to your civilization. It is a gateway to your world, a means of contact with your plane of existence for those many vicious hordes that dwell in other planes of the fifth dimension. Without it, the Bardeks had not been able to enter and effect the kidnaping of your friends. Oh, I tried so hard to warn them--Parker and the girl--but could not do it in time."

A measure of understanding came to Bert Redmond. This was the thing Joan had feared and which Tom Parker had neglected to consider. The forces which enabled the scientist to see into the mysterious planes of this uncharted realm were likewise capable of providing physical contact between the planes, or actual travel from one to the other. Tom had not learned how to use the forces in this manner, but the Bardeks had.

"We travel now along a different set of coordinates, those of space-time," said the Wanderer. "We go into the past, through eons of time as it is counted in your world."

"Into the past," Bert repeated. He stared foolishly at his host, whose eyes glittered strangely in the flickering light.

"Yes, we go to my home--to what was my home."

"To your home? Why?" Bert shrank before the awful contorted face of the Wanderer. A spasm of ferocity had crossed it on his last words. Some fearful secret must be gnawing at the big man's vitals.

"Again you must trust me. To understand, it is necessary that you see."

The gentle whir of machinery rose to a piercing shriek as the Wanderer manipulated the tiny levers of a control board that was set in the smooth transparent wall. And the rushing light-forms outside became a blur at first, then a solid stream of cold liquid fire into which they plunged at breakneck speed.

There was no perceptible motion of the sphere, however. It was the only object that seemed substantial and fixed in an intangible and madly gyrating universe. Its curved wall, though transparent, was solid, comforting to the touch.

Standing by his instrument board, the Wanderer was engrossed in a tabulation of mathematical data he was apparently using in setting the many control knobs before him. Plotting their course through infinity! His placid serenity of countenance had returned, but there was a new eagerness in his intense gaze and his strong fingers trembled while he manipulated the tiny levers and dials.

Outside the apparently motionless sphere, a never-ending riot of color surged swiftly and silently by, now swirling violently in great sweeping arcs of blinding magnificence, now changing character and driving down from dizzying heights as a dim-lit column of gray that might have been a blast of steam from some huge inverted geyser of the cosmos. Always there were the intermittent black bands that flashed swiftly across the brightness, momentarily darkening the sphere and then passing on into the limbo of this strange realm between planes.

Abruptly then, like the turning of a page in some gigantic book, the swift-moving phantasmagoria swung back into the blackness of the infinite and was gone. Before them stretched a landscape of rolling hills and fertile valleys. Overhead, the skies were a deep blue, almost violet, and twin suns shone down on the scene. The sphere drifted along a few hundred feet from the surface.

"Urtraria!" the Wanderer breathed reverently. His white head was bowed and his great hands clutched the small rail of the control board.

In a daze of conflicting emotions, Bert watched as this land of peace and plenty slipped past beneath them.
This, he knew, had been the home of Wanderer. In what past age or at how great a distance it was from his own world, he could only imagine. But that the big man who called himself Wanderer loved this country there was not the slightest doubt. It was a fetish with him, a past he was in duty bound to revisit time and again, and to mourn over.

Smooth broad lakes, there were, and glistening streams that ran their winding courses through well-kept and productive farmlands. And scattered communities with orderly streets and spacious parks. Roads, stretching endless ribbons of wide metallic surface across the countryside. Long two-wheeled vehicles skimming over the roads with speed so great the eye could scarcely follow them. Flapping-winged ships of the air, flying high and low in all directions. A great city of magnificent dome-topped buildings looming up suddenly at the horizon.

The sphere proceeded swiftly toward the city. Once a great air liner, flapping huge gossamerlike wings, drove directly toward them. Bert cried out in alarm and ducked instinctively, but the ship passed through them and on its way. It was as if they did not exist in this spherical vehicle of the dimensions.

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"We are here only as onlookers," the Wanderer explained sadly, "and can have no material existence here. We can not enter this plane, for there is no gateway. Would that there were."

Now they were over the city and the sphere came to rest above a spacious flat roof where there were luxurious gardens and pools, and a small glass-domed observatory. A woman was seated by one of the pools, a beautiful woman with long golden hair that fell in soft profusion over her ivory shoulders and bosom. Two children, handsome stalwart boys of probably ten and twelve, romped with a domestic animal which resembled a foxhound of Earth but had glossy short-haired fur and flippers like those of a seal. Suddenly these three took to the water and splashed with much vigor and joyful shouting.

The Wanderer gripped Bert's arm with painful force. "My home!" he groaned. "Understand, Earthling? This was my home, these my wife and children--destroyed through my folly. Destroyed, I say, in ancient days. And by my accursed hand--when the metal monsters came."

There was madness in the Wanderer's glassy stare, the madness of a tortured soul within. Bert began to fear him.

"We should leave," he said. "Why torment yourself with such memories? My friends...."

"Have patience, Earthling. Don't you understand that I sinned and am therefore condemned to this torment? Can't you see that I must unburden my soul of its ages-old load, that I must revisit the scene of my crime, that others must see and know? It is part of my punishment, and you, perforce, must bear witness. Moreover, it is to help your friends and your world that I bring you here. Behold!"

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A man was coming out of the observatory, a tall man with bronzed skin and raven locks. It was the Wanderer himself, the Wanderer of the past, as he had been in the days of his youth and happiness.

The woman by the pool had risen from her seat and was advancing eagerly toward her mate. Bert saw that the man hardly glanced in her direction, so intent was he upon an object over which he stood. The object was a shimmering bowl some eight or ten feet across, which was mounted on a tripod near the observatory, and over whose metallic surface a queer bluish light was playing.

It was a wordless pantomime, the ensuing scene, and Bert watched in amazement. This woman of another race, another age, another plane, was pleading with her man. Sobbing soundlessly, wretchedly. And the man was unheeding, impatient with her demonstrations. He shoved her aside as she attempted to interfere with his manipulations of some elaborate mechanical contrivance at the side of the bowl.

And then there was a sudden roaring vibration, a flash of light leaping from the bowl, and the materialization of a spherical vessel that swallowed up the man and vanished in the shaft of light like a moth in the flame of a candle.

At Bert's side, the Wanderer was a grim and silent figure, misty and unreal when compared with those material, emotion-torn beings of the rooftop. The woman, swooning, had wilted over the rim of the bowl, and the two boys with their strange amphibious pet splashed out from the pool and came running to her, wide-eyed and dripping.

The Wanderer touched a lever and again there was the sensation as of a great page turned across the vastness of the universe. All was hazy and indistinct outside the sphere that held them, with a rushing blur of dimly gray light-forms. Beneath them remained only the bright outline of the bowl, an object distinct and real and fixed in space.

"It was thus I left my loved ones," the Wanderer said hollowly. "In fanatical devotion to my science, but in blind disregard of those things which really mattered. Observe, O Man-Called-Bert, that the bowl is still existent in infra-dimensional space--the gateway I left open to Utraria. So it remained while I, fool that I was, explored those planes of the fifth dimension that were all around us though we saw and felt them not. Only I had seen, even as your friend Tom has seen. And, like him, I heeded not the menace of the things I had witnessed. We go now to the plane of the metal monsters. Behold!"
The sphere shuddered to the increased power of its hidden motors and another huge page seemed to turn slowly over, lurching sickeningly as it came to rest in the new and material plane of existence. Here, Bert understood now, the structure of matter was entirely different. Atoms were comprised of protons and electrons whirling at different velocities and in different orbits—possibly some of the electrons in reverse direction to those of the atomic structure of matter in Urtraria. And these coexisted with those others in the same relative position in time and in space. Ages before, the thing had happened, and he was seeing it now.

They were in the midst of a forest of conical spires whose sides were of dark glittering stuff that reminded Bert of the crystals of carborundum before pulverizing for commercial use. A myriad of deep colors were reflected from the sharply pointed piles in the light of a great cold moon that hung low in the heavens above them.

In the half light down there between the circular bases of the cones, weird creatures were moving. Like great earthworms they moved, sluggishly and with writhing contortions of their many-jointed bodies. Long cylindrical things with glistening gray hide, like armor plate and with fearsome heads that reared upward occasionally to reveal the single flaming eye and massive iron jaws each contained. There were riveted joints and levers, wheels and gears that moved as the creatures moved; darting lights that flashed forth from trunnion-mounted cases like the searchlights of a battleship of Earth; great swiveled arms with grappling hooks attached. They were mechanical contrivances—the metal monsters of which the Wanderer had spoken. Whether their brains were comprised of active living cells or whether they were cold, calculating machines of metallic parts, Bert was never to know.

"See, the gateway," the Wanderer was saying. "They are investigating. It is the beginning of the end of Urtraria—all as it occurred in the dim and distant past."

He gripped Bert's arm, pointing a trembling finger, and his face was a terrible thing to see in the eerie light of their sphere.

A sharply outlined circle of blue-white appeared down there in the midst of the squirming monsters. The sphere drifted lower and Bert was able to see that a complicated machine was being trundled out from an arched doorway in the base of one of the conical dwellings. It was moved to the edge of the light circle which was the bowl on that rooftop of Urtraria. The same bowl! A force area like that used by Tom Parker, an area existent in many planes of the fifth dimension simultaneously, an area where the various components of wave motion merged and became as one. The gateway between planes!

The machine of the metal monsters was provided with a huge lens and a reflector, and these were trained on the bowl. Wheels and levers of the machine moved swiftly. There came an orange light from within that was focused upon lens and reflector to strike down and mingle with the cold light of the bowl. A startling transformation ensued, for the entire area within view was encompassed with a milky diffused brightness in which two worlds seemed to intermingle and fuse. There were the rooftops of the city in Urtraria and its magnificent domes, a transparent yet substantial reality superimposed upon the gloomy city of cones of the metal monsters.

"Jupiter!" Bert breathed. "They're going through!"

"They are, Earthling. More accurately, they did—thousands of them; millions." Even as the Wanderer spoke, the metal monsters were wriggling through between the two planes, their enormous bodies moving with menacing deliberation.

On the rooftops back in Urtraria could be seen the frantic, fleeing forms of humanlike beings—the Wanderer's people.

There was a sharp click from the control panel and the scene was blotted out by the familiar maze of geometric shapes, the whirling, dancing light-forms that rushed madly past over the vast arch which spanned infinity.

"Where were you at the time?" asked Bert. Awed by what he had seen and with pity in his heart for the man who had unwittingly let loose the horde of metal monsters on his own loved ones and his own land, he stared at the Wanderer.

The big man was standing with face averted, hands clutching the rail of the control panel desperately. "I?" he whispered. "I was roaming the planes, exploring, experimenting, immersed in the pursuits that went with my insatiable thirst for scientific data and the broadening of my knowledge of this complex universe of ours. Forgetting my responsibilities. Unknowing, unsuspecting."

"You returned—to your home?"

"Too late I returned. You shall see; we return now by the same route I then followed."

"No!" Bert shouted, suddenly panicky at thought of what might be happening to Joan and Tom in the land of the Bardeks. "No, Wanderer—tell me, but don't show me. I can imagine. Seeing those loathsome big worms of iron and steel, I can well visualize what they did. Come now, have a heart, man; take me to my friends before...."
"Ah-h!" The Wanderer looked up and a benign look came to take the place of the pain and horror which had contorted his features. "It is well, O Man-Called-Bert. I shall do as you request, for I now see that my mission has been well accomplished. We go to your friends, and fear you not that we shall arrive too late."

"Your--your mission?" Bert calmed immediately under the spell of the Wanderer's new mood.

"My mission throughout eternity, Earthling--can't you sense it? Forever and ever I shall roam infra-dimensional space, watching and waiting for evidence that a similar catastrophe might be visited on another land where warm-blooded thinking humans of similar mold to my own may be living out their short lives of happiness or near-happiness. Never again shall so great a calamity come to mankind anywhere if it be within the Wanderer's power to prevent it. And that is why I snatched you up from your friend's laboratory. That is why I have shown to you the--"

"Me, why me?" Bert exclaimed.

"Attend, O Earthling, and you shall hear."

The mysterious intangibilities of the cosmos whirled by unheeded by either as the Wanderer's tale unfolded.

* * * * *

"When I returned," he said, "the gateway was closed forever. I could not reenter my own plane of existence. The metal monsters had taken possession; they had found a better and richer land than their own, and when they had completed their migration they destroyed the generator of my force area. They had shut me out; but I could visit Utraria--as an outsider, as a wraith--and I saw what they had done. I saw the desolation and the blackness of my once fair land. I saw that--that none of my own kind remained. All, all were gone.

"For a time my reason deserted me and I roamed infra-dimensional space a madman, self-condemned to the outer realms where there is no real material existence, no human companionship, no love, no comfort. When reason returned, I set myself to the task of visiting other planes where beings of my own kind might be found and I soon learned that it was impossible to do this in the body. To these people I was a ghostly visitant, if they sensed my presence at all, for my roamings between planes had altered the characteristics of atomic structure of my being. I could no longer adapt myself to material existence in these planes of the fifth dimension. The orbits of electrons in the atoms comprising my substance had become fixed in a new and outcast oscillation interval. I had remained away too long. I was an outcast, a wanderer--the Wanderer of Infinity."

There was silence in the sphere for a space, save only for the gentle whirring of the motors. Then the Wanderer continued:

"Nevertheless, I roamed these planes as a nonexistent visitor in so far as their peoples were concerned. I learned their languages and came to think of them as my own, and I found that many of their scientific workers were experimenting along lines similar to those which had brought disaster to Utraria. I swore a mighty oath to spend my lifetime in warning them, in warding off a repetition of so terrible a mistake as I had made. On several occasions I have succeeded.

"And then I found that my lifetime was to be for all eternity. In the outer realms time stands still, as I have told you, and in the plane of existence which was now mine--an extra-material plane--I had no prospect of aging or of death. My vow, therefore, is for so long as our universe may endure instead of for merely a lifetime. For this I am duly thankful, for I shall miss nothing until the end of time.

"I visited planes where other monsters, as clever and as vicious as the metal ones who devastated Utraria, were bending every effort of their sciences toward obtaining actual contact with other planes of the fifth dimension. And I learned that such contact was utterly impossible of attainment without a gateway in the realm to which they wished to pass--a gateway such as I had provided for the metal monsters and such as that which your friend Tom Parker has provided for the Bardeks, or spider men, as you term them.

"In intra-dimensional space I saw the glow of Tom Parker's force area and I made my way to your world quickly. But Tom could not get my warning; he was too stubbornly and deeply engrossed in the work he was engaged in. The girl Joan was slightly more susceptible, and I believe she was beginning to sense my telepathic messages when she sent for you. Still and all, I had begun to give up hope when you came on the scene. I took you away just as the spider men succeeded in capturing your friends, and now my hope has revived. I feel sure that my warning shall not have been in vain."

"But," objected Bert, "you've warned me, not the scientist of my world who is able to prevent the thing--"

"Yes, you," the Wanderer broke in. "It is better so. This Tom Parker is a zealot even as was I--a man of science thinking only of his own discoveries. I am not sure he would discontinue his experiments even were he to receive my warning in all its horrible details. But you, O Man-Called-Bert, through your love of his sister and by your influence over him, will be able to do what I can not do myself: bring about the destruction of this apparatus of his; impress upon him the grave necessity of discontinuing his investigations. You can do it, and you alone, now that you fully understand."

"Sa-ay! You're putting it up to me entirely?"
"Nearly so, and there is no alternative. I believe I have not misjudged you; you will not fail, of that I am certain. For the sake of your own kind, for the love of Joan Parker—you will not fail. And for me—for this small measure of atonement it is permitted that I make or help to make possible—"

"No, I'll not fail. Take me to them, quick." Bert grinned understandingly as the Wanderer straightened his broad shoulders and extended his hand.

There was no lack of substantiality in the mighty grip of those closing fingers.

* * * * *

Again the sphere's invisible motors increased speed, and again the dizzying kaleidoscope of color swept past them more furiously.

"We will now overtake them—your friends," said the Wanderer, "in the very act of passing between planes."

"Overtake them..." Bert mumbled. "I don't get it at all, this time traveling. It's over my head a mile."

"It isn't time travel really," explained the Wanderer. "We are merely closing up the time-space interval, moving to the precise spot in the universe where your friend's laboratory existed at the moment of contact between planes with your world and that of the Bardeks. We shall reach there a few seconds after the actual capture."

"No chance of missing?" Bert watched the Wanderer as he consulted his mathematical data and made new adjustments of the controls.

"Not the slightest; it is calculated to a nicety. We could, if we wished, stop just short of the exact time and would see the re-occurrence of their capture. But only as unseen observers—you can not enter the plane as a material being during your own actual past, for your entity would then be duplicated. Of course, I can not enter in any case. But, moving on to the instant after the event, as we shall do, you may enter either plane as a material being or move between the two planes at will by means of the gateway provided by Tom Parker's force area. Do you not now understand the manner in which you will be enabled to carry out the required procedure?"

"H-hmm!" Bert wasn't sure at all. "But this moving through time, and the change from one plane of oscillation to another—they're all mixed up—what have they to do with each other?"

"All five dimensions of our universe are definitely interrelated and dependent one upon the other for the existence of matter in any form whatsoever. You see—but here we are."

* * * * *

The motors slowed down and a titanic page seemed to turn over in the cosmos with a vanishing blaze of magnificence. Directly beneath them glowed the disk of blue-white light that was Tom's force area. The sphere swooped down within its influence and came to rest.

"Make haste," the Wanderer said. "I shall be here in the gateway though you see me not. Bring them here, speedily."

On the one side Bert saw familiar objects in Tom's laboratory, on the other side the white cliff and the pitchy sea of the Bardek realm. And the cage of basket-weave between, with his friends inside struggling with the spider men. It was the instant after the capture.

"Joan! Tom!" Bert shouted.

A side of the sphere had opened and he plunged through and into the Bardek plane—to the inky surface of the sea, fully expecting to sink in its forbidding depths. But the stuff was an elastic solid, springy under his feet and bearing him up as would an air-inflated cushion. He threw himself upon the cage and tore at it with his fingers.

The whimpering screams of the spider men were in his ears, and he saw from the corner of his eye that other of the tortoiselike mounds were rising up out of the viscid black depths, dozens of them, and that hundreds of the Bardeks were closing in on him from all directions. Weapons were in their hands, and a huge engine of warfare like a caterpillar tractor was skimming over the sea from the cliff wall with a great grinding and clanking of its mechanisms.

But the cage was pulling apart in his clutches as if made of reeds. With Joan in one encircling arm he was battling the spider men, driving swift short-arm jabs into their soft bloated bodies with devastating effect. And Tom, recovering from the first surprise of his capture, was doing a good job himself, his flailing arms scattering the Bardeks like ninepins. The Wanderer and his sphere, both doomed to material existence only in infra-dimensional space, had vanished from sight.

A bedlam rose up from the reinforcing hordes as they came in to enter the force area. But Bert sensed the guiding touch of the Wanderer's unseen hand, heard his placid voice urging him, and, in a single wild leap was inside the sphere with the girl.

With Joan safely in the Wanderer's care, he rushed out again for Tom. Then followed a nightmare of battling those twining tentacles and the puffy crowding bodies of the spider men. Wrestling tactics and swinging fists were all that the two Earthlings had to rely upon, but, between them, they managed to fight off a half score of the Bardeks and work their way back into the glowing force area.
"It's no use," Tom gasped. "We can't get back."
"Sure we can. We've a friend--here--in the force area."
Tom Parker staggered: his strength was giving out. "No, no, Bert," he moaned, "I can't. You go on. Leave me here."
"Not on your life!" Bert swung him up bodily into the sphere as he contacted with the invisible metal of its hull. Kicking off the nearest of the spider men, he clambered in after the scientist.

* * * * *

The tableau then presented in the sphere's interior was to remain forever imprinted on Bert's memory, though it was only a momentary flash in his consciousness at the time: the Wanderer, calm and erect at the control panel, his benign countenance alight with satisfaction; Tom Parker, pulling himself to his feet, clutching at the big man's free arm, his mouth opened in astonishment; Joan, seated at the Wanderer's feet with awed and reverent eyes upturned.

There is no passing directly between the planes. One must have the force area as a gateway, and, besides, a medium such as the cage of the Bardeks, the orange light of the metal monsters, or the sphere of the Wanderer. Bert knew this instinctively as the sphere darkened and the flashing light-forms leaped across the blackness.

The motors screamed in rising crescendo as their speed increased. Then, abruptly, the sound broke off into deathly silence as the limit of audibility was passed. Against the brilliant background of swift color changes and geometric light-shapes that so quickly merged into the familiar blur, Bert saw his companions as dim wraithlike forms. He moved toward Joan, groping.

Then came the tremendous thump, the swinging of a colossal page across the void, the warping of the very universe about them, the physical torture and the swift rush through Stygian inkiness....

"Farewell." A single word, whispered like a benediction in the Wanderer's mellow voice, was in Bert's consciousness. He knew that their benefactor had slipped away into the mysterious regions of intra-dimensional space.

* * * * *

Raising himself slowly and dazedly from where he had been flung, he saw they were in Tom's laboratory. Joan lay over there white and still, a pitiful crumpled heap. Panicky, Bert crossed to her. His trembling fingers found her pulse; a sobbing breath of relief escaped his lips. She had merely swooned.

Tom Parker, exhausted from his efforts in that other plane and with the very foundations of his being wrenched by the passage through the fifth dimension, was unable to rise. Only semiconscious, his eyes were glazed with pain, and incoherent moaning sounds came from his white lips when he attempted to speak.

Bert's mind was clearing rapidly. That diabolical machine of Tom's was still operating, the drone of its motors being the only sound in the laboratory as the inventor closed his mouth grimly and made a desperate effort to raise his head. But Bert had seen shapes materializing on the lighted disk that was the gateway between planes and he rushed to the controls of the instrument. That starting lever must be shifted without delay.

"Don't!" Tom Parker had found his voice; his frantic warning was a hoarse whistling gasp. He had struggled to his knees. "It will kill you, Bert. Those things in the force area--partly through--the reaction will destroy the machine and all of us if you turn it off. Don't, I say!"

"What then?" Bert fell back appalled. Hazily, the steel prow of a war machine was forming itself on the metal disk; caterpillar treads moved like ghostly shadows beneath. It was the vanguard of the Bardek hordes!

"Can't do it that way!" Tom had gotten to his feet and was stumbling toward the force area. "Only one way--during the change of oscillation periods. Must mingle other atoms with those before they stabilize in our plane. Must localize annihilating force. Must--"

What was the fool doing? He'd be in the force area in another moment. Bert thrust forward to intercept him; saw that Joan had regained consciousness and was sitting erect, swaying weakly. Her eyes widened with horror as they took in the scene and she screamed once despairingly and was on her feet, tottering.

"Back!" Tom Parker yelled, wheeling. "Save yourselves."

* * * * *

Bert lunged toward him but was too late. Tom had already burst into the force area and cast himself upon the semitransparent tank of the spider men. A blast of searing heat radiated from the disk and the motors of Tom's machine groaned as they slowed down under a tremendous overload.

Joan cried out in awful despair and moved to follow, but her knees gave way beneath her. Moaning and shuddering, she slumped into Bert's arms and he drew her back from the awful heat of the force area.

Then, horrified, they watched as Tom Parker melted into the misty shape of the Bardek war machine. Swiftly his body merged with the half-substance of the tank and became an integral part of the mass. For a horrible instant Tom, too, was transparent--a ghost shape writhing in a ghostly throbbing mechanism of another world. His own atomic structure mingled with that of the alien thing and yet, for a moment, he retained his Earthly form. His lean
face was peaceful in death, satisfied, like the Wanderer's when they had last seen him.

A terrific thunderclap rent the air and a column of flame roared up from the force area. Tom's apparatus glowed to instant white heat, then melted down into sizzling liquid metal and glass. The laboratory was in sudden twilight gloom, save for the tongue of fire that licked up from the force area to the paneled ceiling. On the metal disk, now glowing redly, was no visible thing. The gateway was closed forever.

What more fearful calamity might have befallen had the machine been switched off instead, Bert was never to know. Nor did he know how he reached his parked flivver with Joan a limp sobbing bundle in his arms. He only knew that Tom Parker's sacrifice had saved them, had undoubtedly prevented a horrible invasion of Earth; and that the efforts of the Wanderer had not been in vain.

The old house was burning furiously when he climbed in under the wheel of his car. He held Joan very close and watched that blazing funeral pyre in wordless sorrow as the bereaved girl dropped her head to his shoulder.

A group of men came up the winding road, a straggling group, running--the loungers from the village. In the forefront was the beardless youth who had directed Bert, and, bringing up the rear, limping and scurrying, was the old man they had called Gramp. He was puffing prodigiously when the others gathered around the car, demanding information.

And the old fellow with the thick spectacles talked them all down.

"What'd I tell you?" he screeched. "Didn't I say they was queer doin's up here? Didn't I say the devil was here with his imps--an' the thunder? You're a passel o' idjits like I said--"

The roar of Bert's starting motor drowned out the rest, but the old fellow was still gesticulating and dancing about when they clattered off down the winding road to Lenville.

An hour later Joan had fallen asleep, exhausted.

Night had fallen and, as mile after mile of smooth concrete unrolled beneath the flivver's wheels, Bert gave himself over to thoughts he had not dared to entertain in nearly two years. They'd be happy, he and Joan, and there'd be no further argument. If she still objected to living on the fruit farm, that could be managed easily. They'd live in Indianapolis and he'd buy a new car, a good one, to run back and forth. If, when her grief for Tom had lessened, she wanted to go on with laboratory work and such--well, that was easy, too. Only there would be no fooling around with this dimensional stuff--she'd had enough of that, he knew.

He drew her close with his free arm and his thoughts shifted--moved far out in infra-dimensional space to dwell upon the man of the past who had called himself Wanderer of Infinity. He who would go on and on until the end of time, until the end of all things, watching over the many worlds and planes. Warning peoples of humanlike mold and emotions wherever they might dwell. Helping them. Atoning throughout infinity. Suffering.
have mutinies, disobedience of orders, defections of every variety. That is a real situation, and it will persist until we can induce the men to accept tactical leadership that can cope with the enemy.

"Actually, it is not very remarkable that this situation developed. Strategy is still a rational computable quantity, but the actual tactics of fighting is something else entirely. The aliens have an intellectual response that is in full truth alien to us. It simply cannot be comprehended rationally by a human being, although they manage to guess pretty well the responses of our own fighters. Naturally, the result has been that in the past our losses were almost ninety per cent whenever a patrol actually engaged in a firefight with the enemy.

"Fortunately, the aliens are much too far from their home to possess anything like the number of personnel and other resources that we have. Otherwise, they would have beaten us long ago. Completely wiped us out. And all because an ordinary, intelligent human being cannot learn any patterns by which the aliens operate, and by which he can fight them successfully."

"I know that," the commander muttered. "I spent plenty of time out there before I got tapped for this new branch of service." He rubbed the moist palms of his hands together nervously.

"Certainly you did," the captain acknowledged absently. Then he continued his explanation. "Fortunately, there was a small body of information on extra-rational mental faculties that had been developed over the past century, and as soon as we expanded it sufficiently, we were able to form this new branch of service you now belong to. But unfortunately, some idiot in the Information Service released a popularization of the data on the new branch. That was ill-advised. The veterans who had survived so far had their own way of accounting for their survival, and that did not include what that silly description alluded to as 'blind guessing' by commanders of 'exceptional psychic gifts.'

"Like most popularizations, the description was grossly inaccurate, and was promptly withdrawn; but the damage had already been done. The damage was completed by another idiot who named the new branch the Psi Corps, merely because the basic capacity for extra-rational mental faculties is technically signified by the Greek letter 'psi.' The name was slightly mispronounced by the men, and that automatically produced that nasty little nickname, which has stuck, and which expresses very well the attitude of the men toward the new service.

"As I say, fleet discipline is very bad, and the men simply would not accept orders from such officers. There are numerous cases on record where they killed them when there was no other way out.

"Now, as far as discipline itself is concerned, the best procedure would be to pull an entire fleet out of the defense perimeter and retrain them, because the newly trained recruits can be made to accept Psi Corps officers as commanders. But our situation is far too desperate to permit anything like that. Therefore, we must use whatever devices we can think of to do the job.

"The ship you are going to is staffed by veterans. They were incredibly lucky. From the outset, they had a CO who was a man highly gifted in psi without he or anyone else knowing about it until a few months ago when we ran a quiet little survey. But he got killed in a recent encounter, along with their executive officer, so we are now sending them a new captain and a new exec as well. But those men simply will not accept orders from a Psi Corps officer. Furthermore, they have heard the rumors--soundly based--that the Psi Corps, as a result of its opposition, has gone underground, so to speak. They know that its personnel has been largely disguised by giving them special commissions in the regular Space Combat Service. As a result, they will most certainly suspect any new commanding officer no matter what insignia he wears.

"Of course, now and then you will find one of the old hands who will accept the Psi Corps, so long as it isn't jammed down his throat. Just pray that you have somebody like that aboard your new ship, although I must admit, it isn't very likely."

"All right, all right," the commander growled with irritation. "But--with your permission, sir--I still think my particular method of assignment is a lousy approach and I don't like it. I still think it will make for very bad discipline."

"Whether you like it or not, commander, that is the way it will have to be accomplished. We are simply recognizing a real situation for what it is, and compromising with it."

"But couldn't this change in command personnel be postponed until--"

"If it could be postponed," the captain replied acidly, "you may rest assured we would not be employing disagreeable--and somewhat questionable--devices to speed it up. Unfortunately, our outlying detectors have identified the approach of a fleet of starships. They can only be reinforcements for the aliens, about equal to what they already have here, and they will arrive in two years. If those two forces can join each other, there will be no need to worry further about discipline among the humans. There will shortly be no humans left. So we are preparing a full-scale assault against those aliens now within our system in the very near future. And we simply must have all tactical combat devices commanded by men with extra-rational mental abilities in order to deal with them
effectively."

"Effectively?" the commander snorted. "Thirty-two per cent effective, according to the figures they gave us in the Psi school."

"That is considerably better than twelve per cent, which is the statistical likelihood of survival in combat without it," the captain retorted.

Nervously, the commander scratched the back of his thin neck, grimaced and nodded.

"The first and most important problem for you is to gain the confidence of your crew. They will be worse than useless to you without it, and it will be a very difficult job, even with all the advice and help our men can give you. And you will have to be careful--don't forget what I said about assassinations. The way we are going about it, that you find so disagreeable, should minimize that danger, but you can't ever tell what will happen."

He held up his hand to forestall a comment from the other and continued on. "There are conditions for everything, commander. Men react according to certain patterns, given the proper circumstances. It is characteristic of the sort of men you will encounter on your new ship that they are unlikely to take the initiative in such matters, partly from their early training and partly from their association with a CO who pretty well dominated them. However, they will readily condone it if somebody else does take the initiative in their behalf. Particularly, if that man has some official authority over them, and there is always somebody like that. They will not only condone the action, they will positively be happy about it, because it will tend to bolster their sense of security--such as it is. You know the sort of thing--father hunger. Somebody to take care of them the way their old CO did."

The captain sighed. "So you see, commander, you are going into a double-edged situation. Everything in it that can accrue to your advantage, could also get you promptly killed."

"I see. First I fight with my men," the commander said bitterly. "And if I win that battle, I will be permitted to fight the aliens with a thirty-two per cent possibility of living through the first encounter of that."

"It's always been that way to some extent," the captain replied sympathetically, "in every command situation since the world began. Only right now is a little worse than anyone can remember."

* * * * *

The commander departed. But about a month later, ensuing circumstances brought one Lieutenant Maise to the same office building. He was not, of course, ushered into the august presence of the captain, who was seeing more important people than lieutenants that day.

Maise had been there for several hours every day for the previous three, and he went immediately to the desk of the Special Reports Officer. The SR Officer was a lieutenant also, a combination of psychologist and writer, whose business it was to make sure that Special Reports on morale matters were presented in the properly dramatic fashion so that that indefinable aura of reality, customarily omitted from official historical documents, could be included. The Evaluation Division, back on Earth, was very fussy about that "aura."

"Ah, good afternoon sir," the SR Officer greeted him. "Glad to see you again."

Maise nodded curtly and took a seat beside the desk.

"I think we are pretty well finished now--"

"We better be," Maise interrupted. "My ship is pulling out in four hours."

"Right on the button, eh?" said the SR Officer. He fumbled in a desk drawer and withdrew a bulky folder, from which he extracted a smaller manuscript, and handed it to Maise. "I think you will find it complete and suitably expressive, now, sir."

Maise scowled as he accepted the document. "It makes no difference to me. I didn't want to get involved with the report in the first place."

"I know," the SR Officer nodded agreeably. "But don't worry. Nobody is going to prefer any charges against anybody in any case. What they want back on Earth is all the information they can get on morale problems, so that they can more effectively implement their planning. You know how it is."

"How would I know?"

The SR Officer snapped, "I can understand your sentiments, but don't blame me. Remember, I'm just a lieutenant, and I just work here in Morale."

"Sure," Maise said, cracking a grin on his stiff lips. "Sorry. I know it isn't your fault."

He opened the report, and commenced reading.

* * * * *

TITLE:
SPECIAL CONFIDENTIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL REPORT, prepared in collaboration with Lieutenant E. G. von Wald, Special Reports Officer, Mars XLV Base.

TO:
COMMANDING OFFICER Psychological Study and Evaluation District Central Command Authority Unified
FROM:
LIEUTENANT ALTON A. B. MAISE Executive Officer Space Combat Device LMB-43534 Seventh Space Fleet

SUBJECT:
ATTEMPTED BACTERIOLOGICAL POISONING OF COMMANDER THOMAS L. FRENDON, recently assigned captain of above-mentioned Combat Device. As per Special Order PSIC334349, dated 23 July 2013.

On 17 October 2015, Space Combat Device LMB-43534 was detached from the Seventh Fleet and returned to the Martian XLV Docks for general overhauling and refitting with new equipment. This period extended for two months, and was followed by a seven-day course of rechecking by the crew.

I was assigned to the ship as Executive Officer on 21 November following detachment, and was in command of the ship during most of the above-mentioned operations. The men were extremely hostile toward me, owing to their fear that I was a Psi Corps officer acting under a special commission in the SCS, but no overt signs of mutiny took place, perhaps because we were still in port. Needless to say, I was very glad when the message arrived informing us of the assignment of Commander Frendon as captain, inasmuch as the situation made clearly evident that I could not expect to be able to assume tactical command of the ship myself when it was returned to combat, the attitude of the crew being what it was.

Almost immediately upon receipt of the message, some of the animosity toward me lifted, but hardly enough for me to consider myself accepted as a member of the crew, although there was a good deal more work done after that.

Six days before our scheduled departure date, Commander Frendon arrived. I was in the control cabin with Lieutenant Spender, Third Officer, when Lieutenant Harding, the Astrogator entered. He limped around the little room a couple of times and then slumped dejectedly into a chair. "Well," he said, "we've had it, boys."
Spender looked around at him quickly, saying, "What's that?"
"I said we've had it. I just saw the new CO, walking over from the Operations office."
"What about it?" I asked sharply.
Harding shook his heavy, balding head, staring at the floor. "It's written all over him," he said bitterly.
"No!" muttered Spender.
"Yep," Harding growled. "Just wait until you lay eyes on him."
He stood up and faced me, his expression bleak and cold. "A sickman, Mr. Exec," he snarled. "Just as sure as death."

As previously noted, discipline was very lax, but I had been trying to restore it as much as possible. So I said, "I don't know whether the new CO is a member of the Psi Corps or not, Harding, but cut out this nickname of 'sick.'"
Harding mumbled: "That's what everybody calls them. I didn't invent the name. But I think it is plenty appropriate."
"Well cut it out."
Harding glared at me. "I suppose you're glad to have one of the guess-kids running this ship."
"Nobody wants to be involved in any guessing games, but we're not running the war here, so stow it."
Spender broke in then with his customary cold, quiet speech. "A sickman, eh? Then we have approximately one chance in three of living through our first encounter with the enemy when we leave here. That is according to the statistics, I believe. But to the best of my recollection, our previous captain brought us through eighty-eight skirmishes before anyone got hurt." He shook his head and thoughtfully contemplated the big, raw knuckles of his hand.

As is perfectly obvious from the above, the situation was ill-suited for a new officer to take command of the ship. I would have liked to settle the matter a little more before he got there, but there was nothing I could do about it then. Besides, it wasn't my worry any more, I realized gratefully. The problem of loyalty and confidence was now the business of the new CO. I did not envy him his job, but it had to be done.

At the very first glance, you could see what Harding had been talking about. Commander Frendon was the absolute epitome of every popular physiological cliché associated with people of unusual psi endowment for the past century that it has been known. At least ten years younger than any of the rest of us, he was of medium height, extremely skinny and nervous, his eyes glancing about with a restless uncertainty. It seemed almost too obvious on him, I thought, and wondered who had been responsible for assigning him to anything at all in the armed forces.

He grinned slightly at us when he came in, dearly unsure of himself, and made a valiant but artificial-sounding effort. "Hello men," he said. "My name is Frendon. I'm the new CO."
"Yeah," muttered Harding, "we see that you are."

"What's that lieutenant?" Frendon's voice was suddenly sharp, and the wavering grin had vanished.

"I said, yes sir," Harding replied sullenly. "Welcome aboard."

Frendon nodded curtly, and glanced around at the rest of us, at no time looking anyone directly in the eyes. I stood up and held out my hand. "Maise, here," I said. "Your Exec." And naturally I added the traditional welcome.

Spender introduced himself, and as he was speaking, the remaining crewman walked in to find out what was up. He took one look at Frendon, understood, and turned to leave again.

"And the man in the lead-lined tunic is Lieutenant Korsakov," I said quickly. "He's your engineer."

Korsakov sullenly said hello and waited. And Frendon also waited, all the time standing stiff and sensitive. One got the impression that he was in a nervous agony, but unable to help himself or to receive help from anybody else. When the introductions were long since completed, Frendon still stood uncertainly, and an unpleasant silence developed.

"Sit down, captain," I suggested. "How about some coffee?"

Frendon nodded and jerkily moved to the seat I had vacated. The eyes of the other men followed him, studying his uniform. Although it was clear by now that he was wearing the ordinary insignia of the SCS, nobody was particularly reassured, because we had all heard of the new arrangement under which the Psi Corps operated.

So Frendon sat. The silence continued. Everybody stared at him, and he looked helplessly around. I worked up what I felt was a friendly grin, and his gaze finally found itself on me and stayed there, almost pleading.

"You'll have to forgive us, captain," I told him. "We're an old bunch of mangy veterans, and it's going to be a little strange for a while having a bright new captain."

"Certainly," Frendon said, his voice hardly above a whisper. "I understand." He hesitated and then added in a quick defensive rush of words, "But, of course, you must understand that this isn't the first ship I've commanded, and I've been in combat before too, and so I don't see why I should be so doggone strange."

That's what he said. Doggone.

"Well," I murmured and cleared my throat. "Of course, captain."

* * * * *

Harding broke off his steady, hostile glare, and fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette.

"Captain," he started, a little uncertainly, which was unusual for Harding, "can I ask you a frank question?"

"Huh?" Frendon looked at the Astrogator blankly. "Why ... why, er, certainly, lieutenant. Harding you say your name is? Certainly, Harding, go right ahead."

Lieutenant Harding carefully lit his cigarette. Then he said, "Captain, will you tell us whether or not you are a sickman—I mean a Psi Corps officer?"

"Why?" Frendon leaned forward tensely, then relaxed self-consciously. "Why do you ask that, Harding? Aren't you familiar with the insignia of your own branch of service?"

"Yes, sir," Harding replied blandly, "but there have been a number of reports that they were going to assign a sick ... I mean a Psi Corps officer to the command of all new Combat Devices, only they would be wearing SCS insignia. Since we have been outfitted fresh and all, we probably come under the heading of new Devices."

"What if I were a Psi Corps officer?" Frendon demanded truculently, his long, skinny frame taut with excitement.

Harding considered that question, or rather statement, and puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette. Finally he shrugged. He reached over and meticulously crushed out the cigarette in an ash tray.

"For the benefit of you, lieutenant"--Frendon's bitter gaze swept the entire room--"and the rest of you, I am not now nor have I ever been a member of the Psi Corps. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, sir," I said quickly. Nobody else said anything.

Frendon stood up and stalked tensely to the door. There he spun around and said, "But there is a branch of the military service designated as the Psi Corps, and if you wish to discuss it in the future, kindly refer to it by its official title or abbreviation, and not by that atrocious nickname of 'sick.' I am sure the Central Command Authority knows what it is doing, and if they did intend to assign such personnel they must have very good reasons for it. Understand?"

There was a general nodding of heads and a scattered, sullen, "Yes, sir."

"Now then, you may call out the ship's company, Mr. Maise," Frendon said to me.

"Well, captain," I replied, "we're all here." Then sure enough, Frendon made us all stand at attention while he read his orders to us, just like it says in the book at the academy. After which, happily, he went to his cabin, and let us go back to our work.

* * * * *

That was the introduction of Commander Frendon to the crew. He made a distinct impression. Entirely bad.
Veteran small-ship personnel in this war have shown themselves to be extremely clannish, at best, deriving their principal sense of security not from the strength of the fleet which they never see and rarely contact, but from their familiarity with and confidence in each other's capabilities. Now these men had a new CO who was not only a stranger, but one who they felt sure was a member of the feared and mistrusted Psi Corps, a sickman, a man whose battle tactics were reputedly nothing but a bunch of blind, wild guesses. Previously, I had been the unwanted and suspected stranger, so I knew how Frendon would feel.

The situation developed rapidly, probably because we had only six days before our scheduled departure into the combat zone. That afternoon, Korsakov and Harding were supposed to be checking the wiring of fire-control circuits. Base mechanics had installed the gear and tested it, but it is standard operating procedure for the ship's crew to do their own checking afterwards, the quality of the work by electronics mechanics on planetary assignment being what it is these days.

I found them sitting on the deck, engaged in a desultory, low-voiced conversation. They had stripped the conduit ducts of plating, but there was no sign that they had done anything further.

"All right, you guys," I said. "Get up and finish that check. We may have to use those missiles one day soon, and I'd like to be sure they go where they are sent."

Korsakov looked up at me, his broad, thick mouth spread in an unpleasant toothy grin and his bushy eyebrows raised. "What difference will it make, my friend?"

"None," supplied Harding. Then he added, "As a matter of fact, it might even be better to leave them scrambled. If we strike an alien, our new captain is going to close his eyes and punch buttons at random, probably. Why shouldn't we leave the fire controls at random, too?"

"They might," Korsakov said, still grinning inanely, "even cancel out his error."

"Cut it out," I said. "You know better than that."

"Maybe you do, Maise." Harding replied, "but we don't."

My face must have telegraphed my mood, because he lurched to his feet and quickly added, "Now wait a minute, Maise. Don't get excited. You're not in command any more, so you don't have to stick to that authority line now. Oh sure, I know you're the Exec, but what the hell, Maise."

I stared at him for a moment, then said quietly, "Come on Kors. On your feet, too. Get that work done."

"Ha," said Korsakov, but he stood up.

* * * * *

Harding moved closer to me. "Confidentially, Maise," he said, "what do you really think?"

"About what?"

"You know--Frendon."

I shrugged. "What am I supposed to think?"

"You know as well as I do that he's a sickman."

"I told you not to use that nickname around me," I replied with annoyance. "Naturally you're going to mistrust them if you tie them up in your mind with a name like that."

"Do you trust them?"

I suddenly wasn't sure myself, so I evaded by saying, "Frendon told us he wasn't one, anyway."

"Did you expect him to tell the truth?" Korsakov sneered. "After going to the trouble of getting an auxiliary commission in the SCS? He knows what we think."

"Sickman," Harding repeated, watching me carefully. "And I'm plenty sick of having the brass hats handing us junk like that. It used to be that the worst we'd get would be fouled up equipment that we'd have to check and rewire ourselves, like these fire controls. Now they give us a fouled-up captain."

"Look," I said. "I want you to cut that talk out, Harding. That's an order. And if you think I can't pour it on you guys, just try me once."

Korsakov, who had been staring morosely into the wiring duct, turned around to face me. He had that nasty grin on his face again.

The best thing I could think of to do at that moment was to pretend I assumed that they would obey and go on back to the control room. I knew they wouldn't pay much attention to the order, but the stand had to be taken. I was still pretty much a stranger myself, but I wasn't going to let them think they could sell me their friendship at the cost of the captain's authority.

One thing I did accomplish, however, was the completion of the fire-control checkout. There was a lot of rewiring to do, but they had it finished in two hours, and everything was perfect.

Frendon went off to the city that evening, and didn't show up the next day except for about an hour. Apparently, he had been talking to a Psychological Advice officer or somebody like that, and now proceeded to interview each of us in private, quite obviously trying to gain some kind of rapport with us. It didn't work. Even if it hadn't been so
obviously what it was, it wouldn't have worked. The men couldn't stand simply having him around, and their conviction that he was a Psi Corps officer merely grew stronger.

When he left for the day, it was a relief. You couldn't like the guy, but you couldn't help but feel sorry for him—at least, I couldn't.

* * * * *

That evening, since we were still docked on Mars, I went to the Base service club for dinner. Sitting in a booth there I found the three of them—Harding, Spender and Korsakov. For the first time, they actually seemed happy to see me, and the usual animosity I had experienced from them had almost vanished. Of course, I knew what the reason was. They could now hate somebody else, and since I was in the same dismal situation that they were in, they generously permitted me to share their gloom.

I ordered some good Earthside bourbon, and sat down with them. Harding had apparently been making a little speech, which I had interrupted, and which he now concluded to me.

"So what do you think we can do?"
"About what?" I said.
"You know about what."

I shrugged and reached for my drink off the servidore.

"I know you don't like to talk about it, Maise," Harding said, "but we have to. Something has to be done."

I started to say something, but he raised a hand and hurried on. "I know, I know," he growled, "command authority, dignity of rank and all that sort of nonsense and tradition. Sure, I'd like to see some of it, too. But this is a hopeless case, Maise. Frendon is a sickman. Or a Psi Corps man if you prefer. Undoubtedly they have some awfully clever fellows back on Earth to do our thinking for us, but as far as I am concerned, they might as well have sent us an idiot child to run the ship in combat. Don't you understand?"

He was looking at me earnestly, the deep concern he felt plain on his face. I already knew that Harding could be depended upon to reflect the sentiments of the group, and to say exactly what he felt. It was a useful bit of knowledge.

"I know what you mean, Harding," I said, "but--"

"Well, think about it then, man," he interrupted sharply. "You're in the same ship, you know. When we blow up, you do, too. And it isn't just that we'll all be killed with this incompetent guess-kid in command—we probably would anyway, sooner or later. But it's the waste of a good ship. You know as well as I do that it stands to reason combat can't be run as a game of blind man's bluff. And that's just what Frendon will make it. If you're going to make proper use of your military potential it takes brains, like our old skipper had."

"They say the Psi Corps training brings out the most sensitive intellectual capacities of a man," I replied, quoting from the old publicity releases on it and keeping my voice level and dispassionate. "The Central Command Authority believes that it will raise the possibility of survival from twelve to thirty-two per cent in actual combat."

Korsakov giggled, belched, hiccupped and finished his drink. "Thirty-two per cent," he said. "That is one chance in three."

"You don't understand," Harding insisted. "Maybe the guessing games and tests they run back on Earth do give the sickmen one chance in three of being right by blind guessing. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about us—on our ship in combat and not in a laboratory back on Earth. We had a captain who ran the ship well, ran it in eighty-seven separate forays with the aliens and brought us back each time. He got killed himself on the eighty-eighth. That's the sort of captain we want, Maise. A man who can use his head and who can bring the ship through eighty-odd runs safely. And that is going to take something besides guesswork. Don't forget—if you like to believe in mathematical probability statistics—our chances should be getting slender after all our combat experience. Yours, too, for that matter."

"Maybe," I hedged, "your previous captain was a Psi Corps man in disguise."

"No, he wasn't," Spender cut in calmly. "I knew him for years. We went through the same service training and served together every minute of the war. And they didn't start this sick-business until three years or so ago."

"Well, they say there are natural Psi men who don't need the training so much."

"Fairy tales," snorted Harding. "That stuff doesn't go. I don't believe it."

* * * * *

That was clear. And no argument would convince him otherwise, even if I had felt inclined to give him one, which I didn't.

Korsakov, the silent Russian, thoughtfully rubbed his thick hands together, and then punched the button calling for another drink. "Once in three times," he said. "It's all been proved. Out of the next three missions we go out on, we come back only once." His homely face broke into a tired grin.

I laughed with him, but Harding did not like the joke. "It isn't funny," he growled. "If they can't find a decent
captain to send us, why can't they move up one of us that has at least served with a good commander in combat, and maybe learned some of his tricks from him. Not that I would want the job. But it would be better than Frendon. Anything would."

I raised my eyebrows at him skeptically. He got the idea and swore. "You know I didn't mean that I want the job, so don't go goggling your righteous eyes at me, Maise. I know my limitations, but I also know a good captain when I see one. And what do they send us? A kid who not only is a nut, but he's already so scared he--"

"Once in three times," Korsakov said loudly. He was apparently getting pretty drunk. "Their computing machines would need an aspirin to handle that situation. We go out three times but we only come back once." He turned and peered intently at me, his heavy bushy eyebrows drawn severely down and wiggling. "Puzzle: complete the figure without retracing any lines or lifting the pencil from the paper. How do we manage to go out there the third time when we haven't yet come back from the second mission, huh?"

"Shut up, Kors," Spender said without emotion. "You're getting a fixation."

"I'm not the astrogator," Korsakov muttered, laying his head down on the table. "If you want a fix on our position, you will have to call on Mr. Harding."

My bourbon was probably good, but I couldn't taste it. There was too much else to think about. I said, "Well, what are you going to do if he really is a Psi Corps man?"

"That," Harding said thoughtfully, "is the question."

"Maise, you're the Exec," Spender commented. "It's up to you to work us a replacement."

" Didn't you see his orders?" I snapped. "They're dated from Central Command Authority itself. Even if I did know somebody here in Mars Command--which I don't--it wouldn't do any good."

"He's right," Harding grumbled. "Everybody knows that once they've assigned a sickman, the only people who can get him reassigned are the sickmen themselves. Maise couldn't do anything about it unless he was a member of the Corps himself. But that settles it, though--his orders being from Central, I mean. Nobody but a sickman would have his orders cut at Central for a puny little ship like ours. It proves what we thought about him, anyway."

"I don't think it proves anything," I retorted angrily. "I don't think the question is whether or not Frendon is a sick--now you've got me saying it--a Psi Corps man. The question is whether we're going to settle down and stop whining just because we got a new CO we don't like, and that we can't do anything about. We're not running this war. They're running it back on Earth."

"We're fighting it," Spender commented, chewing on a big, raw knuckle. Harding looked at me skeptically. "How much space-combat have you seen, Maise?"

"Six years, more or less," I told him. "I've seen plenty of the stuff. I'd just as soon let somebody else do it from now on in, but nobody asked me."

Harding grunted: "Well, tell me, have you ever served under a sick skipper?"

"No."

"Do you want to?"

"Why not? Besides--what can I do about it?"

* * * * *

Harding leaned back and sipped away on the straight whiskey he was drinking, watching me over the top of the glass and talking directly into it, making his voice sound muffled and sinister. "You know, Maise, sometimes you make me tired. Frankly, when they first sent us you, I didn't like it. None of us did. You were CO then, and we thought maybe you were a sickman even if you didn't look like it, and you kept sort of sticking up for the sickmen whenever it was mentioned. Well, that's all right. New officer in charge, trying to stiffen up discipline, et cetera and so forth. But now we've got Frendon for CO. You're in the same boat as the rest of us, and you still keep insisting that the sickmen are O.K. But you're a liar and you know it."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" I shouted angrily. "Poison the guy?"

There was a sudden sharp hush. Even Korsakov lifted his head from the table, and looked around with bleary, bloodshot eyes. "Poison?" he said. Then, as if the effort of thinking was too much, he lay down again and muttered. "Once in three times. It's a puzzle question, men. Figure it out."

"Of course, entirely aside from the present argument," Spender stated in his cold, emotionless voice, staring into his empty glass, "but I do seem to recall an incident like that. Seems there was a ship just about like ours. About three months ago. A mechanic told me about it. Seems they got a new CO assigned to it who was obviously a sickman, just like us. Somebody managed to sneak a few of the dormant spores lying around outside the dome into him. Then the sickman really was sick."

I licked my lips. "I didn't mean that," I said. "Besides, they could always tell if you did anything like that."

"How?" asked Spender.

Harding was listening intently, watching both of us, but he didn't say anything.
"They can identify the organisms," I pointed out.
"Sure. Easy. But how do they know where he picked them up? They're laying all around outside the domes here on Mars ever since the first assault by the aliens twelve years ago. Nobody's had time to decontaminate this whole planet like they did Earth. Easiest thing in the world for a new officer on Mars to take a little sight-seeing excursion outside the domes and to be a little careless."
"There would be an epidemic if he brought back a lot of spores," I suggested. "Besides, it's out of bounds to leave the dome."
Spender shook his head. "You can get around that out-of-bounds business without any trouble," he said. "And there are decontamination chambers in the air locks, which would clean up anything he brought in; so there would be no epidemic. The exposure would take place outside of the domes--say if he opened his helmet to smell the perfume of the famous hypnotic marspoppy, or something like that. Then he would be infected, and after that it's non-contagious. All we need is somebody to buddy up to him, and take him out there. Nature and the poppy will do the rest."
"Look," I said angrily, "cut that stuff out, Spender. If you're looking to me to disable the guy, forget about it. I won't. And I'm telling you right now that if I find anybody else does, I'll report it."
* * * * *
For once Spender laughed. He turned to face me, and his blue eyes were dancing in his scarred, old face. He was laughing at me and my belligerent righteousness, but the real joke, of course, was that unless somebody actually caught him talking Frendon into going out there, there wouldn't be the slightest chance of proving he had done it. It was the simplest thing in the world to sneak out and back without being observed, and we both knew it.
"All right," I said then. "Have your laugh, Spender. And you, too, Harding. I don't like the nut we've got any more than you do, but what you're talking about is mutiny and murder--"
"Oh, he wouldn't necessarily die," Harding commented thoughtfully. "If he gets the serum within a few hours of the first symptoms, he probably would be just a very sick man for about a month. Too long to take the ship out with us when we go." He grinned at me. "And as for mutiny, nobody would be using any physical force on him. Nor--when you come right down to the specific matter of his commanding his ship--would there be any moral force employed either."
"Have it any way you like," I said, standing up. "I don't care for the tone of this discussion, and I'm getting out of it."
Harding laughed again at that. "O.K., Maise," he said in a friendly tone of voice. "Sorry. I guess you're right at that." I stood glaring at him. "Come on, sit down," he continued. "I know there isn't anything else for you to say about it. Being Exec and all, you pretty well have to stick up for him, and we don't hold it against you. And don't worry about us doing anything to your precious Frendon."
His face darkened as he said it, though, and he swore. "Not right now, anyway. Still, that spore business isn't such a bad--"
"Let it go," Spender cut him off with a mixture of irritation and affection. "Somebody told me about it, and so I just passed it on. It isn't as easy as it sounds, because that stuff can kill, and you stand a pretty good chance of making a mistake and catching it yourself." Then he looked up at me and smiled again. "You might as well stick around with us tonight and get drunk, Maise. No place else to go."
I hesitated. It was a genuine offer of comradeship, and God knows I wanted it. So I grinned back at him and slid down into the booth again, pressing the button for another drink. "I'll have one more, but then I think I have some work to do. Got to see a man about something."
Korsakov stirred himself. He wasn't as drunk as he seemed, I think. He raised his head and looked at me carefully for a moment, but then he mumbled, "Once in three times. How do you figure it?"
* * * * *
I left them soon after, located and spoke to Frendon, and then returned to the ship. The following morning at nine thirty Commander Frendon suddenly complained of a fever, and said he was going to the hospital.
A couple of hours later, we received notification of his condition from the hospital, and at the same time orders from CINCMARS.
Korsakov, eyes still bloodshot from his hangover, took the message out of the scanner and stared at it. Then he wordlessly handed it over to me.
I read it. It said that Commander Frendon had contracted the spore disease, but that his condition was satisfactory due to the speedy treatment. He would, however, be confined to the hospital for one month.
There was an empty space of three lines, and the orders followed, addressed to Frendon, to prepare to lift off planet in three days and rejoin the Seventh Fleet.
Harding, Spender and Korsakov stared at me with awe when I read them the information. Nobody said
anything for a full minute.

"All right," I snapped finally. "Kors, ship out a quickie to CINCMARS and notify him that we can't join the
fleet, because we don't have a captain, and the orders are to him, personally, and not the ship. Something has to be
changed."

Korsakov thoughtfully pulled on his shaggy, graying eyebrows with his thick fingers. "Why don't we wait until
just before lift time," he suggested. "Then they won't have time to fish us out another sickman, and you'll be the
skipper, Maise. What do you think of that?"

"Lousy," I said. "A delay like that when they already must have that information kicking around somewhere
might just be the thing to foul up the deal. This has to be played straight. Besides, I don't think they are likely to
have any unassigned sick--I mean Psi Corps men around on Mars. Go chop out that report."

He was reluctant, but he didn't waste any time about it. And almost immediately the reply came back ordering
me to report to the Base Morale Officer and account for Frendon's sudden illness, or accident, or whatever it was. In
the old days, that might not have meant so much; but now, of course, the Morale Officer is the whole works.

"Well," I said then, "looks like the soup is hot. They're suspicious." Nobody said anything. They were all
waiting, looking at me. "Who," I continued slowly and carefully, "do you suppose slipped Frendon the spore?
They'll want to know, maybe."

"Why, Maise," Harding said garrulously, "just like Spender told us. He went outside, the dome on a sight-
seeing trip and made the mistake of looking at a marspoppy without an antihypnotic color filter. He just accidentally
happened to expose himself."

"He might not have gone alone," I suggested. "They'll want to know who went with him, since he probably
didn't know anybody else on the Base."

"They might." I stood up, frowning. "Well, it all depends upon what Frendon told them, but, of course, he
might have been drunk himself at the time, and a man like him would hesitate to admit something like that. That
shouldn't be too hard to demonstrate. In which case," I added, letting them see a grin on my face, "he might have
gone by himself after all, and then none of us would have to be even slightly implicated. Like for instance, if he
spent some time with us drinking, and then went off by himself, how would we know where he was going?"

They all laughed with evident relief. It would be a good story. They all knew that none of them had induced
Frendon to disable himself, and for them that settled the question of who did it. Their willingness to take a full share
of the blame off me settled the only other question I myself was concerned about.

And this morning, when CINCMARS confirmed my acting captain status, and sent us a raw recruit for third
officer replacement after moving Harding up to acting Exec, everybody was satisfied and happy.

As happy as any small group of reluctant soldiers about to go into battle is ever likely to get, anyway.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Maise dropped the report back on the SR Officer's desk when he had finished reading it.

"How did you like it?" the SR wanted to know.

"All right," Maise murmured. "It covers it. I just hope they can make some use of it, so that in the future the
assignment of a Psi Corps officer won't be a general signal for a small-time mutiny."

"That's the whole point of making these reports. They'll work out something."

Maise nodded. "Where's Frendon now?"

"He was transferred to XXX Base three days ago, right after he left your ship. Couldn't let him run around here
for a while. Not after the trouble with your crew--somebody might recognize him. Besides, he already has another
assignment there."

"I think it was a pretty stupid thing," Maise grumbled. "He was so obvious. And suppose I hadn't warned him
about it that night, or that I hadn't been there when the spore-poisoning idea came to a head among the crew? They
might really have tried to get him outside the dome, or to get a spore culture inside. And then we'd all be sick or
dead."

"Not likely, sir," the SR Officer said with a polite, knowing smile. "You see, the aliens are presumably
susceptible to their own bacteriological weapons. At least we think so from the way they went about it. They want
our planets, and they didn't want to have to decontaminate them when they took them over. Besides, it's practically
impossible to decontaminate an entire planet, anyway."

"But we did it with Earth."

"For morale purposes, Central Authority let it be known that they were able to decontaminate it, but what
actually happened was that the spores lost their effectiveness within a few years of their original seeding. I'm
surprised they didn't tell you that in the beginning--" He caught himself suddenly, then shrugged and smiled again.
"Maybe you aren't supposed to be told," he continued without embarrassment. "It's sometimes hard for me to know about such things. You have no idea how confused the directives can get in an organization this large. Anyway, as you can see, your men couldn't have poisoned Frendon or themselves or anybody else with those spores. That's why we have been using that particular form of suggested violence in this unpleasant business. If, as you pointed out, something unexpected did happen, it would be absolutely harmless. Naturally," he added, "we wouldn't like to risk unnecessarily a professional actor with such a remarkably suitable physical appearance as Commander Frendon—even if the poor fellow doesn't have the slightest trace of psi ability."

Maise gaped at him for a moment as he comprehended the careful, knowledgeable planning behind the ruse, much of which had not been explained to him before in his briefings. He said, "And I guess there is still a lot more about it that I don't know."

The SR Officer nodded agreement. "Neither you nor I," he replied in bald understatement. "After all, there are some pretty intelligent men in charge of this last-ditch defense of our species, and they do keep a few of the more important things to themselves. For your own safety among your crew, I suggest that you keep this spore business equally secret."

"I don't need your advice for that," Maise said with a low voice and a wry grin on his face. But the grin vanished as he stood up to go. He hesitated and shook his head uncertainly.

"So that takes care of that," the SR concluded. "Now you're all set, aren't you?"

"All set?" Maise murmured, half to himself. "Hell, I'm just starting, and I'm scared. When the boys asked me if I trusted the intuition of the Psi Corps men, I suddenly realized that I really wasn't quite sure myself. I've studied and worked for two solid years under extraordinary teachers, and back on Earth they said I was unusually good. But now that men's lives will depend on it, it almost seems like something out of a joke book." He stopped talking and sighed. "Well, that's the way it has to be, I guess."

He turned to go, but the SR Officer called him back. "Just a minute, sir," he said. "You forgot to sign this report. You are the originating officer, you know."

"Oh, yes." Maise went back to the desk. He picked up a pen and riffled through the pages to the last one. There he signed his name, scribbling rapidly,

"Alton A. B. Maise, Acting Lieutenant SCS Commander, Psi Corps."

"There you are, lieutenant," he muttered, and started walking on back to the field where his ship was waiting. THE END

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**Contents**

The 4-D DOODLER
by GRAPH WALDEYER

"Do you believe, Professor Gault, that this four dimensional plane contains life--intelligent life?"

At the question, Gault laughed shortly. "You have been reading pseudo-science, Dr. Pillbot," he twitted. "I realize that as a psychiatrist, you are interested in minds, in living beings, rather than in dimensional planes. But I fear you will find no minds to study in the fourth dimension. There aren't any there!"

Professor Gault paused, peered from beneath bushy white brows out over the laboratory. To his near sighted eyes the blurred figure of Harper, his young assistant, seemed busily at work over his mathematical charts. Gault hoped sourly that the young man was actually working and not just drawing more of his absurd, senseless designs amidst the mathematical computations....

"Your proof," Dr. Pillbot broke into his thoughts insistently, "is purely negative, Professor! How can you know there are no beings in the fourth dimension, unless you actually enter this realm, to see for yourself?"

Professor Gault stared at the fat, puffy face of his visitor, and snorted loudly.

"I am afraid, Pillbot, you do not comprehend the impossibility of such a passage. We can not possibly break from the confines of our three dimensional world. Here, let me explain by a simple illustration."

Gault took up a book, held it so that a shadow fell onto the surface of the desk.

"That shadow," he said, "is two dimensional, has length and breadth, but no thickness. Now in order to enter the third dimension, our plane, the shadow would have to bulge out in some way, into the dimension of thickness an obvious impossibility. Similarly, we can not enter the fourth dimension. Do you see?"

"No!" retorted Pillbot with some heat. "In the first place, we are not two dimensional shadows, and--why, what is the matter?"
Professor Gault's lanky form had stiffened, his near sighted eyes glaring out over the laboratory to the rear of Pillbot. The psychiatrist wheeled around, followed his host's gaze.

It was Harper. That young man's antics drew an amazed grunt from Pillbot. He was describing peculiar motions in the air with his pencil. Circles, whirls, angles, abrupt jabs forward. He bent over the paper on the desk, made a few sweeps of the pencil, then the pencil rose again into the air to describe more erratic motions. Harper himself seemed in a trance.

Suddenly Pillbot gave a stifled gasp. It seemed to him that Harper's arm vanished at the elbow as it stabbed forward, then reappeared. Once again the phenomenon happened.

Pillbot blinked rapidly, rubbed his eyes. It must have been illusion, he decided. It was too ... unlikely....

"Harper!" Gault's voice was like the snapping of a steel trap.

Startled, Harper came to with a jerk. Seeing he was being watched, he flushed redly, then bent over his charts again. An apologetic murmur floated from his desk.

"What was he doing?" Pillbot asked puzzledly.

"Doodling!" Gault spat out the word disgustedly.

"Doodling?" echoed the psychiatrist. "Why that is a slang term we use in psychiatry, to describe the absent-minded scrawls and designs people make while their attention is elsewhere occupied. An overflow of the unconscious mind, we call it. Many famous people are 'doodlers.' Their doodles often are a sign of special ability--"

"Exactly!" snapped Gault. "It shows a special ability to waste time. And Harper has become worse since I hired him to do some of my mathematical work. Some influence in this laboratory--I blush to confess--seems to bring it on. 'Four dimensional doodling' we call it, because, as you saw, he doesn't confine it to the surface of the paper!"

Pillbot looked startled. "By jove," he cried. "I believe you've hit on something new to psychiatry. This young man may have some unknown faculty of mind--an instinctive perception of the fourth dimension. Just as some people have an unerring sense of direction, so perhaps Harper has a sense of--of a fourth direction--the fourth dimension! I should like to examine some of his 'doodles'."

Harper looked up in alarm as his crusty tempered employer appeared, followed by the stout figure of Pillbot. He rose and stood aside unassumingly, as Pillbot bent over the scrawls on his charts, clucking interestedly.

Harper flickered a worried glance over to the corner. He hoped they wouldn't notice his stress-analyzing clay model standing there. It looked like a futurist's nightmare, with angles, curves and knobs stuck out at all angles. Professor Gault might not understand....

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For one of his retiring temperament, Harper was aiming high. There was a standing award of $50,000 for the lucky mathematician who would solve the mystery of the "stress-barrier" encountered by skyscrapers as they were built up toward the 150 story mark. At this height, they encountered stress and strains which mathematical computations and engineering designs had been unable to solve. Harper believed the "stress-barrier" was due to an undetected space-bending close to the earth's surface, a bending of space greater than ever provided for in the prediction of Einstein. And if he was right, and could win that award, then there might be wedding bells, and a little bungalow with Judith....

Harper's greatest fear was that he would do something to annoy Gault into firing him, thus depriving him of the privilege of using the mathematical charts and computing machines available in the laboratory. Right now, he hoped Gault wouldn't notice his stress-analyzing clay model standing there. It looked like a futurist's nightmare, with angles, curves and knobs stuck out at all angles. Professor Gault might not understand....

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"Get that thing out of here! I won't stand for such rot in this laboratory. Throw it into the hall for the janitor!"

"Ye-yessir," said Harper, gulping. He took hold of the statue, pulled at it.

"It--it won't budge," he exclaimed amazedly.

"Eh? Won't move? It's not heavy, is it?" demanded the Professor.

"No--about thirty pounds, but it won't move!"

Gault took hold of one of the angles of the thing, jerked at it savagely. He gave it up with an oath, returned to Harper's desk muttering.

Harper suddenly noticed the top portion of the statue. It didn't seem to be all there! He was positive there had been another section on top, shooting off at an angle, representing a problem in tangential stress. What had happened
to that top section?

He would figure that out later, when the occasion was more propitious. Right now, he realized that only the 
presence of Dr. Pillbot prevented Gault from firing him. He cast an apprehensive glance toward his employer.

With trepidation, he saw Gault reach for something projecting from behind a bench. Gault pulled it out, held it 
dangling before him. A strangled exclamation of wrath came from him. His long nose pointed accusingly toward 
Harper, like a finger pointing out a criminal.

"I was afraid of that!" he grated. "Cutting paper dolls!" Gault was holding up a large paper cutout of a human 
figure—a long, rangy man.

"This is the last straw," Gault went on, his voice rising. "I have stood enough—"

"It—it wasn't me, sir," Harper cried quickly, with visions of his job and $50,000 vanishing. "It was your ten year 
old nephew, Rudolph, when he was here yesterday. He cut it out, said it looked like—like his uncle—"

Harper stopped as Gault seemed about to explode. Then the mathematician subsided, a malicious expression 
crept over his face.

"H-m-m," he said. "Might be just what I need to explain things to Dr. Pillbot."

"I shall take this matter before the Psychiatric Society," Pillbot was saying excitedly. "Undoubtedly you have 
some strange faculty—an instinctive perception of four dimensional laws ... what was that, Professor?"

"I said if you will step over to this desk I will explain to you in elementary terms—very elementary and easy to 
understand—why you will never be able to study four dimensional beings—if any exist!" Gault's voice was tinged 
with sarcasm.

Pillbot came over, followed by Harper, who was interested in any explanations about the fourth dimension— 
even elementary ones....

Gault, with a glint in his eye, pressed the paper figure flatly on the surface of Harper's desk.

"This paper man, we will say, represents a two dimensional creature. We lay him flatly against the desk, which 
represents his world—Flatland, we mathematicians call it. Mr. Flatlander can't see into our world. He can see only 
along the flat plane of his own world. To see us, for instance, he would have to look up, which is the third 
dimension, a direction inconceivable to him. Now, Doctor, are you beginning to understand why we can never see 
four dimensional beings?"

Pillbot frowned thoughtfully, then looked up. "And what about the viewpoint of the four dimensioners 
themselves—what would prevent them from seeing us?"

Harper hardly heard the Professor's snort of disgust. This two dimensional cutout in "Flatland" fascinated him. 
An idea occurred to him. Now, just supposing the....

* * * * *

As Gault and Pillbot argued, Harper grasped the paper cutout, and bent it, "jacknifed" it, creasing it firmly in 
the middle. Then he raised the upper half so that it rose vertically from the desk, while the lower half was still 
pressed flatly against the desk surface.

"Now," he murmured to himself, "the Flatlander would appear to his fellows to have vanished from the waist 
up, because from the waist up he is bent into the third dimension ... so far as they are concerned...."

"E-e-e-e-e-e!"

At the wavering scream, Harper looked up quickly. Pillbot was staring frozenly in front of him, toward the 
floor. Harper followed his glance—and saw it.

Professor Gault had vanished from the waist up.

His lower body still stood before Pillbot, swaying slightly, but the upper body was unconditionally missing. 
From the large feet planted solidly on the floor, long legs rose majestically, terminating in slim, angular hips—and 
from thence vanished abruptly into nothingness. It was as though the upper body had been sheared away, neatly and 
precisely, at the waist.

Pillbot stared from the visible portion of Gault to slack-jawed Harper and back again, sweat splashing from his 
puffy face.

"Why, why really my dear fellow," he quavered, addressing the half-figure. "This--this is a bit rude of you, 
vanishing in the midst of my sentence. I--I trust you will--ah, return at once!" Then, as the full import of the 
phenomenon penetrated to his understanding, his eyes became glazed and he backed away.

The portion of Professor Gault addressed failed to give any indication it had heard the remonstrance. Slowly, 
the legs began to feel their way, like a blind man, about the floor.

Harper stared wildly, white showing around his pale blue irises.

"No!" he bleated. "The Professor didn't do it himself—I caused it to happen. I bent the paper cutout, and--and 
Something saw me do it, and imitated me by bending the Professor into the fourth dimension!" Harper moaned 
faintly, wringing his hands.
Pillbot at the moment got little satisfaction from this demonstration of his point about four dimensional life. He glanced fearfully at the half-figure.

"You--you mean to say," he quailed, "that we are under scrutiny by some Being of the fourth dimension?"

"That's it," replied Harper with a whinny. "I--I know it, I can feel it. It became aware of our three dimensional life in some way, and its attention is now concentrated on the laboratory!" He wrung his hands. "I just know something else terrible is going to happen!" He backed away quickly as the occupied pair of pants moved toward him.

His retreat was halted by his desk, upon which reposed two large California oranges, an inevitable accompaniment to Harper's lunch. To him, orange juice was a potent, revivifying drink. Now he automatically reached for one of the oranges, as a more hardy individual might reach for a whisky and soda in a moment of mental shock.

His eyes wide on the shuffling approach of Gault's underpinnings, Harper nervously dug sharp fingernails into the orange, tore off large chunks of skin.

A sudden blur seen from the corner of his eyes pulled his gaze back to the desk. The other orange had vanished.

Phwup!

It dropped to the floor before Harper, but now it was a squishy mess, the insides standing out like petals, the juice running from it.

The other orange slipped from Harper's nerveless fingers, rolled along the desk top. Harper pounced on the squashy thing on the floor, feverishly pushed back the projecting insides, closely examined it. He looked up wide-eyed at Pillbot.

"Turned inside out," he gasped hoarsely, "without breaking its skin!"

Pillbot's expression indicated that the scientific attitude was slowly replacing his former fright. He snapped his fingers.

"Imitation again!" he said, half to himself. He looked at Harper. "When you bent the paper figure this--this fourth dimensional entity imitated your action by bending the Professor. Now, as you started to peel the orange, your action was again imitated--in a four dimensional manner--by this entity turning the other orange inside out."

His voice dropped, as he muttered, "Imitativeness—the mark of a mind of low evolutionary order, or of ..." his words faded off, his expression thoughtful.

More white showed around Harper's eyes. "You--you mean I am being specially watched by this Being--that He--It--imitates everything I do...?"

"That's it," clipped Pillbot. "Because you possess this strange perception of Its realm the Being has been especially attracted to you, imitates whatever you do, but in a four dimensional manner. A Being of inexplicable powers and prerogatives, with weird power over matter, but with a mentality that is either very primitive, or--"

Harper leaped into the air with a yell, as Professor Gault's abbreviated body sidled up to him from behind. As he leaped, the inside out orange flew out of his grasp.

"I--I'd better remove it," said Harper weakly. He moved with a dreadful compulsion toward the swaying half-figure, one slender hand extended tremblingly toward the inverted orange.

Abruptly, the orange vanished. Harper halted like he'd run into a brick wall. Staring blankly ahead, he put his hands to his stomach, moaning faintly.

"What's the matter?" cried Pillbot.

"The orange--it's in my--stomach!"

"See, what did I tell you," exulted Pillbot. "Another act of imitativeness. It saw you drop the orange on the Professor's--where his stomach should be!"

The squashy orange had landed on the area of Gault that was the line of demarkation between his visible and invisible portions—the area that his stomach would occupy normally. It rested there in plain sight of the two startled men.

"I--I'd better remove it," said Harper weakly. He moved with a dreadful compulsion toward the swaying half-figure, one slender hand extended tremblingly toward the inverted orange.

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"What's the matter?" cried Pillbot.

"The orange--it's in my--stomach!"

"See, what did I tell you," exulted Pillbot. "Another act of imitativeness. It saw you drop the orange on Gault's--where his stomach should be, and imitated by putting the orange in your stomach. It proves I'm right about the Being--glug!" With a loud belch, Pillbot broke off. He stared blankly at Harper, then his hands slowly came up to clutch at his stomach.

Harper looked quickly at the desk top.

"The other orange," he gasped. "It's gone!"

"Into--my--stomach!" groaned Pillbot. "Be--be careful what you do! My God, don't do anything. Don't even think. This--this four dimensional creature will surely imitate whatever you do in some weird manner."

Rubbing his stomach, Pillbot glanced about at the various articles of furniture. He blanched. "I wouldn't want any of that stuff inside of me," he yammered.
Harper flicked a despairing glance at the half-body, now gliding along in the vicinity of the paper cutout.

"We--we must do something to get the Professor back," he said worriedly.

* * * * *

He thought incongruously of a restaurant where he used to order lemon pie--and invariably get apple. Finally he found that he could get lemon by ordering peach. Now the problem was, what did he have to "order" to get his employer extricated from being stuck between dimensions, like a pig under a fence? Anything he did would be imitated in a manner that might prove tragic.

The upright portion of the cutout was leaning over backward, the head drooping down like a wilted flower, as the tension at the crease slowly lessened.

Gathering together what resolution he could, Harper determined to take the bull by the horns. He would get the Professor returned by pressing the upper portion of the cutout flatly onto the desk surface. With trembling hands, he pressed down on it--then sprang back with a muffled yell.

Three feet above the half-body, the Professor's head had flashed into visibility.

"You only pressed the head onto the desk," said Pillbot disgustedly, "so the Being only impressed Galt's head back into the laboratory. Now press down the rest of the body."

The Professor's head, suspended above the body, glared about, affixed Harper with a smouldering glance. The mouth moved rapidly, but no words came.

"Professor, I can't hear you," whimpered Harper. "Your lungs and vocal cords are in the other dimension. Here, I'll have you completely returned." He reached a hand toward the cutout, the torso of which still bulged upward from the desk.

Gault's head wagged in vigorous negation of Harper's contemplated act. His mouth moved in what, if audible, would have been clipped, burning accents.

Harper drew back his hand as if he had touched a red hot poker. "The Professor doesn't want me to touch the cutout," he said helplessly.

Gault's head hovered over the cutout like a gaunt moon. It swooped down toward the paper figure, seemed to be studying its position on the desk closely. Pillbot watched him for a sign of his intentions or wishes.

Harper wandered distractedly over toward the high wall bench. He had it! He would distract the attention of the Entity from Gault by making another cutout. He would then experiment with that second one, without endangering Gault. He'd be careful not to make this one thin and tall, so as not to resemble the Professor in outline. Perhaps with it, he could trick the Entity into releasing the missing part of Gault's body....

He scraped in the bench drawer for the scissors, and started to shear through a large stiff piece of paper.

A moment later he looked up as Pillbot walked over.

"Gault has some reason for not wanting his silhouette touched," he said. "Can't quite make out his lip movements, but he seems afraid some permanent mark may be left on him by his return. He wants time to figure out--why, what are you doing?"

"I've made another cutout for experiment," explained Harper. "And this one doesn't look like the Professor, isn't tall and thin. See--?" He lifted the second cutout from the flat surface of the bench, held it suspended before him.

"This one is short and fat--" Harper halted abruptly, the breath whooshing from his lungs.

There was no use talking to thin air. Pillbot had been whisked into nothingness. Where the portly figure of the eminent psychiatrist had stood was now nothing, not even a half man.

Too late, Harper realized that when he had lifted the paper figure from the surface of the bench, the Entity had imitated him by "lifting" Pillbot into the fourth dimension. Belatedly, he knew that the cutout which he held dangling, resembled Pillbot in outline.

Harper dashed back and forth in little rushes, carrying the paper figure. He dared not put it down, for fear of seeing some segment of Pillbot flash back. He did not know what to do with it.

Finally he compromised by suspending it to a low hanging chandelier, where it dangled swaying in the slight air currents.

* * * * *

Gault was watching his assistant's antics with a bleak expression that changed to sardonic satisfaction as he realized Pillbot was in a predicament like his--only more so. Abruptly he frowned, staring ahead, and Harper guessed that Pillbot had located Gault's torso in the other realm, was nudging him to indicate the fact.

Suddenly Harper knew that he himself must enter this fourth dimensional realm. That strange instinct told him the solution to everything was there--somewhat as a woman's intuition impels her to act in a certain way, without knowing why.

How to get there? Another paper cutout? He glanced toward the Professor--the occupied trousers, and swimming above it, the man's head. The head was watching him, the expression savage.
No, there must be no more cutouts, Harper decided. While the four dimensional entity distinguished between the outlines of a thin silhouette and a fat one, something in between, like Harper's form, would be testing it too far.

He, Harper would take the place of his own cutout!

Gault's head reared up, glared fixedly at his assistant as the young man swung his legs onto the desk, then lay down flat. A moment he lay there, in "Flatland"—then leaped to his feet.

It was as though he had leaped into a different world. He was no longer in the laboratory. He wasn't on any floor at all, as far as he could make out. His feet rested on nothing—yet there was some sort of tension under him—like the surface tension of water.

He was--he suddenly knew it--standing on a segment of warped space! There was a spacial strain here that acted as a solid beneath him!

Harper looked "up"—that is, overhead. There was nothing there but vast stretches of emptiness—at first. Then he saw that this emptiness was lined and laced with filmy striations, like cellophane. They bore a strange resemblance to his "doodlings," as though that strange faculty of his enabled him to somehow perceive this place of the fourth dimension. And instinctively Harper knew that these lacings were the boundaries of a vast enclosure—a four dimensional enclosure, the "walls" of which consisted of joined and meshed space-warsps.

Abruptly he became aware of movement. He became aware of solidity there above him. And the solidity was in motion.

Harper knew he was gazing upon a being of the fourth dimension—doubtless the Entity that had caused the phenomena in the laboratory, which had snatched him into the fourth dimension, and was even now observing him with its four dimensional sight! There was a shape above him that strained his eyes, gave hint of Form just beyond his comprehension.

Harper hardly noticed that Pillbot was beside him, shaking him. He had suddenly grasped a fundamental law of spacial stresses, and he whipped out a pad and pencil, began scribbling down the mathematical formula of these laws. He began to see now why skyscrapers encountered the "stress-barrier" at a certain height. He understood it just as a person of innate musical ability, hearing music for the first time, would understand the laws of that music.

"Look out, It's moving, descending!" Pillbot was yelling into his ear. "It is about to act. Became active the moment you got here. How did you induce it to bring you here?"

"Huh?" Harper looked up from his scribbling. "Oh," Harper explained quickly how he had induced the Being to act on himself.

"That's it!" cried Pillbot hoarsely. "You switched the pattern of imitation on It—tricked It into bringing you here. That's what made it angry—"

"Angry?" Harper almost dropped his pad, clutched at Pillbot as there was a sudden upheaval of the invisible tension-surface on which they stood. A violent shake sprawled them on the "ground" and now Harper saw the torso of Gault, a few feet away, apparently hovering above the surface.

"Yes, angry!" Pillbot was pale. "As long as you merely gave it something to imitate it was pacified. But now it recognizes opposition, an effort to outwit it due to your switching the pattern of imitation. Its condition is dangerous—it's bound to react violently. We have to get out of here. You must know some way—"

Harper again scribbled some figures on his pad. "As soon as I've worked out this formula—"

Pillbot shook him frantically. "Can't you understand! This Creature is a mental patient of a violent type. We are in a fourth dimensional insane asylum!" Pillbot gazed upward fearfully at a descending mass. "The pattern of its action fits perfectly," he went on. "Some violent type of insanity, combined with delusions of grandeur. Any slightest opposition will cause a spasm of fury. It recognizes such opposition in the way you tricked it into bringing you here. At first I thought it was a primitive mentality, but now I know it is a highly evolved, but insane creature, thinks it's Napoleon, wants to conquer the three dimensional plane which its attention has been attracted to in some way—"

Harper looked up in surprise. "Does it know about Napoleon?"

"Of course not, you fool!" screamed Pillbot. "It has the Napoleonic complex, identifies itself with some great conqueror of its own realm. And now it's on the rampage. We have to get out of here—" He clutched at Harper as another upheaval of the surface threw them down.

* * * * *

Rising, Harper put away his pad. His calculations were complete. He could now show engineers how to build high buildings, taking advantage of space stress instead of trying to fight the stress.

For the first time, the danger of their position seemed to penetrate to his consciousness. He looked about—and his eyes rested on a strange familiar projection rising from the invisible floor a few feet away. It was the section of his clay statue that had vanished—vanished because its peculiar shape had somehow caused it to be warped into the fourth dimension!
Why hadn't he been able to move it--Professor Gault moved about freely.

He and Pillbot went over to it, tried to move it. A slight filmy webwork around the projection caught Harper's eye. Now he knew--the Being had somehow affixed it to the spot as a landmark, so It could locate the laboratory. It must have been this projection that had first attracted the Being's attention to the three dimensional world, since, ordinarily, It would never have noticed the presence of three dimensional life, any more than humans would notice the presence of two dimensional life if such existed!

Harper looked up at a bleat from Pillbot. Above them was a sudden furious play of lights and shades. Vast masses seemed shifting in crazy juxtapositions, now descending rapidly toward them.

"Quick," Harper, now fully aroused, gasped to Pillbot. "Climb down this projection!"

"Climb down it--?"

"Yes, there is a fluid condition of space where it penetrates between the two planes. By hugging its contours you will emerge into the laboratory--I hope!"

Pillbot glanced overhead nervously, then experimentally slid a font down the projection. The foot vanished. With a cry of relief, Pillbot lowered himself until only head and shoulders were visible. Then that too vanished.

Harper looked up. Some monstrous suggestion of Form was almost upon him. He grasped the projection and just as his head sank out of sight the Form seemed to smash down on him.

Pillbot helped Harper to his feet, from where he had sprawled at the base of the statue, on the laboratory floor.

"Quick," he gasped. "The Creature will be infuriated now, by our escape from Its realm. A maniacal spasm is sure to follow. We must get Gault back in some way, then leave the laboratory."

Even as they dashed over toward the abbreviated form of Gault, the laboratory shook. Invisible strains seemed to be bulging the walls inward.

Harper rushed to the desk upon which still reposed the cutout, the section between neck and waist still arched off the surface. As Harper reached toward the cutout to press it flat, Gault's eyes widened, his mouth opened in a soundless shout of opposition. Harper hesitated.

"Never mind him," yammered Pillbot. "Press the figure flat!"

Harper pressed it flat.

For an instant the laboratory stopped its ominous vibration. Then the figure of Gault flew through the air, came up against a wall—but it was his complete figure.

"More signs of violence," cried Pillbot. "But that action won't appease It--we must get out of here--"

Even as he spoke there was a thunderous crackling and roaring. Harper felt himself flying about, and for an instant of awful vertigo he did not know up from down. Forces seemed to be tearing at him. He felt as though he were a piece of iron being attracted simultaneously in several directions by powerful electro magnets.

There was a flare of colored lights, a deafening detonation—and he felt himself knocked breathless against a wall.

He picked himself up, looked around.

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On one side of him was the familiar south wall of the laboratory. To the north, east and west was--open air. He was standing on a section of laboratory flooring that jutted out over empty space from the wall. His desk was a few feet away, right at the edge of the jutting floor. Gault and Pillbot were picking themselves up to one side of the desk.

The pair looked over the edge of the floor, then recoiled, frenziedly hugging the flooring under them.

Harper crawled over, looked over the edge, quickly backed away. Several hundred feet below, the traffic of the city roared!

Gault went over to the door in the one wall, opened it, then stepped back quickly, his face pale.

"The laboratory has been turned inside out!" he shouted. "We are on the outside!"

"We must get away from here," squalled Pillbot. "Another spasm of the creature will precipitate us into the street!"

Gault forgot his apprehensions long enough to freeze Harper with a glance. "This is all your doing," he bawled. "You with your absurd doodling, which attracted the attention of some Being of the fourth dimension!" In his anger, he overlooked the fact that he was contradicting his formerly held opinion.

"The laboratory wrecked," he continued, "and that isn't all!" He stalked up to the cringing Harper, thrust his face toward him.

"Do you know," he yelled, "why I didn't want to be returned hastily--why I didn't want you to bring me back by flattening out the paper cutout? You dolt, did you ever try to get a crease out of a piece of paper?"

"I--I don't understand," murmured Harper.

"That paper doll was creased, wasn't it?" shouted Gault.

"Once a piece of paper is creased," he resumed heatedly, "it can't be perfectly flattened out again. At the crease
a thin cross-section continues to bulge--into the third dimension in the case of that paper cutout. Into the fourth dimension in my case! I'm creased too, at the line where I was bent into the fourth dimension! Surely you aren't blind?"

Harper staggered back as he saw it--a thin, horizontal line of light shining through Gault's body--across his waistline, through clothes and all.

"I shall have to go through life this way," Gault snarled, "due to your imbecilic 'doodling', your meddling with what you don't understand. Go about constantly with a slit of daylight showing through me. You're fired!"

"Gentlemen," cried Pillbot. "The entity--we must get away. Another spasm will surely follow--"

Harper didn't think so. A few feet away he had noticed something--his statue lying on its side. It was all there, including the portion that had been in the fourth dimension. The Entity's "landmark" was gone. Harper didn't believe it would locate this particular area of the third dimension again.

The scream of a fire siren rose up to them. As a ladder scraped over the projecting floor, Harper fondly felt the pad in his pocket with the formula on it. He wasn't worried now about having been fired. He was seeing visions of a small cottage with Judith....

Of course, he would have to be careful in the future with his "doodling"! He could not again risk attracting the attention of some four dimensional Being--not with Judith to think about!
In order to make a man stop, you must convince him that it's impossible to go on. Some people, though, just can't be convinced.

In the dark, our glider chutes zeroed neatly on target—only Art Benjamin missed the edge of the gorge. When we were sure Invader hadn't heard the crashing of bushes, I climbed down after him. The climb, and what I found, left me shaken. A Special Corps squad leader is not expendable—by order. Clyde Esterbrook, my second and ICEG mate, would have to mine the viaduct while my nerve and glycogen stabilized.

We timed the patrols. Clyde said, "Have to wait till a train's coming. No time otherwise." Well, it was his show. When the next pair of burly-coated men came over at a trot, he breathed, "Now!" and ghosted out almost before they were clear.

I switched on the ICEG—inter-cortical encephalograph—planted in my temporal bone. My own senses could hear young Ferd breathing, feel and smell the mat of pine needles under me. Through Clyde's, I could hear the blind whuffle of wind in the girders, feel the crude wood of ties and the iron-cold molding of rails in the star-dark. I could feel, too, an odd, lilting elation in his mind, as if this savage universe were a good thing to take on—spray guns, cold, and all.

We wanted to set the mine so the wreckage would clobber a trail below, one like they'd built in Burma and Japan, where you wouldn't think a monkey could go; but it probably carried more supplies than the viaduct itself. So Clyde made adjustments precisely, just as we'd figured it with the model back at base. It was a tricky, slow job in the bitter dark.

I began to figure: If he armed it for this train, and ran, she'd go off while we were on location and we'd be drenched in searchlights and spray guns. Already, through his fingers, I felt the hum in the rails that every tank-town-reared kid knows. I turned up my ICEG. "All right, Clyde, get back. Arm it when she's gone past, for the next one."

I felt him grin, felt his lips form words: "I'll do better than that, Willie. Look, Daddy-o, no hands!" He slid over the edge and rested elbows and ribs on the raw tie ends.

We're all acrobats in the Corps. But I didn't like this act one little bit. Even if he could hang by his hands, the heavy train would jolt him off. But I swallowed my thoughts.

He groped with his foot, contacted a sloping beam, and brought his other foot in. I felt a dull, scraping slither under his moccasin soles. "Frost," he thought calmly, rubbed a clear patch with the edge of his foot, put his weight on it, and transferred his hands to the beam with a twist we hadn't learned in Corps school. My heart did a double-take; one slip and he'd be off into the gorge, and the frost stung, melting under his bare fingers. He lay in the trough of the massive H-beam, slid down about twenty feet to where it made an angle with an upright, and wedged himself there. It took all of twenty seconds, really. But I let out a breath as if I'd been holding it for minutes.

As he settled, searchlights began skimming the bridge. If he'd been running, he'd have been shot to a sieve. As it was, they'd never see him in the mingled glare and black.

His heart hadn't even speeded up beyond what was required by exertion. The train roared around a shoulder and onto the viaduct, shaking it like an angry hand. But as the boxcars thunder-clattered above his head, he was peering into the gulf at a string of feeble lights threading the bottom. "There's the flywalk, Willie. They know their stuff. But we'll get it." Then, as the caboose careened over and the searchlights cut off, "Well, that gives us ten minutes before the patrol comes back."

He levered onto his side, a joint at a time, and began to climb the beam. Never again for me, even by proxy! You just couldn't climb that thing nohow! The slope was too steep. The beam was too massive to shiny, yet too narrow to lie inside and elbow up. The metal was too smooth, and scummed with frost. His fingers were beginning to numb. And—he was climbing!

In each fin of the beam, every foot or so, was a round hole. He'd get one finger into a hole and pull, inching his body against the beam. He timed himself to some striding music I didn't know, not fast but no waste motion, even the pauses rhythmic.

I tell you. I was sweating under my leathers. Maybe I should have switched the ICEG off, for my own sake if not to avoid distracting Clyde. But I was hypnotized, climbing.
In the old days, when you were risking your neck, you were supposed to think great solemn thoughts. Recently, you're supposed to think about something silly like a singing commercial. Clyde's mind was neither posturing in front of his mental mirror nor running in some feverish little circle. He faced terror as big as the darkness from gorge bottom to stars, and he was just simply as big as it was--sheer life exulting in defying the dark, the frost and wind and the zombie grip of Invader. I envied him.

Then his rhythm checked. Five feet from the top, he reached confidently for a finger hole ... No hole.

He had already reached as high as he could without shifting his purchase and risking a skid--and even his wrestler's muscles wouldn't make the climb again. My stomach quaked: Never see sunlight in the trees any more, just cling till dawn picked you out like a crow's nest in a dead tree; or drop ...

Not Clyde. His flame of life crouched in anger. Not only the malice of nature and the rage of enemies, but human shiftlessness against him too! Good! He'd take it on.

Shoulder, thigh, knee, foot scraped off frost. He jammed his jaw against the wet iron. His right hand never let go, but it crawled up the fin of the strut like a blind animal, while the load on his points of purchase mounted--watchmaker co-ordination where you'd normally think in boilermaker terms. The flame sank to a spark as he focused, but it never blinked out. This was not the anticipated, warded danger, but the trick punch from nowhere. This was It. A sneak squall buffeted him. I cursed thinly. But he sensed an extra purchase from its pressure, and reached the last four inches with a swift glide. The next hole was there.

He waited five heartbeats, and pulled. He began at the muscular disadvantage of aligned joints. He had to make it the first time; if you can't do it with a dollar, you won't do it with the change. But as elbow and shoulder bent, the flame soared again: Score one more for life!

A minute later, he hooked his arm over the butt of a tie, his chin, his other arm, and hung a moment. He didn't throw a knee up, just rolled and lay between the rails. Even as he relaxed, he glanced at his watch: three minutes to spare. Leisurely, he armed the mine and jogged back to me and Ferd.

As I broke ICEG contact, his flame had sunk to an ember glow of anticipation.

* * * * *

We had almost reached the cave pricked on our map, when we heard the slam of the mine, wee and far-off. We were lying doggo looking out at the snow peaks incandescent in dawn when the first Invader patrols trailed by below. Our equipment was a miracle of hot food and basic medication. Not pastimes, though; and by the second day of hiding, I was thinking too much. There was Clyde, an Inca chief with a thread of black mustache and incongruous hazel eyes, my friend and ICEG mate--what made him tick? Where did he get his delight in the bright eyes of danger? How did he gear his daredevil valor, not to the icy iron and obligatory killing, but to the big music and stars over the gorge? But in the Corps, we don't ask questions and, above all, never eavesdrop on ICEG.

Young Ferd wasn't so inhibited. Benjamin's death had shaken him--losing your ICEG mate is like losing an eye. He began fly-fishing Clyde: How had Clyde figured that stunt, in the dark, with the few minutes he'd had?

"There's always a way, Ferd, if you're fighting for what you really want."

"Well, I want to throw out Invader, all right, but--"

"That's the start, of course, but beyond that--" He changed the subject: perhaps only I knew of his dream about a stronghold for rebels far in these mountains. He smiled. "I guess you get used to calculated risks. Except for imagination, you're as safe walking a ledge twenty stories up, as down on the sidewalk."

"Not if you trip."

"That's the calculated risk. If you climb, you get used to it."

"Well, did you get used to it? Were you a mountaineer or an acrobat?"

"In a way, both." Clyde smiled again, a trifle bitterly and switched the topic. "Anyway, I've been in action for the duration except some time in hospital."

Ferd was onto that boner like an infielder. To get into SC you have to be not only championship fit, but have no history of injury that could crop up to haywire you in a pinch. So, "Hospital? You sure don't show it now."

Clyde was certainly below par. To cover his slip he backed into a bigger, if less obvious, one. "Oh, I was in that Operation Armada at Golden Gate. Had to be patched up."

He must have figured, Ferd had been a kid then, and I hadn't been too old. Odds were, we'd recall the episode, and no more. Unfortunately, I'd been a ham operator and I'd been in the corps that beamed those fireships onto the Invader supply fleet in the dense fog. The whole episode was burned into my brain. It had been kamikaze stuff, though there'd been a theoretical chance of the thirty men escaping, to justify sending them out. Actually, one escape boat did get back with three men.

I'd learned about those men, out of morbid, conscience-scalded curiosity. Their leader was Edwin Scott, a medical student. At the very start he'd been shot through the lower spine. So, his companions put him in the escape boat while they clinched their prey. But as the escape boat sheered off, the blast of enemy fire killed three and
disabled two.

Scott must have been some boy. He'd already doctored himself with hemostatics and local anaesthetics but, from the hips down, he was dead as salt pork, and his visceral reflexes must have been reacting like a worm cut with a hoe. Yet somehow, he doctored the two others and got that boat home.

The other two had died, but Scott lived as sole survivor of Operation Armada. And he hadn't been a big, bronze, Latin-Indian with incongruous hazel eyes, but a snub-nosed redhead. And he'd been wheel-chaired for life. They'd patched him up, decorated him, sent him to a base hospital in Wisconsin where he could live in whatever comfort was available. So, he dropped out of sight. And now, this!

Clyde was lying, of course. He'd picked the episode at random. Except that so much else about him didn't square. Including his name compared to his physique, now I thought about it.

I tabled it during our odyssey home. But during post-mission leave, it kept bothering me. I checked, and came up with what I'd already known: Scott had been sole survivor, and the others were certified dead. But about Scott, I got a runaround. He'd apparently vanished. Oh, they'd check for me, but that could take years. Which didn't lull my curiosity any. Into Clyde's past I was sworn not to pry.

We were training for our next assignment, when word came through of the surrender at Kelowna. It was a flare of sunlight through a black sky. The end was suddenly close.

Clyde and I were in Victoria, British Columbia. Not subscribing to the folkway that prescribes seasick intoxication as an expression of joy, we did the town with discrimination. At midnight we found ourselves strolling along the waterfront in that fine, Vancouver-Island mist, with just enough drink taken to be moving through a dream. At one point, we leaned on a rail to watch the mainland lights twinkling dimly like the hope of a new world--blackout being lifted.

Suddenly, Clyde said, "What's fraying you recently, Will? When we were taking our ICG reconditioning, it came through strong as garlic, though you wouldn't notice it normally."

Why be coy about an opening like that? "Clyde, what do you know about Edwin Scott?" That let him spin any yarn he chose--if he chose.

He did the cigarette-lighting routine, and said quietly, "Well, I was Edwin Scott, Will." Then, as I waited, "Yes, really me, the real me talking to you. This," he held out a powerful, coppery hand, "once belonged to a man called Marco da Sanhao ... You've heard of transplanting limbs?"

I had. But this man was no transplant job. And if a spinal cord is cut, transplanting legs from Ippalovsky, the primo ballerino, is worthless. I said, "What about it?"

"I was the first--successful--brain transplant in man."

For a moment, it queered me, but only a moment. Hell, you read in fairy tales and fantasy magazines about one man's mind in another man's body, and it's marvelous, not horrible. But--

By curiosity, I know a bit about such things. A big surgery journal, back in the '40s, had published a visionary article on grafting a whole limb, with colored plates as if for a real procedure[A]. Then they'd developed techniques for acclimating a graft to the host's serum, so it would not react as a foreign body. First, they'd transplanted hunks of ear and such; then, in the '60s, fingers, feet, and whole arms in fact.

But a brain is another story. A cut nerve can grow together; every fiber has an insulating sheath which survives the cut and guides growing stumps back to their stations. In the brain and spinal cord, no sheaths; growing fibers have about the chance of restoring contact that you'd have of traversing the Amazon jungle on foot without a map. I said so.

"I know," he said, "I learned all I could, and as near as I can put it, it's like this: When you cut your finger, it can heal in two ways. Usually it bleeds, scabs, and skin grows under the scab, taking a week or so. But if you align the edges exactly, at once, they may join almost immediately healing by First Intent. Likewise in the brain, if they line up cut nerve fibers before the cut-off bit degenerates, it'll join up with the stump. So, take a serum-conditioned brain and fit it to the stem of another brain so that the big fiber bundles are properly fitted together, fast enough, and you can get better than ninety per cent recovery."

"Sure," I said, parading my own knowledge, "but what about injury to the masses of nerve cells? And you'd have to shear off the nerves growing out of the brain."

"There's always a way, Willie. There's a place in the brain stem called the isthmus, no cell masses, just bundles of fibers running up and down. Almost all the nerves come off below that point; and the few that don't can be spliced together, except the smell nerves and optic nerve. Ever notice I can't smell, Willie? And they transplanted my eyes with the brain--biggest trick of the whole job."

It figured. But, "I'd still hate to go through with it."
“What could I lose? Some paraplegics seem to live a fuller life than ever. Me, I was going mad. And I’d seen the dogs this research team at my hospital was working on—old dogs’ brains in whelps’ bodies, spry as natural.

Then came the chance. Da Sanhao was a Brazilian wrestler stranded here by the war. Not his war, he said; but he did have the decency to volunteer as medical orderly. But he got conscripted by a bomb that took a corner off the hospital and one off his head. They got him into chemical stasis quicker than it’d ever been done before, but he was dead as a human being—no brain worth salvaging above the isthmus. So, the big guns at the hospital saw a chance to try their game on human material, superb body and lower nervous system in ideal condition, waiting for a brain. Only, whose?

“Naturally, some big-shot’s near the end of his rope and willing to gamble. But I decided it would be a forgotten little-shot, name of Edwin Scott. I already knew the surgeons from being a guinea pig on ICEG. Of course, when I sounded them out, they gave me a kindly brush-off: The matter was out of the their hands. However, I knew whose hands it was in. And I waited for my chance—a big job that needed somebody expendable. Then I’d make a deal, writing my own ticket because they’d figure I’d never collect. Did you hear about Operation Seed-corn?”

That was the underground railway that ran thousands of farmers out of occupied territory. Manpower was what finally broke Invader, improbable as it seems. Epidemics, desertions, over-extended lines, thinned that overwhelming combat strength; and every farmer spirited out of their hands equalled ten casualties. I nodded.

“Well, I planned that with myself as director. And sold it to Filipson.”

He shrugged. "You do what you can with what you've got. Those weren't the big adventures I was thinking about when I said that. I had a team behind me in those—"

I could only josh. "I'd sure like to hear the capperoo then."

He toed out his cigarette. "You're the only person who's equipped for it. Maybe you'd get it, Willie."

“How do you mean?”

“I kept an ICEG record. Not that I knew it was going to happen, just wanted proof if they gave me a deal and I pulled it off. Filipson wouldn't renege, but generals were expendable. No one knew I had that transmitter in my temporal bone, and I rigged it to get a tape on my home receiver. Like to hear it?”

I said what anyone would, and steered him back to quarters before he'd think better of it. This would be something!

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On the way, he filled in background. Scott had been living out of hospital in a small apartment, enjoying as much liberty as he could manage. He had equipment so he could stump around, and an antique car specially equipped. He wasn't complimentary about them. Orthopedic products had to be: unreliable, hard to service, unsightly, intricate, and uncomfortable. If they also squeaked and cut your clothes, fine!

Having to plan every move with an eye on weather and a dozen other factors, he developed in uncanny foresight. Yet he had to improvise at a moment's notice. With life a continuous high-wire act, he trained every surviving fiber to precision, dexterity, and tenacity. Finally, he avoided help. Not pride, self-preservation; the compulsively helpful have rarely the wit to ask before rushing in to knock you on your face, so he learned to bide his time till the horizon was clear of beaming simpletons. Also, he found an interest in how far he could go.

These qualities, and the time he had for thinking, begot Seed-corn. When he had it convincing, he applied to see General Filipson, head of Regional Intelligence, a man with both insight and authority to make the deal--but also as tough as his post demanded. Scott got an appointment two weeks ahead.

That put it early in April, which decreased the weather hazard—a major consideration in even a trip to the Supermarket. What was Scott's grim consternation, then, when he woke on D-day to find his windows plastered with snow under a driving wind—not mentioned in last night's forecast of course.

He could concoct a plausible excuse for postponement—which Filipson was just the man to see through; or call help to get him to HQ—and have Filipson bark, "Man, you can't even make it across town on your own power because of a little snow." No, come hell or blizzard, he'd have to go solo. Besides, when he faced the inevitable unexpected behind Invader lines, he couldn't afford a precedent of having flinched now.

He dressed and breakfasted with all the petty foresights that can mean the shaving of clearance in a tight squeeze, and got off with all the margin of time he could muster. In the apartment court, he had a parking space by the basement exit and, for a wonder, no free-wheeling nincompoop had done him out of it last night. Even so, getting to the car door illustrated the ordeal ahead; the snow was the damp, heavy stuff that packs and glares. The streets were nasty, but he had the advantage of having learned restraint and foresight.
HQ had been the post office, a ponderous red-stone building filling a whole block. He had scouted it thoroughly in advance, outside and in, and scheduled his route to the general's office, allowing for minor hazards. Now, he had half an hour extra for the unscheduled major hazard.

But on arriving, he could hardly believe his luck. No car was yet parked in front of the building, and the walk was scraped clean and salted to kill the still falling flakes. No problems. He parked and began to unload himself quickly, to forestall the elderly MP who hurried towards him. But, as Scott prepared to thank him off, the man said, "Sorry, Mac, no one can park there this morning."

Scott felt the chill of nemesis. Knowing it was useless, he protested his identity and mission.

But, "Sorry, major. But you'll have to park around back. They're bringing in the big computer. General himself can't park here. Them's orders."

He could ask the sergeant to park the car. But the man couldn't leave his post, would make a to-do calling someone--and that was Filipson's suite overlooking the scene. No dice. Go see what might be possible.

But side and back parking were jammed with refugees from the computer, and so was the other side. And he came around to the front again. Five minutes wasted. He thought searchingly.

He could drive to a taxi lot, park there, and be driven back by taxi, disembark on the clean walk, and there you were. Of course, he could hear Filipson's "Thought you drove your own car, ha?" and his own damaging excuses. But even Out Yonder, you'd cut corners in emergency. It was all such a comfortable Out, he relaxed. And, relaxing, saw his alternative.

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He was driving around the block again, and noted the back entrance. This was not ground level, because of the slope of ground; it faced a broad landing, reached by a double flight of steps. These began on each side at right-angles to the building and then turned up to the landing along the face of the wall. Normally, they were negotiable; but now, even had he found parking near them, he hadn't the chance of the celluloid cat in hell of even crossing the ten feet of uncleaned sidewalk. You might as well climb an eighty-degree, fifty-foot wall of rotten ice. But there was always a way, and he saw it.

The unpassable walk itself was an avenue of approach. He swung his car onto it at the corner, and drove along it to the steps to park in the angle between steps and wall--and discovered a new shut-out. He'd expected the steps to be a mean job in the raw wind that favored this face of the building; but a wartime janitor had swept them sketchily only down the middle, far from the balustrades he must use. By the balustrades, early feet had packed a semi-ice far more treacherous than the untouched snow; and, the two bottom steps curved out beyond the balustrade. So ... a sufficiently reckless alpinist might assay a cliff in a sleet storm and gale, but he couldn't even try if it began with an overhang.

Still time for the taxi. And so, again Scott saw the way that was always there: Set the car so he could use its hood to heft up those first steps.

Suddenly, his thinking metamorphosed: He faced, not a miserable, unwarranted forlorn hope, but the universe as it was. Titanic pressure suit against the hurricanes of Jupiter, and against a gutter freshet, life was always outclassed--and always fought back. Proportions didn't matter, only mood.

He switched on his ICEG to record what might happen. I auditioned it, but I can't disentangle it from what he told me. For example, in his words: Multiply distances by five, heights by ten, and slickness by twenty. And in the playback: Thirty chin-high ledges loaded with soft lard, and only finger holds and toe holds. And you did it on stilts that began, not at your heels, at your hips. Add the hazard of Helpful Hosea: "Here, lemme giveya hand, Mac!", grabbing the key arm, and crashing down the precipice on top of you.

Switching on the ICEG took his mind back to the snug apartment where its receiver stood, the armchair, books, desk of diverting work. It looked awful good, but ... life fought back, and always it found a way.

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He shucked his windbreaker because it would be more encumbrance than help in the showdown. He checked, shoelaces, and strapped on the cleats he had made for what they were worth. He vetoed the bag of sand and salt he kept for minor difficulties--far too slow. He got out of the car.

This could be the last job he'd have to do incognito--Seed-corn, he'd get credit for. Therefore, he cherished it: triumph for its own sake. Alternatively, he'd end at the bottom in a burlesque clutter of chrom-alum splints and sticks, with maybe a broken bone to clinch the decision. For some men, death is literally more tolerable than defeat in humiliation.

Eighteen shallow steps to the turn, twelve to the top. Once, he'd have cleared it in three heartbeats. Now, he had to make it to a twenty-minute deadline, without rope or alpenstock, a Moon-man adapted to a fraction of Earth gravity.

With the help of the car hood, the first two pitches were easy. For the next four or five, wind had swept the top
of the balustrade, providing damp, gritty handhold. Before the going got tougher, he developed a technic, a rhythm and system of thrusts proportioned to heights and widths, a way of scraping holds where ice was not malignantly welded to stone, an appreciation of snow texture and depth, an economy of effort.

He was enjoying a premature elation when, on the twelfth step, a cleat strap gave. Luckily, he was able to take his lurch with a firm grip on the balustrade; but he felt depth yawning behind him. Dourly, he took thirty seconds to retrieve the cleat; stitching had been sawed through by a metal edge—just as he'd told the cocksure workman it would be. Oh, to have a world where imbecility wasn't entrenched! Well—he was fighting here and now for the resources to found one. He resumed the escalade, his rhythm knocked cockeyed.

Things even out. Years back, an Invader bomber had scored a near miss on the building, and minor damage to stonework was unrepai...
BOLDEN'S PETS
By F. L. WALLACE

The price of life was a life for a life--which was all the reward the victim looked for!

His hands were shaking as he exhibited the gifts. If he were on Earth, he would be certain it was the flu; in the Centaurus system, kranken. But this was Van Daamas, so Lee Bolden couldn't say what he had. Man hadn't been here long enough to investigate the diseases with any degree of thoroughness. There were always different hazards to overcome as new planets were settled.

But whatever infection he had, Bolden was not greatly concerned as he counted out the gifts. He had felt the onset of illness perhaps an hour before. When he got back to the settlement he'd be taken care of. That was half a day's flight from here. The base was equipped with the best medical facilities that had been devised.

He stacked up the gifts to make an impressive show: five pairs of radar goggles, seven high-velocity carbines, seven boxes of ammunition. This was the natives' own rule and was never to be disregarded--it had to be an odd number of gifts.

The Van Daamas native gazed impassively at the heap. He carried a rather strange bow and a quiver was strapped to his thigh. With one exception, the arrows were brightly colored, mostly red and yellow. Bolden supposed this was for easy recovery in case the shot missed. But there was always one arrow that was stained dark blue. Bolden had observed this before--no native was ever without that one somber-looking arrow.

The man of Van Daamas stood there and the thin robe that was no protection against the elements rippled slightly in the chill current of air that flowed down the mountainside. "I will go talk with the others," he said in English.

"Go talk," said Bolden, trying not to shiver. He replied in native speech, but a few words exhausted his knowledge and he had to revert to his own language. "Take the gifts with you. They are yours, no matter what you decide."

The native nodded and reached for a pair of goggles. He tried them on, looking out over fog and mist-shrouded slopes. These people of Van Daamas needed radar less than any race Bolden knew of. Living by preference in mountains, they had developed a keenness of vision that enabled them to see through the perpetual fog and mist far better than any Earthman. Paradoxically it was the goggles they appreciated most. Extending their sight seemed more precious to them than powerful carbines.

The native shoved the goggles up on his forehead, smiling with pleasure. Noticing that Bolden was shivering, he took his hands and examined them. "Hands sick?" he queried.

"A little," said Bolden. "I'll be all right in the morning."

The native gathered up the gifts. "Go talk," he repeated as he went away.

Lee Bolden sat in the copter and waited. He didn't know how much influence this native had with his people. He had come to negotiate, but this might have been because he understood English somewhat better than the others.

A council of the natives would make the decision about working for the Earthmen's settlement. If they approved of the gifts, they probably would. There was nothing to do now but wait--and shiver. His hands were getting numb and his feet weren't much better.

Presently the native came out of the fog carrying a rectangular wicker basket. Bolden was depressed when he saw it. One gift in return for goggles, carbines, ammunition. The rate of exchange was not favorable. Neither would the reply be.

The man set the basket down and waited for Bolden to speak. "The people have talked?" asked Bolden. "We have talked to come," said the native, holding out his fingers. "In five or seven days, we come."

It was a surprise, a pleasant one. Did one wicker basket equal so many fine products of superlative technology? Apparently it did. The natives had different values. To them, one pair of goggles was worth more than three carbines, a package of needles easily the equivalent of a box of ammunition.

"It's good you will come. I will leave at once to tell them at the settlement," said Bolden. There was something moving in the basket, but the weave was close and he couldn't see through it.

"Stay," the man advised. "A storm blows through the mountains."

"I will fly around the storm," said Bolden.

If he hadn't been sick he might have accepted the offer. But he had to get back to the settlement for treatment. On a strange planet you never could tell what might develop from a seemingly minor ailment. Besides he'd already
been gone two days searching for this tribe in the interminable fog that hung over the mountains. Those waiting at the base would want him back as soon as he could get there.

"Fly far around," said the man. "It is a big storm." He took up the basket and held it level with the cabin, opening the top. An animal squirmed out and disappeared inside.

Bolden looked askance at the eyes that glowed in the dim interior. He hadn't seen clearly what the creature was and he didn't like the idea of having it loose in the cabin, particularly if he had to fly through a storm. The man should have left it in the basket. But the basket plus the animal would have been two gifts—and the natives never considered anything in even numbers.

"It will not hurt," said the man. "A gentle pet."

As far as he knew, there were no pets and very few domesticated animals. Bolden snapped on the cabin light. It was one of those mysterious creatures every tribe kept in cages near the outskirts of their camps. What they did with them no one knew and the natives either found it impossible to explain or did not care to do so.

It seemed unlikely that the creatures were used for food and certainly they were not work animals. And in spite of what this man said, they were not pets either. No Earthman had ever seen a native touch them nor had the creatures ever been seen wandering at large in the camp. And until now, none had been permitted to pass into Earth's possession. The scientists at the settlement would regard this acquisition with delight.

"Touch it," said the native.

Bolden held out his trembling hand and the animal came to him with alert and friendly yellow eyes. It was about the size of a rather small dog, but it didn't look much like one. It resembled more closely a tiny slender bear with a glossy and shaggy cinnamon coat. Bolden ran his hands through the clean-smelling fur and the touch warmed his fingers. The animal squirmed and licked his fingers.

"It has got your taste," said the native. "Be all right now. It is yours." He turned and walked into the mist.

Bolden got in and started the motors while the animal climbed into the seat beside him. It was a friendly thing and he couldn't understand why the natives always kept it caged.

He headed straight up, looking for a way over the mountains to avoid the impending storm. Fog made it difficult to tell where the peaks were and he had to drop lower, following meandering valleys. He flew as swiftly as limited visibility would allow, but he hadn't gone far when the storm broke. He tried to go over the top of it, but this storm seemed to have no top. The region was incompletely mapped and even radar wasn't much help in the tremendous electrical display that raged around the ship.

His arms ached as he clung to the controls. His hands weren't actually cold, they were numb. His legs were leaden. The creature crept closer to him and he had to nudge it away. Momentarily the distraction cleared his head. He couldn't put it off any longer. He had to land and wait out the storm—if he could find a place to land.

Flexing his hands until he worked some feeling into them, he inched the ship lower. A canyon wall loomed at one side and he had to veer away and keep on looking.

Eventually he found his refuge—a narrow valley where the force of the winds was not extreme—and he set the land anchor. Unless something drastic happened, it would hold.

He made the seat into a bed, decided he was too tired to eat, and went directly to sleep. When he awakened, the storm was still raging and the little animal was snoozing by his side.

He felt well enough to eat. The native hadn't explained what the animal should be fed, but it accepted everything Bolden offered. Apparently it was as omnivorous as Man. Before lying down again, he made the other seat into a bed, although it didn't seem to matter. The creature preferred being as close to him as it could get and he didn't object. The warmth was comforting.

Alternately dozing and waking he waited out the storm. It lasted a day and a half. Finally the sun was shining. This was two days since he had first fallen ill, four days after leaving the settlement.

Bolden felt much improved. His hands were nearly normal and his vision wasn't blurred. He looked at the little animal curled in his lap, gazing up at him with solemn yellow eyes. If he gave it encouragement it would probably be crawling all over him. However, he couldn't have it frisking around while he was flying. "Come, Pet," he said--there wasn't anything else to call it--"you're going places."

Picking it up, half-carrying and half-dragging it, he took it to the rear of the compartment, improvising a narrow cage back there. He was satisfied it would hold. He should have done this in the beginning. Of course he hadn't felt like it then and he hadn't had the time—and anyway the native would have resented such treatment of a gift. Probably it was best he had waited.

His pet didn't like confinement. It whined softly for a while. The noise stopped when the motors roared. Bolden headed straight up, until he was high enough to establish communication over the peaks. He made a brief report
about the natives' agreement and his own illness, then he started home. He flew at top speed for ten hours. He satisfied his hunger by nibbling concentrated rations from time to time. The animal whined occasionally, but Bolden had learned to identify the sounds it made. It was neither hungry nor thirsty. It merely wanted to be near him. And all he wanted was to reach the base.

The raw sprawling settlement looked good as he sat the copter down. Mechanics came running from the hangars. They opened the door and he stepped out.

And fell on his face. There was no feeling in his hands and none in his legs. He hadn't recovered.

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Doctor Kessler peered at him through the microscreen. It gave his face a narrow insubstantial appearance. The microscreen was a hemispherical force field enclosing his head. It originated in a tubular circlet that snapped around his throat at the top of the decontagion suit. The field killed all microlife that passed through it or came in contact with it. The decontagion suit was non-porous and impermeable, covering completely the rest of his body. The material was thinner over his hands and thicker at the soles.

Bolden took in the details at a glance. "Is it serious?" he asked, his voice cracking with the effort.

"Merely a precaution," said the doctor hollowly. The microscreen distorted sound as well as sight. "Merely a precaution. We know what it is, but we're not sure of the best way to treat it."

Bolden grunted to himself. The microscreen and decontagion suit were strong precautions.

The doctor wheeled a small machine from the wall and placed Bolden's hand in a narrow trough that held it steady. The eyepiece slid into the microscreen and, starting at the finger tips, Kessler examined the arm, traveling slowly upward. At last he stopped. "Is this where feeling ends?"

"I think so. Touch it. Yeah. It's dead below there."

"Good. Then we've got it pegged. It's the Bubble Death."

Bolden showed concern and the doctor laughed. "Don't worry. It's called that because of the way it looks through the X-ray microscope. It's true that it killed the scouting expedition that discovered the planet, but it won't get you."

"They had antibiotics. Neobiotics, too."

"Sure. But they had only a few standard kinds. Their knowledge was more limited and they lacked the equipment we now have."

The doctor made it sound comforting. But Bolden wasn't comforted. Not just yet.

"Sit up and take a look," said Kessler, bending the eyepiece around so Bolden could use it. "The dark filamented lines are nerves. See what surrounds them?"

Bolden watched as the doctor adjusted the focus for him. Each filament was covered with countless tiny spheres that isolated and insulated the nerve from contact. That's why he couldn't feel anything. The spherical microbes did look like bubbles. As yet they didn't seem to have attacked the nerves directly.

While he watched, the doctor swiveled out another eyepiece for his own use and turned a knob on the side of the machine. From the lens next to his arm an almost invisible needle slid out and entered his flesh. Bolden could see it come into the field of view. It didn't hurt. Slowly it approached the dark branching filament, never quite touching it.

The needle was hollow and as Kessler squeezed the knob it sucked in the spheres. The needle extended a snout which crept along the nerve, vacuuming in microbes as it moved. When a section had been cleansed, the snout was retracted. Bolden could feel the needle then.

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When the doctor finished, he laid Bolden's hand back at his side and wheeled the machine to the wall, extracting a small capsule which he dropped into a slot that led to the outside. He came back and sat down.

"Is that what you're going to do?" asked Bolden. "Scrape them off?"

"Hardly. There are too many nerves. If we had ten machines and enough people to operate them, we might check the advance in one arm. That's all." The doctor leaned back in the chair. "No. I was collecting a few more samples. We're trying to find out what the microbes react to."

"More samples? Then you must have taken others."

"Certainly. We put you out for a while to let you rest." The chair came down on four legs. "You've got a mild case. Either that or you have a strong natural immunity. It's now been three days since you reported the first symptoms and it isn't very advanced. It killed the entire scouting expedition in less time than that."

Bolden looked at the ceiling. Eventually they'd find a cure. But would he be alive that long?

"I suspect what you're thinking," said the doctor. "Don't overlook our special equipment. We already have specimens in the sonic accelerator. We've been able to speed up the life processes of the microbes about ten times. Before the day is over we'll know which of our anti and neobiotics they like the least. Tough little things so far--"
unbelievably tough--but you can be sure we'll smack them."

His mind was active, but outwardly Bolden was quiescent as the doctor continued his explanation.

The disease attacked the superficial nervous system, beginning with the extremities. The bodies of the crew of the scouting expedition had been in an advanced state of decomposition when the medical rescue team reached them and the microbes were no longer active. Nevertheless it was a reasonable supposition that death had come shortly after the invading bacteria had reached the brain. Until then, though nerves were the route along which the microbes traveled, no irreparable damage had been done.

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This much was good news. Either he would recover completely or he would die. He would not be crippled permanently. Another factor in his favor was the sonic accelerator. By finding the natural resonance of the one-celled creature and gradually increasing the tempo of the sound field, the doctor could grow and test ten generations in the laboratory while one generation was breeding in the body. Bolden was the first patient actually being observed with the disease, but the time element wasn't as bad as he had thought.

"That's where you are," concluded Kessler. "Now, among other things, we've got to find where you've been."

"The ship has an automatic log," said Bolden. "It indicates every place I landed."

"True, but our grid coordinates are not exact. It will be a few years before we're able to look at a log and locate within ten feet of where a ship has been." The doctor spread out a large photomap. There were several marks on it. He fastened a stereoscope viewer over Bolden's eyes and handed him a pencil. "Can you use this?"

"I think so." His fingers were stiff and he couldn't feel, but he could mark with the pencil. Kessler moved the map nearer and the terrain sprang up in detail. In some cases, he could see it more clearly than when he had been there, because on the map there was no fog. Bolden made a few corrections and the doctor took the map away and removed the viewer.

"We'll have to stay away from these places until we get a cure. Did you notice anything peculiar in any of the places you went?"

"It was all mountainous country."

"Which probably means that we're safe on the plain. Were there any animals?"

"Nothing that came close. Birds maybe."

"More likely it was an insect. Well, we'll worry about the host and how it is transmitted. Try not to be upset. You're as safe as you would be on Earth."

"Yeah," said Bolden. "Where's the pet?"

The doctor laughed. "You did very well on that one. The biologists have been curious about the animal since the day they saw one in a native camp."

"They can look at it as much as they want," said Bolden. "Nothing more on this one, though. It's a personal gift."

"You're sure it's personal?"

"The native said it was."

The doctor sighed. "I'll tell them. They won't like it, but we can't argue with the natives if we want their cooperation."

Bolden smiled. The animal was safe for at least six months. He could understand the biologists' curiosity, but there was enough to keep them curious for a long time on a new planet. And it was his. In a remarkably short time, he had become attached to it. It was one of those rare things that Man happened across occasionally--about once in every five planets. Useless, completely useless, the creature had one virtue. It liked Man and Man liked it. It was a pet. "Okay," he said. "But you didn't tell me where it is."

The doctor shrugged, but the gesture was lost in the shapeless decontagion suit. "Do you think we're letting it run in the streets? It's in the next room, under observation."

The doctor was more concerned than he was letting on. The hospital was small and animals were never kept in it. "It's not the carrier. I was sick before it was given to me."

"You had something, we know that much, but was it this? Even granting that you're right, it was in contact with you and may now be infected."

"I think life on this planet isn't bothered by the disease. The natives have been every place I went and none of them seemed to have it."

"Didn't they?" said the doctor, going to the door. "Maybe. It's too early to say." He reeled a cord out of the wall and plugged it into the decontagion suit. He spread his legs and held his arms away from his sides. In an instant, the suit glowed white hot. Only for an instant, and it was insulated inside. Even so it must be uncomfortable--and the process would be repeated outside. The doctor wasn't taking any chances. "Try to sleep," he said. "Ring if there's a change in your condition--even if you think it's insignificant."
"I'll ring," said Bolden. In a short time he fell asleep. It was easy to sleep.

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The nurse entered as quietly as she could in the decontagion outfit. It awakened Bolden. It was evening. He had slept most of the day. "Which one are you?" he asked. "The pretty one?"

"All nurses are pretty if you get well. Here. Swallow this."

It was Peggy. He looked doubtfully at what she held out. "All of it?"

"Certainly. You get it down and I'll see that it comes back up. The string won't hurt you."

She passed a small instrument over his body, reading the dial she held in the other hand. The information, he knew, was being recorded elsewhere on a master chart. Apparently the instrument measured neural currents and hence indirectly the progress of the disease. Already they had evolved new diagnostic techniques. He wished they'd made the same advance in treatment.

After expertly reeling out the instrument he had swallowed, the nurse read it and deposited it in a receptacle in the wall. She brought a tray and told him to eat. He wanted to question her, but she was insistent about it so he ate. Allowance had been made for his partial paralysis. The food was liquid. It was probably nutritious, but he didn't care for the taste.

She took the tray away and came back and sat beside him. "Now we can talk," she said.

"What's going on?" he said bluntly. "When do I start getting shots? Nothing's been done for me so far."

"I don't know what the doctor's working out for you. I'm just the nurse."

"Don't try to tell me that," he said. "You're a doctor yourself. In a pinch you could take Kessler's place."

"And I get my share of pinches," she said brightly. "Okay, so I'm a doctor, but only on Earth. Until I complete my off-planet internship here, I'm not allowed to practice."

"You know as much about Van Daamas as anyone does."

"That may be," she said. "Now don't be alarmed, but the truth ought to be obvious. None of our anti or neobiotics or combinations of them have a positive effect. We're looking for something new."

It should have been obvious; he had been hoping against that, though. He looked at the shapeless figure sitting beside him and remembered Peggy as she usually looked. He wondered if they were any longer concerned with him as an individual. They must be working mainly to keep the disease from spreading. "What are my chances?"

"Better than you think. We're looking for an additive that will make the biotics effective."

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He hadn't thought of that, though it was often used, particularly on newly settled planets. He had heard of a virus infection common to Centaurus that could be completely controlled by a shot of neobiotics plus aspirin, though separately neither was of any value. But the discovery of what substance should be added to what antibiotic was largely one of trial and error. That took time and there wasn't much time. "What else?" he said.

"That's about it. We're not trying to make you believe this isn't serious. But don't forget we're working ten times as fast as the disease can multiply. We expect a break any moment." She got up. "Want a sedative for the night?"

"I've got a sedative inside me. Looks like it will be permanent."

"That's what I like about you, you're so cheerful," she said, leaning over and clipping something around his throat. "In case you're wondering, we're going to be busy tonight checking the microscope. We can put someone in with you, but we thought you'd rather have all of us working on it."

"Sure," he said.

"This is a body monitor. If you want anything just call and we'll be here within minutes."

"Thanks," he said. "I won't panic tonight."

She plugged in the decontagion uniform, flashed it on and then left the room. After she was gone, the body monitor no longer seemed reassuring. It was going to take something positive to pull him through.

They were going to work through the night, but did they actually hope for success. What had Peggy said? None of the anti or neobiotics had a positive reaction. Unknowingly she had let it slip. The reaction was negative; the bubble microbes actually grew faster in the medium that was supposed to stop them. It happened occasionally on strange planets. It was his bad luck that it was happening to him.

He pushed the thoughts out of his mind and tried to sleep. He did for a time. When he awakened he thought, at first, it was his arms that had aroused him. They seemed to be on fire, deep inside. To a limited extent, he still had control. He could move them though there was no surface sensation. Interior nerves had not been greatly affected until now. But outside the infection had crept up. It was no longer just above the wrists. It had reached his elbows and passed beyond. A few inches below his shoulder he could feel nothing. The illness was accelerating. If they had ever thought of amputation, it was too late, now.

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He resisted an impulse to cry out. A nurse would come and sit beside him, but he would be taking her from
work that might save his life. The infection would reach his shoulders and move across his chest and back. It would travel up his throat and he wouldn't be able to move his lips. It would paralyze his eyelids so that he couldn't blink. Maybe it would blind him, too. And then it would find ingress to his brain.

The result would be a metabolic explosion. Swiftly each bodily function would stop altogether or race wildly as the central nervous system was invaded, one regulatory center after the other blanking out. His body would be aflame or it would smolder and flicker out. Death might be spectacular or it could come very quietly.

That was one reason he didn't call the nurse.

The other was the noise.

It was a low sound, half purr, half a coaxing growl. It was the animal the native had given him, confined in the next room. Bolden was not sure why he did what he did next. Instinct or reason may have governed his actions. But instinct and reason are divisive concepts that cannot apply to the human mind, which is actually indivisible.

He got out of bed. Unable to stand, he rolled to the floor. He couldn't crawl very well because his hands wouldn't support his weight so he crept along on his knees and elbows. It didn't hurt. Nothing hurt except the fire in his bones. He reached the door and straightened up on his knees. He raised his hand to the handle, but couldn't grasp it. After several trials, he abandoned the attempt and hooked his chin on the handle, pulling it down. The door opened and he was in the next room. The animal was whining louder now that he was near. Yellow eyes glowed at him from the corner. He crept to the cage.

It was latched. The animal shivered eagerly, pressing against the side, striving to reach him. His hands were numb and he couldn't work the latch. The animal licked his fingers.

It was easier after that. He couldn't feel what he was doing, but somehow he managed to unlatch it. The door swung open and the animal bounded out, knocking him to the floor.

He didn't mind at all because now he was sure he was right. The natives had given him the animal for a purpose. Their own existence was meager, near the edge of extinction. They could not afford to keep something that wasn't useful. And this creature was useful. Tiny blue sparks crackled from the fur as it rubbed against him in the darkness. It was not whining. It rumbled and purred as it licked his hands and arms and rolled against his legs.

After a while he was strong enough to crawl back to bed, leaning against the animal for support. He lifted himself up and fell across the bed in exhaustion. Blood didn't circulate well in his crippled body. The animal bounded up and tried to melt itself into his body. He couldn't push it away if he wanted. He didn't want to. He stirred and got himself into a more comfortable position. He wasn't going to die.

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In the morning, Bolden was awake long before the doctor came in. Kessler's face was haggard and the smile was something he assumed solely for the patient's benefit. If he could have seen what the expression looked like after filtering through the microscreen, he would have abandoned it. "I see you're holding your own," he said with hollow cheerfulness. "We're doing quite well ourselves."

"I'll bet," said Bolden. "Maybe you've got to the point where one of the antibiotics doesn't actually stimulate the growth of the microbes?"

"I was afraid you'd find it out," sighed the doctor. "We can't keep everything from you."

"You could have given me a shot of plasma and said it was a powerful new drug."

"That idea went out of medical treatment a couple of hundred years ago," said the doctor. "You'd feel worse when you failed to show improvement. Settling a planet isn't easy and the dangers aren't imaginary. You've got to be able to face facts as they come."

He peered uncertainly at Bolden. The microscreen distorted his vision, too. "We're making progress though it may not seem so to you. When a mixture of a calcium salt plus two antihistamines is added to a certain neobiotic, the result is that the microbe grows no faster than it should. Switching the ingredients here and there--maybe it ought to be a potassium salt--and the first thing you know we'll have it stopped cold."

"I doubt the effectiveness of those results," said Bolden. "In fact, I think you're on the wrong track. Try investigating the effects of neural induction."

"What are you talking about?" said the doctor, coming closer and glancing suspiciously at the lump beside Bolden. "Do you feel dizzy? Is there anything else unusual that you notice?"

"Don't shout at the patient." Bolden wagged his finger reprovingly. He was proud of the finger. He couldn't feel what he was doing, but he had control over it. "You, Kessler, should face the fact that a doctor can learn from a patient what the patient learned from the natives."

But Kessler didn't hear what he said. He was looking at the upraised hand. "You're moving almost normally," he said. "Your own immunity factor is controlling the disease."

"Sure. I've got an immunity factor," said Bolden. "The same one the natives have. Only it's not inside my body." He rested his hand on the animal beneath the covers. It never wanted to leave him. It wouldn't have to.
"I can set your mind at rest on one thing, Doctor. Natives are susceptible to the disease, too. That's why they were able to recognize I had it. They gave me the cure and told me what it was, but I was unable to see it until it was nearly too late. Here it is." He turned back the covers and the exposed animal sleeping peacefully on his legs which raised its head and licked his fingers. He felt that.

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After an explanation the doctor tempered his disapproval. It was an unsanitary practice, but he had to admit that the patient was much improved. Kessler verified the state of Bolden's health by extensive use of the X-ray microscope. Reluctantly he wheeled the machine to the wall and covered it up.

"The infection is definitely receding," he said. "There are previously infected areas in which I find it difficult to locate a single microbe. What I can't understand is how it's done. According to you, the animal doesn't break the skin with its tongue and therefore nothing is released into the bloodstream. All that seems necessary is that the animal be near you." He shook his head behind the microscreen. "I don't think much of the electrical analogy you used."

"I said the first thing I thought of. I don't know if that's the way it works, but it seems to me like a pretty fair guess."

"The microbes do cluster around nerves," said the doctor. "We know that neural activity is partly electrical. If the level of that activity can be increased, the bacteria might be killed by ionic dissociation." He glanced speculatively at Bolden and the animal. "Perhaps you do borrow nervous energy from the animal. We might also find it possible to control the disease with an electrical current."

"Don't try to find out on me," said Bolden. "I've been an experimental specimen long enough. Take somebody who's healthy. I'll stick with the natives' method."

"I wasn't thinking of experiments in your condition. You're still not out of danger." Nevertheless he showed his real opinion when he left the room. He failed to plug in and flash the decontagion suit.

Bolden smiled at the doctor's omission and ran his hand through the fur. He was going to get well.

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But his progress was somewhat slower than he'd anticipated though it seemed to satisfy the doctor who went on with his experiments. The offending bacteria could be killed electrically. But the current was dangerously large and there was no practical way to apply the treatment to humans. The animal was the only effective method.

Kessler discovered the microbe required an intermediate host. A tick or a mosquito seemed indicated. It would take a protracted search of the mountains to determine just what insect was the carrier. In any event the elaborate sanitary precautions were unnecessary. Microscreens came down and decontagion suits were no longer worn. Bolden could not pass the disease on to anyone else.

Neither could the animal. It seemed wholly without parasites. It was clean and affectionate, warm to the touch. Bolden was fortunate that there was such a simple cure for the most dreaded disease on Van Daamas.

It was several days before he was ready to leave the small hospital at the edge of the settlement. At first he sat up in bed and then he was allowed to walk across the room. As his activity increased, the animal became more and more content to lie on the bed and follow him with its eyes. It no longer frisked about as it had in the beginning. As Bolden told the nurse, it was becoming housebroken.

The time came when the doctor failed to find a single microbe. Bolden's newly returned strength and the sensitivity of his skin where before there had been numbness confirmed the diagnosis. He was well. Peggy came to walk him home. It was pleasant to have her near.

"I see you're ready," she said, laughing at his eagerness.

"Except for one thing," he said. "Come, Pet." The animal raised its head from the bed where it slept.

"Pet?" she said quizzically. "You ought to give it a name. You've had it long enough to decide on something."

"Pet's a name," he said. "What can I call it? Doc? Hero?"

She made a face. "I can't say I care for either choice, although it did save your life."

"Yes, but that's an attribute it can't help. The important thing is that if you listed what you expect of a pet you'd find it in this creature. Docile, gentle, lively at times; all it wants is to be near you, to have you touch it. And it's very clean."

"All right, call it Pet if you want," said Peggy. "Come on, Pet."

It paid no attention to her. It came when Bolden called, getting slowly off the bed. It stayed as close as it could get to Bolden. He was still weak so they didn't walk fast and, at first, the animal was able to keep up.

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It was almost noon when they went out. The sun was brilliant and Van Daamas seemed a wonderful place to be alive in. Yes, with death behind him, it was a very wonderful place. Bolden chatted gaily with Peggy. She was fine company.

And then Bolden saw the native who had given him the animal. Five to seven days, and he had arrived on time.
The rest of the tribe must be elsewhere in the settlement. Bolden smiled in recognition while the man was still at some distance. For an answer the native shifted the bow in his hand and glanced behind the couple, in the direction of the hospital.

The movement with the bow might have been menacing, but Bolden ignored that gesture. It was the sense that something was missing that caused him to look down. The animal was not at his side. He turned around.

The creature was struggling in the dust. It got to its feet and wobbled toward him, staggering crazily as it tried to reach him. It spun around, saw him, and came on again. The tongue lolled out and it whined once. Then the native shot it through the heart, pinning it to the ground. The short tail thumped and then it died.

Bolden couldn't move. Peggy clutched his arm. The native walked over to the animal and looked down. He was silent for a moment. "Die anyway soon," he said to Bolden. "Burned out inside."

He bent over. The bright yellow eyes had faded to nothingness in the sunlight. "Gave you its health," said the man of Van Daamas respectfully as he broke off the protruding arrow.

It was a dark blue arrow.

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Now every settlement on the planet has Bolden's pets. They have been given a more scientific name, but nobody remembers what it is. The animals are kept in pens, exactly as is done by the natives, on one side of town, not too near any habitation.

For a while, there was talk that it was unscientific to use the animal. It was thought that an electrical treatment could be developed to replace it. Perhaps this was true. But settling a planet is a big task. As long as one method works there isn't time for research. And it works—the percentage of recovery is as high as in other common ailments.

But in any case the animal can never become a pet, though it may be in the small but bright spark of consciousness that is all the little yellow-eyed creature wants. The quality that makes it so valuable is the final disqualification. Strength can be a weakness. Its nervous system is too powerful for a man in good health, upsetting the delicate balance of the human body in a variety of unusual ways. How the energy-transfer takes place has never been determined exactly, but it does occur.

It is only when he is stricken with the Bubble Death and needs additional energy to drive the invading microbes from the tissue around his nerves that the patient is allowed to have one of Bolden's pets.

In the end, it is the animal that dies. As the natives knew, it is kindness to kill it quickly.

Bolden never goes there nor will he speak of it. His friends say he's unhappy about being the first Earthman to discover the usefulness of the little animal. They are right. It is a distinction he doesn't care for. He still has the blue arrow. There are local craftsmen who can mend it, but he has refused their services. He wants to keep it as it is.
approximately twelve hundred miles per second. Phobar was astonished. Two new stars discovered within twenty-
four hours in the same part of the heavens, both of the fourth magnitude! But his surprise was as nothing when on
the succeeding night, even while he watched, a third new star appeared in line with these, but much closer.
At midnight he first noticed a pin-point of faint light; by one o’clock the star was of eighth magnitude. At two it
was a brilliant sun of the second magnitude blazing away from Earth like the others at a rate of twelve hundred miles
per second. And on the next evening, and the next, and the next, other new stars appeared until there were seven in
all, every one on a line in the same constellation Hercules, every one with the same radiance and the same proper
motion, though of varying size!

Phobar had broadcast his discovery to incredulous astronomers; but as star after star appeared nightly, all the
telescopes on Earth were turned toward one of the most spectacular cataclysms that history recorded. Far out in the
depths of space, with unheard-of regularity and unheard-of precision, new worlds were flaming up overnight in a
line that began at Hercules and extended toward the solar system.

Phobar’s announcement was immediately flashed to Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, the other members of the
Five World Federation. Saturn reported no evidence of the phenomena, because of the interfering rings and the lack
of Mercia’s nullifier. But Jupiter, with a similar device, witnessed the phenomena and announced furthermore that
many stars in the neighborhood of the novae had begun to deviate in singular and abrupt fashion from their normal
positions.

There was not as yet much popular interest in the phenomena. Without Mercia’s nullifier, the stars were not
visible to ordinary eyes, since the light-rays would take years to reach the Earth. But every astronomer who had
access to Mercia’s nullifier hastened to focus his telescope on the region where extraordinary events were taking
place out in the unfathomable gulf of night. Some terrific force was at work, creating worlds and disturbing the
positions of stars within a radius already known to extend billions and trillions of miles from the path of the seven
new stars. But of the nature of that force, astronomers could only guess.

Phobar took up his duties early on the eighth night. The last star had appeared about five hundred light-years
distant. If an eighth new star was found, it should be not more than a few light-years away. But nothing happened.
All night Phobar kept his telescope pointed at the probable spot, but search as he might, the heavens showed nothing
new. In the morning he sought eagerly for news of any discovery made by fellow-watchers, but they, too, had found
nothing unusual. Could it be that the mystery would now fade away, a new riddle of the skies?

The next evening, he took up his position once more, training his telescope on the seven bright stars, and then
on the region where an eighth, if there were one, should appear. For hours he searched the abyss in vain. He could
find none. Apparently the phenomena were ended. At midnight he took a last glance before entering on some
tedious calculations. It was there! In the center of the telescope a faint, hazy object steadily grew in brightness. All
his problems were forgotten as Phobar watched the eighth star increase hourly. Closer than any other, closer even
than Alpha Centauri, the new sun appeared, scarcely three light-years away across the void surrounding the solar
system. And all the while he watched, he witnessed a thing no man had ever before seen—the birth of a world!

By one o’clock, the new star was of fifth magnitude; by two it was of the first. As the faint flush of dawn began
to come toward the close of that frosty, moonless November night, the new star was a great white-hot object more
brilliant than any other star in the heavens. Phobar knew that when its light finally reached Earth so that ordinary
eyes could see, it would be the most beautiful object in the night sky. What was the reason for these unparalleled
births of worlds and the terrifying mathematical precision that characterized them?

Whatever the cosmic force behind, it was progressing toward the solar system. Perhaps it would even disturb
the balance of the planets. The possible chance of such an event had already called the attention of some
astronomers, but the whole phenomenon was too inexplicable to permit more than speculation.

The next evening was cloudy. Jupiter reported nothing new except that Neptune had deviated from its course
and tended to pursue an erratic and puzzling new orbit.

Phobar pondered long over this last news item and turned his attention to the outermost planet on the
succeeding night. To his surprise, he had great difficulty in locating it. The ephemeris was of absolutely no use.
When he did locate Neptune after a brief search, he discovered it more than eighty million miles from its scheduled
place! This was at one-forty. At two-ten he was thunderstruck by a special announcement sent from the Central
Bureau to every observatory and astronomer of note throughout the world, proclaiming the discovery of an ultra-
Plutonian planet. Phobar was incredulous. For centuries it had been proved that no planet beyond Pluto could
possibly exist.
With feverish haste, Phobar ran to the huge telescope and rapidly focused it where the new planet should be. Five hundred million miles beyond Neptune was a flaming path like the beam of a giant searchlight that extended exactly to the eighth solar planet. Phobar gasped. He could hardly credit the testimony of his eyes. He looked more closely. The great stream of flame still crossed his line of vision. But this time he saw something else: at the precise farther end of the flame-path a round disk—dark!

Beyond a doubt, a new planet of vast size now formed an addition to the solar group. But that planet was almost impervious to the illuminating rays of the sun and was barely discernible. Neptune itself shone brighter than it ever had, and was falling away from the sun at a rate of twelve hundred miles per second.

All night Phobar watched the double mystery. By three o’clock, he was convinced, as far as lightning calculations showed, that the invader was hurtling toward the sun at a speed of more than ten million miles an hour. At three-fifteen, he thought that vanishing Neptune seemed brighter even than the band of fire running to the invader. At four, his belief was certainty. With amazement and awe, Phobar sat through the long, cold night, watching a spectacular and terrible catastrophe in the sky.

As dawn began to break and the stars grew paler, Phobar turned away from his telescope, his brain awhirl, his heart filled with a great fear. He had witnessed the devastation of a world, the ruin of a member of his own planetary system by an invader from outer space. As dawn cut short his observations, he knew at last the cause of Neptune’s brightness, knew that it was now a white-hot flaming sun that sped with increased rapidity away from the solar system. Somehow, the terrible swathe of fire that flowed from the dark star to Neptune had wrenched it out of its orbit and made of it a molten inferno.

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At dawn came another bulletin from the Central Bureau. Neptune had a surface temperature of 3,000° C, was defying all laws of celestial mechanics, and within three days would have left the solar system for ever. The results of such a disaster were unpredictable. The entire solar system was likely to break up. Already Uranus and Jupiter had deviated from their orbits. Unless something speedily occurred to check the onrush of the dark star, it was prophesied that the laws governing the planetary system would run to a new balance, and that in the ensuing chaos the whole group would spread apart and fall toward the gulfs beyond the great surrounding void.

What was the nature of the great path of fire? What force did it represent? And was the dark star controlled by intelligence, or was it a blind wanderer from space that had come by accident? The flame-path alone implied that the dark star was guided by an intelligence that possessed the secret of inconceivable power. Menace hung in the sky now where all eyes could see in a great arc of fire!

The world was on the brink of eternity, and vast forces at whose nature men could only guess were sweeping planets and suns out of its path.

The following night was again cold and clear. High in the heavens, where Neptune should have been, hung a disk of enormously greater size. Neptune itself was almost invisible, hundreds of millions of miles beyond its scheduled position. As nearly as Phobar could estimate, not one hundredth of the sun’s rays were reflected from the surface of the dark star, a proportion far below those for the other planets. Phobar had a better view of the flame-path, and it was with growing awe that he watched that strange swathe in the sky during the dead of night. It shot out from the dark star like a colossal beam or huge pillar of fire seeking a food of worlds.

With a shiver of cold fear he saw that there were now three of the bands: one toward Neptune, one toward Saturn, and one toward the sun. The first was fading, a milky, misty white; the second shone almost as bright as the first one previously had; and the third, toward the sun, was a dazzling stream of orange radiance, burning with a steady, terrible, unbelievable intensity across two and a half billions of miles of space! That gigantic flare was the most brilliant sight in the whole night sky, an awful and abysmally prophetic flame that made city streets black with staring people, a radiance whose grandeur and terrific implication of cosmic power brought beauty and the fear of doom into the heavens!

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Those paths could not be explained by all the physicists and all the astronomers in the Five World Federation. They possessed the properties of light, but they were rigid bands like a tube or a solid pillar from which only the faintest of rays escaped; and they completely shut off the heavens behind them. They had, moreover, singular properties which could not be described, as if a new force were embodied in them.

Hour after hour humanity watched the spectacular progress of the dark star, watched those mysterious and threatening paths of light that flowed from the invader. When dawn came, it brought only a great fear and the oppression of impending disaster.

In the early morning, Phobar slept. When he awoke, he felt refreshed and decided to take a short walk in the familiar and peaceful light of day. He never took that walk. He opened the door on a kind of dim and reddish twilight. Not a cloud hung in the sky, but the sun shone feebly with a dull red glow, and the skies were dull and
somber, as if the sun were dying as scientists had predicted it eventually would.

Phobar stared at the dull heavens in a daze, at the foreboding atmosphere and the livid sun that burned faintly as through a smoke curtain. Then the truth flashed on him--it was the terrible path of fire from the dark star! By what means he could not guess, by what appalling control of immense and inconceivable forces he could not even imagine, the dark star was sucking light and perhaps more than light from the sun!

Phobar turned and shut the door. The world had seen its last dawn. If the purpose of the dark star was destruction, none of the planets could offer much opposition, for no weapon of theirs was effective beyond a few thousand miles range at most--and the dark star could span millions. If the invader passed on, its havoc would be only a trifle smaller, for it had already destroyed two members of the solar system and was now striking at its most vital part. Without the sun, life would die, but even with the sun the planets must rearrange themselves because of the destruction of balance.

Even he could hardly grasp the vast and abysmal catastrophe that without warning had swept from space. How could the dark star have traversed three thousand light-years of space in a week's time? It was unthinkable! So stupendous a control of power, so gigantic a manipulation of cosmic forces, so annihilating a possession of the greatest secrets of the universe, was an unheard-of concentration of energy and knowledge of stellar mechanics. But the evidence of his own eyes and the path of the dark star with flaming suns to mark its progress, told him in language which could not be refuted that the dark star possessed all that immeasurable, titanic knowledge. It was the lord of the universe. There was nothing which the dark star could not crush or conquer or change. The thought of that immense, supreme power numbed his mind. It opened vistas of a civilization, and a progress, and an unparalleled mastery of all knowledge which was almost beyond conception.

Already the news had raced across the world. On Phobar's television screen flashed scenes of nightmare; the radio spewed a gibberish of terror. In one day panic had swept the Earth; on the remaining members of the Five World Federation the same story was repeated. Rioting mobs drowned out the chant of religious fanatics who hailed Judgment Day. Great fires turned the air murky and flame-shot. Machine guns spat regularly in city streets; looting, murder, and fear-crazed crimes were universal. Civilization had completely vanished overnight.

The tides roared higher than they ever had before; for every thousand people drowned on the American seaboards, a hundred thousand perished in China and India. Dead volcanoes boomed into the worst eruptions known. Half of Japan sank during the most violent earthquake in history. Land rocked, the seas boiled, cyclones howled out of the skies. A billion eyes focused on Mecca, the mad beating of tom-toms rolled across all Africa, women and children were trampled to death by the crowds that jammed into churches.

"Has man lived in vain?" asked the philosopher.
"The world is doomed. There is no escape," said the scientist.
"The day of reckoning has come! The wrath of God is upon us!" shouted the street preachers.

In a daze, Phobar switched off the bedlam and, walking like a man asleep, strode out, he did not care where, if only to get away.

The ground and the sky were like a dying fire. The sun seemed a half-dead cinder. Only the great swathe of radiance between the sun and the dark star had any brilliance. Sinister, menacing, now larger even than the sun, the invader from beyond hung in the heavens.

As Phobar watched it, the air around him prickled strangely. A sixth sense gave warning. He turned to race back into his house. His legs failed. A fantastic orange light bathed him, countless needles of pain shot through his whole body, the world darkened.

Earth had somehow been blotted out. There was a brief blackness, the nausea of space and of a great fall that compressed eternity into a moment. Then a swimming confusion, and outlines which gradually came to rest.

Phobar was too utterly amazed to cry out or run. He stood inside the most titanic edifice he could have imagined, a single gigantic structure vaster than all New York City. Far overhead swept a black roof fading into the horizon, beneath his feet was the same metal substance. In the midst of this giant work soared the base of a tower that pierced the roof thousands of feet above.

Everywhere loomed machines, enormous dynamos, cathode tubes a hundred feet long, masses and mountains of such fantastic apparatus as he had never encountered. The air was bluish, electric. From the black substance came a phosphorescent radiance. The triumphant drone of motors and a terrific crackle of electricity were everywhere. Off to his right purple-blue flames the size of Sequoia trees flickered around a group of what looked like condensers as huge as Gibraltar. At the base of the central tower half a mile distant Phobar could see something that resembled a great switchboard studded with silver controls. Near it was a series of mechanisms at whose purpose he could not
even guess.

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All this his astounded eyes took in at one confused glance. The thing that gave him unreasoning terror was the hundred-foot-high metal monster before him. It defied description. It was unlike any color known on Earth, a blinding color sinister with power and evil. Its shape was equally ambiguous—it rippled like quicksilver, now compact, now spread out in a thousand limbs. But what appalled Phobar was its definite possession of rational life. More, its very thoughts were transmitted to him as clearly as though written in his own English:

"Follow me!"

Phobar's mind did not function—but his legs moved regularly. In the grasp of this mental, metal monster he was a mere automaton. Phobar noticed idly that he had to step down from a flat disk a dozen yards across. By some power, some tremendous discovery that he could not understand, he had been transported across millions of miles of space—undoubtedly to the dark star itself!

The colossal thing, indescribable, a blinding, nameless color, rippled down the hall and stooped before a disk of silvery black. In the center of the disk was a metal seat with a control board near-by.

"Be seated!"

Phobar sat down, the titan flicked the controls—and nothing happened.

Phobar sensed that something was radically wrong. He felt the surprise of his gigantic companion. He did not know it then, but the fate of the solar system hung on that incident.

"Come!"

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Abruptly the giant stooped, and Phobar shrank back, but a flowing mass of cold, insensate metal swept around him, lifted him fifty feet in the air. Dizzy, sick, horrified, he was hardly conscious of the whirlwind motion into which the giant suddenly shot. He had a dim impression of machines racing by, of countless other giants, of a sudden opening in the walls of the immense building, and then a rush across the surface of metal land. Even in his vertigo he had enough curiosity to marvel that there was no vegetation, no water, only the dull black metal everywhere. Yet there was air.

And then a city loomed before them. To Phobar it seemed a city of gods or giants. Fully five miles it soared toward space, its fantastic angles and arcs and cubes and pyramids mazing in the dimensions of a totally alien geometry. Tier by tier the stupendous city, hundreds of miles wide, mounted toward a central tower like the one in the building he had left.

Phobar never knew how they got there, but his numbed mind was at last forced into clarity by a greater will. He stared about him. His captor had gone. He stood in a huge chamber circling to a dome far overhead. Before him, on a dais a full thousand feet in diameter, stood—sat—rested, whatever it might be called—a mountain of pliant thinking, living metal. And Phobar knew he stood in the presence of the ruler.

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The metal Cyclops surveyed him as Phobar might have surveyed an ant. Cold, deadly, dispassionate scrutiny came from something that might have been eyes, or a seeing intelligence locked in a metal body.

There was no sound, but inwardly to Phobar's consciousness from the peak of the titan far above him came a command:

"What are you called?"

Phobar opened his lips—but even before he spoke, he knew that the thing had understood his thought: "Phobar."

"I am Garboreggg, ruler of Xlarbi, the Lord of the Universes."

"Lord of the Universes?"

"I and my world come from one of the universes beyond the reach of your telescopes." Phobar somehow felt that the thing was talking to him as he would to a new-born babe.

"What do you want of me?"

"Tell your Earth that I want the entire supply of your radium ores mined and placed above ground according to the instructions I give, by seven of your days hence."

A dozen questions sprang to Phobar's lips. He felt again that he was being treated like a child.

"Why do you want our radium ores?"

"Because they are the rarest of the elements on your scale, are absent on ours, and supply us with some of the tremendous energy we need."

"Why don't you obtain the ores from other worlds?"

"We do. We are taking them from all worlds where they exist. But we need yours also."

Raiders of the universe! Looting young worlds of the precious radium ores! Piracy on a cosmic scale!
"And if Earth refuses your demand?"

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For answer, Garboreggg rippled to a wall of the room and pressed a button. The wall dissolved, weirdly, mysteriously. A series of vast silver plates was revealed, and a battery of control levers.

"This will happen to all of your Earth unless the ores are given us."

The titan closed a switch. On the first screen flashed the picture of a huge tower such as Phobar had seen in the metal city.

Garboreggg adjusted a second control that was something like a range-finder. He pressed a third lever--and from the tower leaped a surge of terrific energy, like a bolt of lightning a quarter of a mile broad. The giant closed another switch--and on the second plate flashed a picture of New York City.

Then--waiting. Seconds, minutes drifted by. The atmosphere became tense, nerve-cracking. Phobar's eyes ached with the intensity of his stare. What would happen?

Abruptly it came.

A monstrous bolt of energy streaked from the skies, purple-blue death in a pillar a fourth of a mile broad crashed into the heart of New York City, swept up and down Manhattan, across and back, and suddenly vanished.

In fifteen seconds, only a molten hell of fused structures and incinerated millions of human beings remained of the world's first city.

Phobar was crushed, appalled, then utter loathing for this soulless thing poured through him. If only--

"It is useless. You can do nothing," answered the ruler as though it had grasped his thought.

"But why, if you could pick me off the Earth, do you not draw the radium ores in the same way?" Phobar demanded.

"The orange-ray picks up only loose, portable objects. We can and will transport the radium ores here by means of the ray after they have been mined and placed on platforms or disks."

"Why did you select me from all the millions of people on Earth?"

"Solely because you were the first apparent scientist whom our cosmotel chanced upon. It will be up to you to notify your Earth governments of our demand."

"But afterwards!" Phobar burst out aloud. "What then?"

"We will depart."

"It will mean death to us! The solar system will be wrecked with Neptune gone and Saturn following it!"

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Garboreggg made no answer. To that impassive, cold, inhuman thing, it did not matter if a nation or a whole world perished. Phobar had already seen with what deliberate calm it destroyed a city, merely to show him what power the lords of Xlarbti controlled. Besides, what guarantee was there that the invaders would not loot the Earth of everything they wanted and then annihilate all life upon it before they departed? Yet Phobar knew he was helpless, knew that the men of Earth would be forced to do whatever was asked of them, and trust that the raiders would fulfill their promise.

"Two hours remain for your stay here," came the ruler's dictum to interrupt his line of thought. "For the first half of that period you will tell me of your world and answer whatever questions I may ask. During the rest of the interval, I will explain some of the things you wish to learn about us."

Again Phobar felt Garboreggg's disdain, knew that the metal giant regarded him as a kind of childish plaything for an hour or two's amusement. But he had no choice, and so he told Garboreggg of the life on Earth, how it arose and along what lines it had developed; he narrated in brief the extent of man's knowledge, his scientific achievements, his mastery of weapons and forces and machines, his social organization.

When he had finished, he felt as a Stone Age man might feel in the presence of a brilliant scientist of the thirty-fourth century. If any sign of interest had shown on the peak of the metallic lord, Phobar failed to see it. But he sensed an intolerant sneer of ridicule in Garboreggg, as though the ruler considered these statements to be only the most elementary of facts.

Then, for three quarters of an hour, in the manner of one lecturing an ignorant pupil, the giant crowded its thought-pictures into Phobar's mind so that finally he understood a little of the raiders and of the sudden terror that had flamed from the abysses into the solar system.

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"The universe of matter that you know is only one of the countless universes which comprise the cosmos," began Garboreggg. "In your universe, you have a scale of ninety-two elements, you have your color-spectrum, your rays and waves of many kinds. You are subject to definite laws controlling matter and energy as you know them.

"But we are of a different universe, on a different scale from yours, a trillion light-years away in space, eons distant in time. The natural laws which govern us differ from those controlling you. In our universe, you would be
hopelessly lost, completely helpless, unless you possessed the knowledge that your people will not attain even in millions of years. But we, who are so much older and greater than you, have for so long studied the nature of the other universes that we can enter and leave them at will, taking what we wish, doing as we wish, creating or destroying worlds whenever the need arises, coming and hurtling away when we choose.

"There is no vegetable life in our universe. There is only the scale of elements ranging from 842 to 966 on the extension of your own scale. At this high range, metals of complex kinds exist. There is none of what you call water, no vegetable world, no animal kingdom. Instead, there are energies, forces, rays, and waves, which are food to us and which nourish our life-stream just as pigs, potatoes, and bread are food to you.

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"Trillions of years ago in your time-calculation, but only a few dozen centuries ago in ours, life arose on the giant world Kygpton in our universe. It was life, our life, the life of my people and myself, intelligence animating bodies of pliant metal, existing almost endlessly on an almost inexhaustible source of energy.

"But all matter wears down. On Kygpton there was a variety of useful metals, others that were valueless. There was comparatively little of the first, much of the second. Kygpton itself was a world as large as your entire solar system, with a diameter roughly of four billion miles. Our ancestors knew that Kygpton was dying, that the store of our most precious element Sthalreh was dwindling. But already our ancestors had mastered the forces of our universe, had made inventions that are beyond your understanding, had explored the limits of our universe in space-cars that were propelled by the free energies in space and by the attracting-repelling influences of stars.

"The metal inhabitants of Kygpton employed every invention they knew to accomplish an engineering miracle that makes your bridges and mines seem but the puny efforts of a gnat. They blasted all the remaining ores of Sthalreh from the surface and interior of Kygpton and refined them. Then they created a gigantic vacuum, a dead-field in space a hundred million miles away from their world. The dead-field was controlled from Kygpton by atomic-projectors, energy-absorbers, gravitation-nullifiers and cosmotels, range-regulators, and a host of other inventions.

"As fast as it was mined and extracted, the Sthalreh metal was vaporized, shot into the dead-field by interstellar rays, and solidified there along an invisible framework which we projected. In a decade of our time, we had pillaged Kygpton of every particle of Sthalreh. And then in our skies hung an artificial world, a manufactured sphere, a giant new planet, the world you yourself are now on--Xlarbti!

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"We did not create a solid globe. We left chambers, tunnels, passageways, storerooms throughout it or piercing it from surface to surface. Thus, even as Xlarbti was being created, we provided for everything that we needed or could need--experimental laboratories, sub-surface vaults, chambers for the innumerable huge ray dynamos, energy storage batteries, and other apparatus which we required.

"And when all was ready, we transferred by space-cars and by atomic individuation all our necessities from Kygpton to the artificial world Xlarbti. And when everything was prepared, we destroyed the dead-field by duplicate control from Xlarbti, turned our repulsion-power on full against the now useless and dying giant world Kygpton, and swung upon our path.

"But our whole universe is incredibly old. It was mature before ever your young suns flamed out of the gaseous nebular, it was decaying when your molten planets were flung from the central sun, it was dying before the boiling seas had given birth to land upon your sphere. And while we had enough of our own particular electrical food to last us for a million of your years, and enough power to guide Xlarbti to other universes, we had exhausted all the remaining energy of our entire universe. And when we finally left it to dwindle behind us in the black abysses of space, we left it, a dead cinder, devoid of life, vitiuated of activity, and utterly lacking in cosmic forces, a universe finally run down.

"The universes, as you may know, are set off from each other by totally black and empty abysms, expanses so vast that light-rays have not yet crossed many of them. How did we accomplish the feat of traversing such a gulf? By the simplest of means: acceleration. Why? Because to remain in our universe meant inevitable death. We gambled on the greatest adventure in all the cosmos.

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"To begin with, we circled our universe to the remotest point opposite where we wanted to leave it. We then turned our attraction powers on part way so that the millions of stars before us drew us ahead, then we gradually stepped up the power to its full strength, thus ever increasing our speed. At the same time, as stars passed to our rear in our flight, we turned our repulsion-rays against them, stepping that power up also.

"Our initial speed was twenty-four miles per second. Midway in our universe we had reached the speed of your light--186,000 miles per second. By the time we left our universe, we were hurtling at a speed which we estimated to be 1,600,000,000 miles per second. Yet even at that tremendous speed, it took us years to cross from our universe to
yours. If we had encountered even a planetoid at that enormous rate, we would probably have been annihilated in white-hot death. But we had planned well, and there are no superiors to our stellar mechanics, our astronomers, our scientists.

"When we finally hurtled from the black void into your universe, we found what we had only dared hope for: a young universe, with many planets and cooling worlds rich in radium ores, the only element in your scale that can help to replenish our vanishing energy. Half your universe we have already deprived of its ores. Your Earth has more that we want. Then we shall continue on our way, to loot the rest of the worlds, before passing on to another universe. We are a planet without a universe. We will wander and pillage until we find a universe like the one we come from, or until Xlarbti itself disintegrates and we perish.

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"We could easily wipe out all the dwellers on Earth and mine the ores ourselves. But that would be a needless waste of our powers, for since you can not defy us, and since the desire for life burns as high in you as in us and as it does in all sentient things in all universes, your people will save themselves from death and save us from wasting energy by mining the ores for us. What happens afterwards, we do not care.

"The seven new suns that you saw were dead worlds that we used as buffers to slow down Xlarbti. The full strength of our repulsion-force directed against any single world necessarily turns it into a liquid or gaseous state depending on various factors. Your planet Neptune was pulled out of the solar system by the attraction of Xlarbti's mass. The flame-paths, as you call them, are directed streams of energy for different purposes: the one to the sun supplies us, for instance, with heat, light, and electricity, which in turn are stored up for eventual use.

"The orange-ray that you felt is one of our achievements. It is similar to the double-action pumps used in some of your sulphur mines, whereby a pipe is inclosed in a larger pipe, and hot water forced down through the larger tubing returns sulphur-laden through the central pipe. The orange-ray instantaneously dissolves any portable object up to a certain size, propels it back to Xlarbti through its center which is the reverse ray, and here reform the object, just as you were recreated on the disk that you stood on when you regained consciousness.

"But I have not enough time to explain everything on Xlarbti to you; nor would you comprehend it all if I did. Your stay is almost up.

"In that one control-panel lies all the power that we have mastered," boasted Garboreggg with supreme egotism. "It connects with the individual controls throughout Xlarbti."

"What is the purpose of some of the levers?" asked Phobar, with a desperate hope in his thoughts.

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A filament of metal whipped to the panel from the lord of Xlarbti. "This first section duplicates the control-panel that you saw in the laboratory where you opened your eyes. Do not think that you can make use of this information—in ten minutes you will be back on your Earth to deliver our command. Between now and that moment you will be so closely watched that you can do nothing and will have no opportunity to try.

"This first lever controls the attraction rays, the second the repulsion force. The third dial regulates the orange-ray by which you will be returned to Earth. The fourth switch directs the electrical bolt that destroyed New York City. Next it is a device that we have never had occasion to use. It releases the Krangor-wave throughout Xlarbti. Its effect is to make each atom of Xlarbti, the Sthalreh metal and everything on it, become compact, to do away with the empty spaces that exist in every atom. Theoretically, it would reduce Xlarbti to a fraction of its present size, diminish its mass while its weight and gravity remained as before.

"The next lever controls matter to be transported between here and the first laboratory. Somewhat like the orange-ray, it disintegrates the object and reassembles it here."

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So that was what Phobar's captor had been trying to do with him back there in the laboratory! "Why was I not brought here by that means?" burst out Phobar.

"Because you belong to a different universe," answered Garboreggg. "Without experimentation, we cannot tell what natural laws of ours you would not be subject to, but this is one of them." A gesture of irritation seemed to come from him. "Some laws hold good in all the universes we have thus far investigated. The orange-ray, for instance, picked you up as it would have plucked one of us from the surface of Kygpton. But on Xlarbti, which is composed entirely of Sthalreh, your atomic nature and physical constitution are so different from ours that they were unaffected by the energy that ordinarily transports objects here."

Thus the metal nightmare went rapidly over the control-panel. At length Phobar's captor, or another thing like him, reentered when Garboreggg flicked a strange-looking protuberance on the panel.

"You will now be returned to your world," came the thought of Garboreggg. "We shall watch you through our cosmotel to see that you deliver our instructions. Unless the nations of Earth obey us, they will be obliterated at the end of seven days."
A wild impulse to smash that impassive, metallic monster passed from Phobar as quickly as it came. He was helpless. Sick and despairing, he felt the cold, baffling-colored metal close around him again; once more he was borne aloft for the journey to the laboratory, from there to be propelled back to Earth.

Seven days of grace! But Phobar knew that less than ten minutes remained to him. Only here could he possibly accomplish anything. Once off the surface of Xlarbti, there was not the remotest chance that all the nations of Earth could reach the invaders or even attempt to defy them. Yet what could he alone do in a week, to say nothing of ten minutes?

He sensed the amused, supercilious contempt of his captor. That was really the greatest obstacle, this ability of theirs to read thought-pictures. And already he had given them enough word-pictures of English so that they could understand....

In the back of Phobar's mind the ghost of a desperate thought suddenly came. What was it he had learned years ago in college? Homer--"The Odyssey"--Plutarch.... From rusty, disused corners of memory crept forth the half-forgotten words. He bent all his efforts to the task, not daring to think ahead or plan ahead or visualize anything but the Greek words.

He felt the bewilderment of his captor. To throw it off the track, Phobar suddenly let an ancient English nursery rime slip into his thoughts. The disgust that emanated from his captor was laughable; Phobar could have shouted aloud. But the Greek words....

Already the pair had left the mountain-high titan city far behind; they rippled across the smooth, black surface of Xlarbti, and bore like rifle bullets down on the swiftly looming laboratory. In a few minutes it would be too late forever. Now the lost Greek words burst into Phobar's mind, and, hoping against hope, he thought in Greek word-pictures which his captor could not understand. He weighed chances, long shots. Into his brain flashed an idea.... But they were upon the laboratory; a stupendous door dissolved weirdly into shimmering haze; they sped through.

Phobar's hand clutched a bulge in his pocket. Would it work? How could it?

They were beyond the door now and racing across the great expanse of the floor, past the central tower, past the control-panel which he had first seen....

And as if by magic there leaped into Phobar's mind a clear-cut, vivid picture of violet oceans of energy crackling and streaking from the heavens to crash through the laboratory roof and barely miss striking his captor behind. Even as Phobar created the image of that terrific death, his captor whirled around in a lightning movement, a long arm of metal flicking outward at the same instant to drop Phobar to the ground.

Like a flash Phobar was on his feet; his hand whipped from his pocket, and with all his strength he flung a gleaming object straight toward the fifth lever on the control-panel a dozen yards away. As a clumsy arrow would, his oversize bunch of keys twisted to their mark, clanked, and spread against the fifth control, which was the size regulator.

As rapidly as Phobar's captor had spun around, it reversed again, having guessed the trick. A tentacle of pliant metal snaked toward Phobar like a streak of flame.

But in those few seconds a terrific holocaust had taken place. As Phobar's keys spattered against the fifth lever, there came an immediate, growing, strange, high whine, and a sickening collapse of the very surface beneath them. Everywhere outlines of objects wavered, changed melted, shrank with a steady and nauseatingly swift motion. The roof of the laboratory high overhead plunged downward; the far-distant walls swept inward, contracted. And the metal monsters themselves dwindled as though they were vast rubber figures from which the air was hissing.

Phobar sprang back as the tentacle whipped after him. Only that jump and the suddenly dwarfing dimensions of the giant saved him. And even in that instant of wild action, Phobar shouted aloud--for this whole world was collapsing, together with everything on it, except he himself who came of a different universe and remained unaffected! It was the long shot he had gambled on, the one chance he had to strike a blow.

All over the shrinking laboratory the monsters were rushing toward him. His dwindling captor flung another tentacle toward the control-panel to replace the size-regulating lever. But Phobar had anticipated that possibility and had already leaped to the switchboard, sweeping a heavy bar from its place and crashing it down on the lever so that it could not be replaced without being repaired. Almost in the same move he had bounded away again, the former hundred-foot giant now scarcely more than his own height. But throughout the laboratory, the other metal things had halted in their tasks and were racing onward.

Phobar always remembered that battle in the laboratory as a scene from some horrible nightmare. The catastrophe came so rapidly that he could hardly follow the whirlwind events. The half dozen great leaps he made from the lashing tentacles of his pursuer sufficed to give him a few seconds' respite, and then the weird, howling
sound of the tortured world swelled to a piercing wail. His lungs were laboring from the violence of his exertions; again and again he barely escaped from the curling whips of metal tentacles. And now the monster was hardly a foot high; the huge condensers and tubes and colossal machinery were like those of a pygmy laboratory. And overhead the roof plunged ever downward.

But Phobar was cornered at last. He stood in the center of a circle of the foot-high things. His captor suddenly shot forth a dozen rope-like arms toward him as the others closed in. He had not even a weapon, for he had dropped the bar in his first mad bound away from the control-panel. He saw himself trapped in his own trick, for in minutes at most the laboratory would be crushing him with fearful force.

* * * * *

Blindly Phobar reverted to a primitive defense in this moment of infinite danger and kicked with all his strength at the squat monster before him. The thing tried to whirl aside, but Phobar's shoe squashed thickly through, and in a disorder of quivering pieces the metal creature fell, and subsided. Knowing at last that the invaders were vulnerable and how they could be killed, Phobar went leaping and stamping on those nearest him. Under foot, they disintegrated into little pulpy lumps of inert metal.

In a trice he broke beyond the circle and darted to the control-panel. One quick glance showed him that the roof was now scarcely a half dozen yards above. With fingers that fumbled in haste at tiny levers and dials, he spun several of them—the repulsion-ray full—the attraction-ray full. And when they were set, he picked up the bar he had dropped and smashed the controls so that they were helplessly jammed. He could almost feel the planet catapult through the heavens.

The laboratory roof was only a foot over his head. He whirled around, squashed a dozen tiny creeping things, leaped to a disk that was now not more than a few inches broad. Stooping low, balancing himself precariously, he somehow managed to close the tiny switch. A haze of orange light enveloped him, there came a great vertigo and dizziness and pain, he felt himself falling through bottomless spaces....

* * * * *

So exhausted that he could scarcely move, Phobar blinked his eyes open to brilliant daylight in the chill of a November Indian summer noon. The sun shone radiant in the heavens; off in the distance he heard a pandemonium of bells and whistles. Wearily he noticed that there were no flame-paths in the sky.

Staggering weakly, he made his way to the observatory, mounted the steps with tired limbs, and wobbled to the eyepiece of his telescope which he had left focused on the dark star two hours before. Almost trembling, he peered through it.

The dark star was gone. Somewhere far out in the abysses of the universe, a runaway world plunged headlong at ever-mounting speed to uncharted regions under its double acceleration of attraction and repulsion.

A sigh of contentment came from his lips as he sank into a heavy and profound sleep. Later he would learn of the readjustments in the solar system, and of the colder climate that came to Earth, and of the vast changes permanently made by the invading planet, and of a blazing new star discovered in Orion that might signify the birth of a sun or the death of a metallic dark world.

But these were events to be, and he demanded his immediate reward of a day's dreamless slumber.
Of course if Man is to survive, he must be adaptable, as any life form must. But that's not enough; he must adapt faster than the competing forms. And on new planets, that can be tricky....

The faxgram read: REPORT MA IS INSTANTER GRAVIS. The news obelisk just off the express strip outside Mega Angeles' Galactic Survey Building was flashing: ONE OF OUR STAR SHIPS IS MISSING!

Going up in the lift, I recalled what I had seen once scrawled upon the bulkhead of a GS trainer: Space is kind to those who respect her. And underneath, in different handwriting: Fear is the word, my boy.

The look given me by the only other passenger, a husky youngster in GS gray, when I punched Interstel's level, didn't help. It was on the tip of my tongue to retaliate: Yes, and I'd turn in my own mother if she were a star chaser and I caught her doing something stupid. But I let it ride; obviously, it was a general-principles reaction; he couldn't have known the particulars of my last assignment: the seldom kind that had given Interstel its reputation.

The lumer over the main entrance glowed: INTERSTELLAR SECURITY, INVESTIGATION, AND SPECIAL SERVICES BRANCH, GALACTIC SURVEY, NORTH AMERICAN FEDERATION.

At the end of the long corridor between offices was a door labeled: CHIEF SPECIAL AGENT.

Gravis hadn't changed a bit in the thirty-six hours since I'd last seen him: a large, rumpled man who showed every year of the twenty he'd spent in Interstel.

"It's a nasty job, Ivy."

"Always has been," I said, completing the little interchange that had been reiterated so often that it had become almost a shibboleth.

I took advantage of his momentary silence. I'd had an hour during the air-taxi hop from Xanadu, the resort two hundred miles off the coast of California, to prepare my bitter statement. Words come fluently when an earned leave has been pulled peremptorily out from beneath you; a leave that still had twenty-nine days to go. But I was brief; the news flasher had canceled much of the bite of my anger; it took me something under one hundred and twenty seconds, including repetition of certain words and phrases.

Gravis lived up to his name; he didn't bat an eye. He handed me a thin folder; three of its sheets were facsimile extrapolations of probot reports; the fourth was an evaluation-and-assignment draft; all were from Galactic Survey Headquarters, NAF, in Montreal. The top three were identical, excepting probot serial numbers and departure and arrival times. GSS 231 had been located in its command orbit above a planet that had not yet been officially named but was well within the explored limits of the space sector assigned NAFGS by the interfederational body, had been monitored by three robot probes--described as being in optimum mechanical condition--on three distinctly separate occasions, and all devices that could be interrogated from outside had triggered safe and secure. But no human contact had been accomplished. The fourth sheet--which bore the calligraphy on its upper right corner: Attention Callum--assumed that the crew of 231, a survey team and con alternate, had met with an accident or series of accidents of undetermined origin and extent in the course of carrying out the duty described as follow-up exploration on the Earth-type planet, herein and heretofore designated Epsilon-Terra, and must therefore be considered--

"The news is--" I started to say.

"Pure delirium," Gravis interrupted. "Haven't you read Paragraph Six? We know exactly where the ship is because it's exactly where it should be. It's the crew that's missing."

Paragraph Seven concluded: We therefore recommend that an agent of experience be dispatched soonest to the designated star system.

"Experienced or expendable?" I muttered.

"Ivy, after ten years in Interstel, you should know that experience and expendability are synonymous."

* * * * *

Inside the GS section of the Lunar Complex, I had the occasion to think semantically again. Words like instanter and soonest seldom match their literal meaning when applied to the physical transport of human beings, but in my job--I hadn't even had time to get my gee-legs.

I stepped off the glide strip in front of the ramp marked OUTGOING PERSONNEL, handed the efficient looking redhead my Q-chit and ID, and said: "Priority one."

"Quarantine, O.K.," she checked, smiling. "Feeling antiseptic?"

I had to admit, privately, that I did not. As applied to her, the term: coveralls, regulation, gray was strictly a
euphemism. Perhaps it was the combination of low gravity and controlled conditions that made Lunatics of female persuasion blossom so anatomically. Or maybe she was a plant, a deliberate psych experiment to put outbound starmen in a particular frame of mind.


She consulted her assignment list.

"Lock Three."

I snapped the identoflake back in its bracelet, picked up my jump bag and briefing kit, and headed up the ramp, feeling more eyes than the redhead’s. The anonymity of a GS working uniform hadn’t lasted very long.

* * * * *

By the time I was able to capture enough breath to make coherent sounds, the shuttler was already approaching parking orbit. The pilot had used maximum grav boost, and the trip must have crowded the record.

"That wasn't exactly SOP, was it?"

"Priority one, sir," the youngster replied, showing teeth wolfishly.

I was still trying to think up an adequate rebuttal when I came out of the air lock and into the ship. Then I felt better. P 1 means, among other things, first available transportation--but this giant was the newest type, crammed to the buffers with the results of science's latest efforts to make star voyagers as safe as express-strip commuters inside a Terran dome. Even the vibrations of the great Gatch-Spitzer-Melnikov generators, building toward maximum output, had been dampened to a level more imaginary than tangible. Internal gravity was momentarily in operation, as an additional blessing; and, walking down the blue-lit corridor toward Astrogation, I could feel the occasional, metallic, thermal thump that meant the IP drive was hot and critical.

I got a second lift when I saw who was bending over the robopilot console: Antonio Moya, Mexico City's gift to Galactic Survey some thirty-five years earlier; a café-con-leche type with shrewd eyes, nervous hands, silver-streaked hair that showed a defiance of geriatric injections, a slight, wiry body that couldn't have gone more than one hundred and twenty pounds at 1.0 gee, and probably the best Master Spaceman extant. Only discipline kept the grin off my face. But he was on the horn, getting traffic clearance, so I didn't interrupt.

The others were unknowns, the sort characterized by old spacers as "pretty boy, recruitment ad types," but they looked competent; I figured a medic and a spread of ratings; counting Moya, a basic GS unit. I'd expected both a con crew and a standby. Either this was the total of available personnel, or the brass had decided not to risk more men than absolutely necessary. If I'd had illusions about the assignment, they would have faded at that instant.

It's this way in Interstel: you're taught to be a loner. You're expected to have absolute confidence in your own abilities and complete skepticism about the talents of others. You're supposed to be suspicious, cynical, courageous, and completely trustworthy. And you're not expected to have friends. Which, obviously, in the light of the aforementioned and part of what is yet to come, could serve as the definition of redundancy. You're required to weed out incompetents wherever you find them without prejudice, mercy, or feeling. The standing order is survival, yet you are expected to lay down your life gladly if the sacrifice will save one, pink-cheeked, short-time, assistant teamer who gives the barest suggestion that he might some day grow up to be a man and repay the thousands of credits squandered upon his training in that profound hope. Which, stated another way, has become the Eleventh Commandment of special agents: Remember the body corporeal and keep it inviolate; and, if the reaction of the rank-and-file of Galactic Survey to Interstel is used as criterion, is the best-kept secret in the explored, physical universe. "The agent's burden," Gravis calls it.

Moya's jaw dropped when he caught sight of me--apparently he had been told only to expect an agent--but he recovered quickly.

"Hello, Callum," he barked. "I won't say it's a pleasure. Stow your gear and strap down."

The claxon sounded stridently, and the inflectionless voice of the robopilot said: "Sixty seconds."

I got into the indicated gee couch and squirmed around seeking some measure of comfort. It had been designed for a much larger man, and I gritted my teeth in the expectation of taking a beating.

* * * * *

After a bruising few minutes, we went weightless, then the servos put us back on internal gravity, and the crew unstrapped.

They ignored me studiously; it wasn't entirely bad manners; there's plenty to be done in the interval prior to the first hop, and it isn't all in just checking co-ordinates and programming master con.

The usual space plan calls for several accelerations and a lot of distance between Terra-Luna proximity and Solar System departure. But Space Regs are disregarded on Priority One missions. So, for probably less than an hour, things were going to be busy in Astrogation.
I retrieved my kit and looked for an unoccupied cubicle.

GS star ships are designed to accommodate twenty-four men in reasonable comfort—a figure arrived at more historically—the sum of experience—than arbitrarily, as the minimum number necessary for the adequate exploration of a new star system.

It breaks down this way: six men to a team, four teams maximum; three for planetary grounding, one for ship's con; since any given team can do either task, they are interchangeable, who gets which depends upon rotation; three for exploration, then, because averages spread over several generations of interstellar capability bear out the fact that mother primaries generally possess no more than three planets that are in the least amicable to humans.

I was more than cursorily familiar with the drill. The basic requirement for Interstel is five years' service with a survey team. I'd spent nine. Which is another reason for general GS enmity: the turncoat syndrome. That and the fact that prospective agents are not even considered unless they rate in the top one per cent in service qualification and fitness reports: the jealousy angle. I'd known Moya from my last regular duty ship. I'd worked up from assistant under his tutelage. I'd been ready for the Team Co-ordinator/Master Spaceman exams when I'd applied for transfer. Moya had raged for hours. But he'd given me a first-rate recommendation. Call it service pride.

I was just getting a start on the vid tapes when the cubicle's panel dilated and Moya stamped in, bristling like a game cock.

"What's all this about Epsilon-Terra?"

I removed the ear bead and grinned at him.

"Hello, Tony, you old space dog! You're looking fine. What happened? Did they pull you off leave, too?"

He held the acid face until the panel closed, then he brightened a little. At least, he didn't refuse my proffered hand.

He stood fists on hips, glaring at me.

Finally, he growled: "I had hopes you'd wash out. When I heard you'd made it, I was plenty disappointed." He shook his head. "You seem healthy enough, but I still think it's a waste of a good spacer." And that, apparently, was as close as he was going to come to saying that he was glad to see me again, because, in the next breath, he reverted to Starship Master.

"Now, let's have the nexus. All I know is that I got orders to round up a short crew, was handed a space plan with co-ordinates that were originally filed for GSS 231 a few months back, with an ultimate destination of a planet I orbited five years ago."

"You've been there?"

"I just said so, didn't I? Don't they teach you vacuum cops to listen?"

I gave him the background.

He nodded soberly a couple of times, but his only comment was: "I heard rumors." Then he said: "That's all I've got time for now. We make our first jump shortly. That'll take us to where 231 went on GSM. From there on out, we follow her plan precisely."

"Until we locate and grapple, Tony, then we start making our own mistakes."

"I don't doubt that."

Moya moved to leave, paused, said over his shoulder: "What's this about old Ben Stuart being cashiered for misconduct?"

"It's true."

His back stiffened and his hands clenched. He turned to face me again. "I went through the Academy with Ben. How about doing me a favor? For old times sake. Tell me who it was that put the finger on him. Just give me a name. I might spot it sometime on a register."

"O.K. Ivor Vincent Callum."

Moya's face blanched; he took a backward step and uttered something under his breath that sounded like the Spanish equivalent of—

He turned abruptly, opened the panel, and stalked out.

Somehow I expected him to come back and ask for details, but he didn't show.

I won't dwell on the trip. Any schoolboy who watches tridee space operas can quote chapter and verse and use phrases like "paraspace hops" and "rip-psyche phenomenon" as trippingly as "Hey, Joey, let's play swap-strip!" Citizens from Venus and Mars, vacationing on Terra, speak knowingly, too, whenever they can bring themselves to cease complaining about the gravity, crowded conditions, and regimentation, and can squelch the bragging about how well they're doing on good old whatever. But don't let them kid you. GSM drive is restricted to interstellar transport. Colonists from the nearer systems are picked people, stiff-backed pioneers, who don't sob to come "home"
every time their particular planet completes a circuit around its primary; and, when they do return, they're generally
too busy lobbying for essentials to bother telling tall tales. So, comparatively few people are really familiar with star
ships and the ins and outs of paraspace. Ask a starman, you won't have any trouble recognizing one, even in mufti;
or, better yet, get a spool labeled: "THE CONQUEST OF PARASPACE: A History of the Origins and Early
Application of Star Drive." It's old, but good, and it was written especially for laymen.
I'll say this: it took about a week. Sure paraspace hops are, to all intents and purposes, instantaneous, but there
is a limit to the capacity of the GSM drive, and regulations restrict the jumps to a toleration well within that
capacity. We might have made it sooner had we not been bound to follow 231's space plan--but not much. Once a
plan has been filed, only an emergency can justify deviation. So, if you'll pardon the expression, let's just say that
interstellar distances are astronomical.

Every time we came back into objective space--and I'd managed to recapture my soul--I applied myself to the
tapes.
I got little from Moya, and not because of enmity. Even after refreshing his memory, he couldn't offer much.
Although he had been master of the ship that had first remarked E-T, he hadn't set foot upon its surface.
The planet was comparatively undistinguished.
It was about the size of Melna-Terra, had an atmosphere with a good balance of nitrogen and oxygen, plus
carbon dioxide, argon, et cetera, was mostly surface water, yet offered polar ice caps and a reasonable land area, as
taken in the aggregate, although present in the form of scattered, insular masses. The largest of these, about half the
size of Terra's Australia, was a comfortable number of degrees above the equator and had been selected as
representative for detailed examination. Briefly: standard terrain--a balance between mountains, desert, and plain;
flora, varied; fauna, primitive--plenty of insect life, enough to keep an entomologist occupied for years, but not
much for specialists in the other branches of zoölogy; warm-blooded creatures comparatively rare; and, according to
the original survey team, nothing bacterial that had overburdened Doc Yakamura's polyvalent vaccine; the kind of
planet that pleased Galactic Survey because it looked promising for future colonization, come the day and the need.
"The type that skeptics like me view with grave suspicion," I told Moya. "Like saints, women of unblemished
reputation, heroes, politicians--"

"And all Interstel agents," Tony offered dryly.
In the interim, since the divulgence of my part in the Stuart affair, Moya had thawed somewhat. After all, he
and I had been friends at one time, and the present situation held no brief for head-on, personality clashes. The
phrase "all in the same boat" applies with particular meaning to spacers. Tony undoubtedly figured that 231 might
have been his ship. He even went so far as to express an interest in seeing E-T from the ground level.
"I work alone, Tony," I said. "But thanks for the offer. Tell you what: I'll strike a compromise. If I get into
serious trouble, it'll be you I shout for. All right?"
Moya scowled. "Probably a wild goose chase anyway."
But he said it without enthusiasm.
It reads like this: regs require that messenger vehicles be returned to the Solar System on their miniature
equivalents of paraspace drive, periodically, with complete information as to conditions encountered, work in
progress, et cetera. None had been received from 231. There's a joke--not at all funny, I'll admit--that concerns itself
with just this situation. It ends with the opening lines of the GS Memorial Service.
* * * * *
The last skull work I did was to familiarize myself with the personal dossiers of each of 231's crew, paying
particular attention to psych reports. It's a part of my job that I've never liked. But I recognize the necessity.

The crew seemed fairly typical. The average was relatively inexperienced, the sort you'd expect on the type of
assignment that was often used as advanced training. I managed to single out several possibles--men who might
\crack, depending upon the gravity of the situation. The captain-designate wasn't one of them; nor was the survey-
team co-ordinator.

GSS 231 was on station--big and reflective and innocently ominous, held methodically by robopilot in an orbit
that matched exactly the rotation of Epsilon-Terra--precisely over the largest land mass.
Moya conned us in like a dream, paralleled, rectified, grappled, and mated locks.
I showed up in Astrogation in a full-pressure suit, carrying the helmet.
The crew gawked, and somebody snickered.
"You think it's silly, do you?" Moya snapped.
"Better flush your side as soon as I get clear," I advised.
Moya nodded, lowered and secured the helmet, checked lines, and rapped O.K.
An hour later, I still didn't feel silly. I had the helmet open now. I sat in front of the communications console.
Moya responded as if he had been waiting with his finger on the stud. I didn't have to specify taping; all star
ship radio traffic is automatically recorded.

"Level O.K.?” I asked.

"Yes, man; what's the story?"

"Inner lock and all compartments: air pressure, density, temperature, and purity optimum; all intrinsic gear optimum; three shuttle berths vacant; hold shows standard environmental equipment for one team gone; messenger racks full, no programming apparent; absolutely no sign of crew; repeat--"

"I got it; have you checked the log?"

"Who's doing this, you or me?"

I figured they could edit Moya's comment.

The log was strictly routine--space plan had been followed exactly; arrival had been on schedule; survey team had been dispatched with minimum delay, had reported grounding and camp establishment without incident, had relayed particulars of commencement of operation--until the last entry. It was eerie listening to the emotionless voice of 231's skipper: "Sub-entry one. Date: same. Time: 2205 Zulu. No contact with base camp. Surface front negates visual. Am holding dispatch of M 1. Will wait until next scheduled report time before action."

There was no sub-entry two.

I broke the recorder seal, reversed and played back the comm tapes. There wasn't much. Distance obviates any talky-talky from ship to base once the Solar System has been cleared. What I learned was simply a substantiation of what I'd already surmised. I cut off when I heard a familiar voice say: "250 from 231."

* * * * *

Moya helped me strip off the pressure suit. No matter what the physio manuals say, there's room for improvement. Nothing beats your own skin.

He trailed me into the gear compartment.

I returned the suit to its clips and began sorting through the welter of what the well-dressed spacer wears for a bug rig somewhere near my size. The tag is not completely adequate. It's a light-weight outfit, with intrinsic filters and auds, designed to be worn under conditions that involve the suspected presence of dangerous bacteria or harmful gases. Its efficacy does not extend beyond the limits of reasonable atmosphere.

"Now don't start jumping to conclusions," I told Moya. "All I know is that whatever happened happened quickly and down below."

From the weapons' chest, I selected a little W&R 50 and the biggest clip I could find. "Fifties" aren't much for range, but they are unconditionally guaranteed to make a creature the size of a Triceratops think twice before heading in your direction again, and, once you strap one on, you never feel the weight. That's why, even though they are officially obsolete, you can generally find a brace in most star ship arsenals.

"Remind me to report the maintenance gang of this hunk for stocking unauthorized weaponry."

"You would, too," Moya said.

On the way back to the lock, I told him:

"Let's save time by not making a duplicate recording. I'll transmit additional information and intent going down. There's one shuttler left in 231, so I'll use it. If I find I need something that isn't in the shuttler, I'll fetch myself. Under no circumstances are you or any of your boys to leave this ship without my say-so."

"What happens if--?"

"You've had thirty years of deep space, Tony; am I supposed to tell you your job? Go by the book. Either launch another messenger and sit tight for instructions, or get out and risk a board inquiry, depending."

"You can rot down there for all of me."

"Thanks a pile. Make certain your crew understands. I wouldn't want any of them getting their pretty hands dirty."

But I didn't feel so cocky going down. I hadn't the least idea of what to expect. Sure, I'd gleaned something from the comm tapes: the unsuccessful attempts to contact the survey team at base camp; the happy-go-lucky report from the kid sent in shuttler II to investigate, saying that the camp was deserted but everything looked fine, just fine; the unsuccessful attempts to recontact him; and then a blank except for my own voice. Apparently, the skipper had followed with the rest of the con crew. I could even guess why he had failed to make additional entries in the log, or not transmitted from the camp in lieu thereof. He figured it was something he could work out himself, and he didn't want anything on record to show that he had broken regulations. He wanted to keep the errors of personnel under his command--and his own--in the family. He figured, after the situation was resolved, that he could make cover entries and nobody's slate would be soiled.

* * * * *

The camp was at the edge of a plain marked "Hesitation" on the chart.

I plucked a scrap of verse out of my mind:
On the Plains of Hesitation Bleach the bones of countless millions Who, when victory was dawning Sat down to rest And resting, died.

I wondered how prophetic that was going to be.

I grounded within yards of the other three shuttlers. They were parked neatly parallel. Their orderliness made my scalp prickle, and I was sweating long before I got into the bug suit, squeezed out of the tiny lock, and set foot on Epsilon-Terra.

The sky was blue, naked except for a tracing of tenuous clouds.

I could see neither of the star ships.

I wonder if you can imagine how it feels to be on a planet so far away from the Solar System that the term "trillions of miles" is totally inadequate? If you can grasp even a bit of it, then add the complication of a small but insistent voice inside your head that keeps telling you that no matter where or how far you go, you're not--

Let's just say it gives your sweat an odor and your mouth a taste and makes you want to look over your shoulder all the time.

I walked the hundred yards to the white plastidome, avoiding the few bulbous plants and tussocks of short yellow grass that dotted the dry plain.

Through the aud cells of the suit's hood, I could hear the light buzzing of insects that served only to heighten the overbearing quiet of the area.

The port was closed. Inside, everything was correct, except for the little dirt brought in on boot soles during erection and subsequent goings and comeings.

There was a packet of nutratabs, lying open on an empty crate that had been pressed into service as a table. Some one had fortified himself before trekking off into the nearby bush. There was much equipment still sealed in cartons. Bunks were made up. Tucked under the blanket of one was a little book with stylus attached. All pages were blank except the first. The entry read: "TC in a sweat to get going. Rain potential. No rest for the weary. This seems to be a nice spot though. Am kind of eager myself to take a look at some of the vegetation hereabouts. Have several ideas along the lines of Thompson's prelim research concerning extraction of--"

I replaced it under the blanket. I was ready to give odds that each of the previous finders had done the same: the kid that had arrived in shuttler II, and probably 231's skipper; and each from the same motive--He'll be back; after all, a diary is a personal thing.

I went back outside, shut the port, and made a complete circuit of the camp. I looked into each of the three shuttlers. I found nothing that could offer the least positive clue to the fate of the twelve men from 231.

I returned to shuttler IV, beamed Moya, and filled him in, forcing myself to be cheery.

"How's everything upstairs?"

"Right now we're having a little zero-gee drill; keeps the boys alert."

"Good idea. Now here's my plan: I've got ten hours of daylight left, so I'm heading out into the bush. Figure departure in five minutes. Weather has obscured signs, but I don't think I can go wrong by following my nose and taking the shortest route. I'm traveling light, just the bug rig, the W&R, belt kit, and a minicomm. I'm going to set up this transceiver to record and transmit on command-response. I suggest you interrogate every hour on the hour from now on. Catchum?"

I broke off, made the necessary adjustments, strapped the minicomm on my wrist, and exited the shuttler.

The antiseptic air that I drew into my lungs was beginning to seem inadequate, I felt slippery all over, and there was a cottony taste in my mouth.

* * * * *

I made it to the start of the bush in fifteen minutes. Don't be misled into picturing jungle. There was a variety of vegetation, including trees, but none of it was what you'd call heavy going. Beyond somewhere was a stream, significant enough to be noted on the chart as "First Water." And several miles from the camp was the start of a series of rolling hills. Blue in the distance was a chain of mountains--"The Guardians." The over-all impression was of peaceful, virgin wilderness.

The original survey team had made its camp in the relative frankness of the plain, then, after preliminary tests, had moved to higher ground, specifically, the lee side of one of the nearer hills.

They had cleared an area, using heat sweepers to destroy encroaching vegetation, and R-F beams to disenchant the local insect population.

Insects there were: a regular cacophony of buzzings, chirpings and monotonous mutterings. By the time I'd reached the bank of the stream, I'd lost track of individual varieties.

The stream was a bare trickle; the bed was spongy and dotted with tall, spare plants that resembled horse tails; I negotiated the fifty feet to the opposite bank without difficulty.

I threaded through a thicket and came out into a brief expanse of savannah.
There I found the first evidence of the fate of 231's people.

It was a small object, oval, flattened, the color of old ivory.

Although I hadn't been walking along with my head under my arm, it took me a moment to tumble to what I'd discovered.

Then my hair tried to stand on end. I rid myself of it and used the minicomm for the first time.

Speaking to a recorder was altogether too impersonal for what I had to report.

"I've just found a patella; a human knee-cap. I'm about a hundred feet beyond the far bank of the stream in almost a straight line from the camp. I'm in grass about two feet tall. I'm casting about now, looking--Hold it. Yes, it's scraps of a gray uniform. More remains. Here's a femur; here's a radius-ulna. The bones are clean, scattered. Evidence of scavengers. No chance for a P-M on this one."

I got out the chart from its case on the suit's belt, x'd the location, and went on, feeling more lonely all the time.

It wasn't that I was unconversant with the physical evidence of death. I've marked corpses on planets you've probably never heard of--corpses resulting from disaster, unavoidable accident, stupid error, and even murder. What I've learned is that you never get used to coming face to face with human death, even when its manifestation is the inscrutable vacancy of bare bones.

You can put this down, too, and think what you want about incongruity: I was angry; angry with the spacer that had got himself catapulted into eternity so far from home; angry with myself for having assumed before leaving the Interstel office in Mega Angeles that this is what I would find; angry because the assumption had done nothing to prepare me for the reality. No space padre would have admired what I said inside the bug suit's hood--nor the refinements that grew more bitter with each new discovery.

Within three hours, I'd accounted for all twelve of 231's missing crew.

The search had led to and beyond the hillside where the original team had made its second and permanent camp. In one place, I found enough to separate four skeletons of men who had fallen within a few feet of each other.

The rest were randomly located. There was a small plant growing up through the hole in the left half of a pelvis. Somehow it looked obscene, and I had to fight the impulse to tear it out. But it was simply one of many, struggling for survival, that I'd seen growing here and there throughout the area: a species that seemed to bear a familial kinship to those that sprinkled the plain.

There was equipment: field kits, a minilab, a couple of blasters, each showing full charge.

Cause of death: that was the enigma.

"So far I'm stumped," I said into the minicomm. "I've retrieved a few scraps of uniform bearing stains. Maybe analysis can discover something. The tapes say that E-T's birds and mammals are comparatively rare, but comparative doesn't mean much in the light of what I've seen. So far, though, everything I can come up with seems totally inadequate. Bacterial invasion, animal attack, insect incursion--none were problems with the first survey gang, so why should they be now? Rule out gas poisoning or allied concomitants; the suit tab shows white. Speaking of that--I'm peeling now. Keep your fingers crossed."

* * * * *

The air was warm and still, heavy with the ubiquitous smells and sounds of wilderness.

I was in the approximate area of the first team's camp. As per custom, they had struck the plastidome, dismantled the scanners, power panels, and other reusable equipment, and destroyed the debris of occupancy. The clearing had repaired itself. But for the slight concavities on the hilltop that marked shuttler settlements, there was little to indicate their previous presence.

I sat down and waited.

The suicide complex has never been a part of my psyche, but there are times when you have to place yourself in jeopardy; it's occupational, and I've got the gray hair, worry lines, and scars to prove it.

I waited for three long hours.

The sweat dampness of my uniform evaporated only to be replaced by the stains of new perspiration. I sucked in great gulps of E-T's air and found it consistently comfortable in my lungs. Insects came, investigated, and retreated, mostly because of urging. I was not approached by anything larger than a line of creatures the size of Vici-Terran milatants, and I was able to avoid them by evasive action. As far as I could determine, I wasn't invaded by anything microscopic or sub-microscopic either, because at the end of the three hours, I felt nothing beyond the personal infirmities that I'd brought with me.

The definite decline of E-T's sun forced me to give up.

The walk back to the plain wasn't entirely fruitless; I found something that I'd overlooked previously: the scattered remains of a small vertebrate. Many of the bones were missing.

"What happened to you?" I mused. "Did you come for a meal and got killed by a larger animal? Or were you caught in the same disaster that--?"
There was no way to tell.

What was it about Epsilon-Terra that could accept one survey team for months of occupancy—occupancy that had involved detailed examination of the region within miles of the plain and the hillside, and cursory examination of thousands of square miles of the rest of the insular mass by air, including touchdowns at key points for short stays—and that five years later could entice, enmesh, and destroy the entire complement of a modern star ship, indiscriminately, within a matter of hours?

* * * * *

It was late afternoon when I reached the camp.

I was tired, dirty, thirsty, hungry, and thoroughly frustrated.

I drank from a previously unopened water bowser and wolfed several nutratabs.

Then I stumbled over to the shuttler, secured the recorder and interrogation setup, raised the star ship, and brought Moya up to date.

"I'm going to move this vehicle to the hillside and spend the night there. I figure I'd better give E-T a full twenty-six hour rotation interval to come up with something before the next step. Tomorrow, I'm going to need a man down here to witness the location and disposition of the corpses. You know the drill. It's your decision whether they should be identified singly, if possible, and secured for removal to Terra, or whether they should be interred here, commonly. My recommendation is to make a film record and plant them, but I'm too tired to argue. One thing more: whoever you send—if he gives me any lip, I'll cut him down like a small tree. There's been enough mistakes made here already."

I spent the night in the shuttler. Call it an atavistic response to the unknowns of darkness.

It was a restless interval between dusk and dawn.

Occasionally, I illuminated the hillside and surrounding area. A couple of times, I glimpsed the eye reflections of small animals. They seemed to possess the shyness of most nocturnal creatures. But I couldn't help wondering—Morning dawned gloomily; there was a light mist hanging over the streambed, and much of the sky was turgid with clouds.

I gave the star ship the go-ahead and specified dispatch because of the threatening weather.

Moya mentioned plastibags, a filmer, and a porto-digger. His decision was obvious. I figured it wise but had the uncomfortable picture of a GS representative trying to explain the reasons to bereaved relatives.

I spent a few moments going over meteorological details. As I recalled from the tapes, this was the rainy season. Judging from the look of the area, it could use precipitation. Things were growing, but the stream was mostly dry, and the plain seemed parched. Apparently the mountains blocked much of it.

Sitting on hands has never been my delight, so I exited the shuttler and went down the hill for another look-see.

Insects buzzed noisily; the air seemed heavy and oppressive; but nothing had changed—there was no evidence of the creatures I'd seen during the night.

It took about an hour for the shuttler from 250 to show.

In the interval, several things happened.

The first was a perceptive darkening of the sky, followed by a light, preliminary shower. I'd anticipated that, and was considering heading back for the bug suit when the second occurred.

I'm not going to offer excuses. From the advantage of retrospection, you can say what you want about slipshod detective work. The point remains that I'd covered the area more than cursorily and had not encountered anything specifically dangerous.

The timing was pure luck.

The shuttler penetrated the overcast about ten miles off target, located, and started its approach.

And something bit me on the leg.

I pulled up my pant's leg immediately, hoping to catch the culprit, but saw nothing save a thin red line about an inch long. It looked more a scratch than an insect bite. But I hadn't brushed against anything.

The shuttler grounded on the hilltop, and I headed up.

Perhaps it was exertion that speeded the reaction.

There was no pain, only a local numbness.

Before I'd traveled ten yards, my leg from the knee almost to the ankle felt prickly asleep.

I paused and looked. There was no swelling, no other discoloration.

I heard a raspy voice from the hilltop.

"Are you going to give me some help, or do I have to haul all this gear myself?"

Despite the leg, I didn't know whether to laugh or explode.

Moya was rattling around in an outsized bug suit and carrying the biggest Moril blaster contained in a star ship's arsenal that could still be called portable.
"What in condemned space are you doing here?" I shouted.
I was ready to give it to him right off the top of the regs about the relationship between ship's master and agents-on-assignment and the responsibilities of command, but the leg chose that moment to fail. Until then, I hadn't really been worried. I fell forward against the pitch of the slope, caught myself with my arms, and rolled over on my back. I hit my left thigh with my fist and felt absolutely nothing. Massage didn't help.
I heard Moya panting down the brow of the hill.
"Keep away!" I shouted. "Get back to the ship!"
Moya bent over me; he had opened the hood of the bug suit, and his face was grave.
"What's the trouble, Callum?"
"Can't you take orders?"
He shook his head. I pointed to the leg. He looked swiftly at the broken skin.
"How does it feel?"
"That's the trouble; it doesn't."
He grabbed my arm, put it over his shoulder, and got me on my feet.
We made good time, considering.
"Too bad you're such a shrimp," I said.
"I can take you on any time."
Shuttler IV was closest, parked on a shelf fifty yards below the top of the hill, but Moya was heading to miss it.
"I programmed for auto, just in case, and the generators are up to power. We waste time to save time. That way I can give you some help on the ascent."
The generator part was fine; the rest wasn't.
It started to rain again, just before we reached 250's shuttler.
I put my face up to it.
Moya got me through the lock and onto an acceleration couch. Then he headed for the panel. I was beginning to feel a desperate weakness, but my head was still clear.
"Wait a minute," I said. "What's your gee tolerance?"
"High, but--"
"So strap me and raise this couch to vertical. Then override the auto and take us up fast."
He blinked.
"Listen," I said. "This feels like a neuro-toxin. Remember snake-bite aid? Well, the numbness is up to my groin now. No place for a tourniquet. And nothing here for freezing."
It was strange going up. I blacked out almost immediately, but Moya took it flat and apparently stayed alert all the way.
"Space!" I managed to gasp finally. "Any more of that sort of thing and I'd have ended up stupid."
Then there was utter confusion.
* * * * *
I came to full awareness under the luminescence of the infirmary's overhead. I was naked on the padding of the table. I could see a respirator off to my right, and a suction octopus near it. The medic was just stowing an auto-heart. But for a different tingling in my leg and an all-is-lost sensation south of my diaphragm, I felt reasonably sound.
The medic approached. I hadn't gotten a very good impression of the lean, blond youngster on the trip out, but now he seemed Hippocrates, Luke, Lister, Salk, O'Grady, and Yakamura all rolled into one.
He weakened it by asking the classic redundancy.
"How do you feel?"
I elbowed up for a look at the leg. There was a series of little welts the length of it, masked by forceheal.
"Where did you learn your trade?" I asked. "In a production expediter's office?"
He grinned.
"It took more than three hours, Mr. Callum. Suction, flushing, full transfusion. You've got some good blood in you now."
I lay back and let him talk.
"There'll be nerve damage, probably. Regeneration should take care of most of it, but you might need transplants. You were lucky. First, that whatever nipped you barely broke the skin. Second, that the skipper was there to help. And third, that you had the sense to block the spread of the toxin by gee forces."
"Yeah. Remind me to thank Moya--immediately after I write him up for leaving his station."
The medic looked pleased.
"Well, now, the way I got it--and I believe the recorder will bear me out--is that you requested a witness. You
left it up to the skipper to make the selection."

He cleared his throat.
"And, by the way, Moya said he'd look in on you after a bit. The thing to do now is rest."
I sat up again.
"Where're my clothes?"

The kid commenced noises of disapproval.
"Damnation! I'm not going anywhere. I just want to look over that pant's leg."
Came the dawn.
"What'd you say Moya was doing?"
"Oh, I expect he's busy up forward."

The trouble was that he looked me straight in the eye. It takes practice to lie convincingly. And the Space Academy doesn't list the Art of Prevarication among its curricula.
"That misbegotten little son of an Aztec! He went back down, didn't he?"

I tried to jackknife off the table.

The medic flexed his muscles and said: "I can't take the responsibility--"
"When are you people going to get it through your stubborn heads that the responsibility for this whole shebang is mine and mine alone?"

Two more of the crew showed up. Under other circumstances, I might have enjoyed tangling with them. I know tricks that even the inventors of karate overlooked.
"All right," I gasped. "But give me the dope. He's not alone, is he? Are you in contact?"

It developed that Moya had returned to the site of the disaster immediately upon learning that I was out of danger. He'd taken a crewman. He was also equipped with my chart of the area complete with locales of the remains. The last word had been that the two had grounded and that the weather front was dissipating. He'd been gone about two hours.

"They both had bug suits," the medic offered.
"Great," I said. "Just splendid. Suppose there's a creature down there that can go through plastic like--"

For the first time the three lost their smug expressions.
"We destroyed your clothes," the medic said sheepishly. "We figured--"

I railed at them for a couple of minutes, but it was mostly unfair. Moya's decision could be justified, too. They rustled up a uniform and helped me to Astrogation. The remaining crewman was at the comm. The freeze was beginning to wear off, and my leg burned.

I alternated between berating myself and trying to think up an adequate explanation for the possible death or injury of two men ostensibly under my control.

After several hours of sweat-agony, Moya's voice came over the horn. He sounded tired.
"We've done it. You'll be happy to know that we gave them an official burial."

I could picture the little Mexican, standing beside the long mound, head bowed, with the Specter probably staring over his shoulder, going methodically through the complete Memorial Service, ending with: And the whole galaxy is the sepulcher of illustrious men.
"It's not much of a place, but the sun is shining now. Expect us shortly."
* * * * *

"Are you sure you're all right?"
I was propped on my elbows on the bunk in my cubicle, nursing the jangle in my leg. Maybe it was that--but I was as confused as a mouse in a psych maze.
"Why wouldn't I be?" Moya said.
"And you wore the suits all the time?"
"Affirmative. If you'd done the same--"

The medic showed with lab analyses.
"There wasn't much of that stuff in you," he said. "And I can't break it down. Too complex. You used the cobra venom analogy--Well, this makes that look as simple as mother's milk."

He held up the stained pieces of uniform. Moya had kept his wits about him.
"A combination of weather, soil, et cetera," the medic said. "Completely innocuous."
"About the toxin," I said. "Given time, could you work up an antivenin?"
"Probably. But I'd need plenty. Both time and toxin." He looked at me. "Oh, I see what you're getting at." He became professionally parochial.
"In other words--" I said.
He snapped his fingers.
"You know how it hit you."
The confusion persisted, so I allowed the medic to use a pressure hypo.
Hours later, I felt better—physically.
On the vid screen, the magnified surface of the insular mass seemed almost to beckon. Sireni, I thought.
Little remained of the weather front. Over the area of the plain and the rolling hills were meager wisps of clouds. Darkness again was creeping across the face of E-T.
"That storm didn't amount to much," Moya said.
Storm, I thought. Rain.
"I know what I'd do," Moya continued. "I'd radiate and have done with it."
The medic dissented on clinical-curiosity grounds.
"I can't reconcile things yet," I said. "But let's assume that it was a tragedy of errors. Let's say that what hit me, killed them. But what was it? Where did it come from? And why? No, I'll have to go down again. It's my burden to find all the answers."
Moya growled: "There's a time for stubbornness."
I caught the rest of the crew staring at me; their expressions were a motley.
* * * * *
Back at the same old stand, open for business, looking at the pitiful alteration, feeling lonely, feeling vulnerable, too, despite the bug suit, Moya's parting blast still burning in my mind.
He'd ferried me down to the hilltop in the long shadows of early morning. I'd had to order him to return to the star ship. I stood now beside the communal mound. Moya had said, pointing down the hill, anger making him illogical: "These are the people you sold out when you transferred to Interstel. They could have used your kind of brains. Post-mortems aren't going to help them, now."
It was simple, wasn't it?
Something on E-T was a killer: quick and deadly.
If it got any sort of clean shot at you--
Something visible. Something big enough to make a mark. And not static, like a thorn. A ground crawler? My pant's legs had been tucked securely into my boot tops. A flier? It would have to be strong enough to pierce a GS uniform and make an entrance into flesh. Or to leave a scratch from a glancing blow. And I hadn't seen anything.
But only a recent problem.
And restricted to the area beyond the stream.
And random.
And terribly innocent. Innocent enough to be overlooked until it was too late.
Think.
I thought and came up with a brainful of nothing.
Think again.
Strong enough to pierce two thicknesses of cloth—It must have gone entirely through, although the overzealousness of the crew had removed any possibility of proof.
How about the bug suit?
Assume the plastic was protection enough--
Wouldn't the wearer notice a blow? Or hear something?
I'd felt but not heard.
But then the rain had been falling.
No insect had hit me forcibly before--
Moya and his helper had noticed nothing after--
A few meager drops of rain, sibilantly soaking into the eager soil of Epsilon-Terra.
Whoever first mouthed that bit about cursing being the audible manifestation of a mediocre mind completely missed the point.
There's something infinitely comforting in the crackle and sweep and roll of heartfelt invective.
I left the site of the common grave and made it back to the hillside and shuttlor IV as fast as discretion and terrain and my game leg would allow.
* * * * *
"I am thinking," Moya grumbled over the comm. "If these details are so important, why--?"
"Don't blame Interstel," I said. "The tapes were put together by GS headquarters."
"Well, whoever. They should have included more information."
"Thompson," I prodded.
"Sure, sure, I remember him. Big, awkward, slow-moving—always babbling about plants."
"What kind?"
"All kinds."
"But anything particular? Something that he wanted to extract something from."
"Well, let's see--He brought back lots of sample specimens, but there was one that he played with all the way home. It was an insectivorous or carnivorous species, as I recall--"
"Yes? Yes?"
"That produced a chemical he thought might prove useful if it could be extracted and concentrated or synthesized--Now, hold on. Are you trying--?"
"Why not? And why didn't you mention this sooner?"
"For the simple reason--What got you off on this tangent?"
"Rain. The kid's diary said 'rain potential.' The captain's log mentioned a surface weather front. And it rained just before I was hit."
"I fail to see the connection. But think about this: It rained on the survey team I ferried here, too--not often, but more than once or twice--and nothing happened to them."
That was the trouble with firing off at half thrust.
But there was still this nagging conviction: rain plus vegetation equals death.
I could picture Moya and the crew speculating that I'd taken complete leave of my senses.
But sometimes you have to play the game blindly--"by the seat of your pressure suit," as the pioneers stated it.
I went to the shuttler's locker, located a canteen in a survival kit, filled it and left the ship.
I started where I'd found the largest collection of remains.
Moya's memory had failed to particularize the plant, but I had enough evidence to negate indiscriminate baptism.
I felt supremely foolish--for a while.
My thoughts began to focus, and I recalled the little plant that had grown up through the hole in the pelvis.
Casting about, I located adult specimens. They seemed to fit the requirements. Again it struck me that they bore a familial kinship to a variety that occurred on the plain.
I couldn't place the difference.
Finally I selected one about two feet tall.
It was bulbous, thick skinned, terminating in broad members that were clustered to form a rough funnel. Their inner surfaces were coated with a glutinous substance. The main body of the plant was studded with warty projections about the size of walnut halves. And just below the terminal funnel was a corona of tapering members like leaves beneath a bizarre blossom. They ended in sharp points, bore flimsy surface bristles, and seemed to serve as protection for the trap.
I prodded the green-and-yellow mottled skin of the thing. It was tough, resistant, almost pneumatic--
I had this sudden, strong feeling.
About ten feet away was a tree with dull-reddish, overlapping bark segments on its trunk. There was a branch close enough to the ground to be reached if my leg would support the necessary spring. I tested the leg for leap and the branch for support. They held.
I uncapped the canteen and sprinkled the remaining water over the plant, making sure that some reached both the funnel and the corona.
I ran.
Seconds later, perched monkey-see, monkey-do on the branch, I lost any lingering feeling of foolishness.
I sat there for quite a while, sickened. I thought about the crew of 231, and the other pieces of the puzzle. One of them had to be arrogance--the natural arrogance of picked people that leads to a belief in corporeal immortality: Nothing can happen to me; you, maybe, but not me.
* * * * *
Even though I knew exactly what to expect, it was impossible not to jerk back involuntarily with the others.
We were in the star ship, clustered around a bell jar. The jar contained a small specimen of the killer that I'd dug up gingerly and brought back for evidence.
I'd introduced water into the jar, and the first reaction had just taken place.
"Watch closely," I cautioned.
Again it happened--innocently at first and then too swiftly for the eye to follow. One of the little protuberances seemed to swell slightly--Ping. Something struck the wall of the bell jar hard enough to evoke a clear, sharp, resonant note.
"I don't know the exact range of a mature specimen," I said, grimly, "but I saw leaves shake a good twenty yards away."
"A seed," one of the crewmen breathed. "Nothing but a tiny, insignificant seed."

Moya shook his head.

"A deadly missile, son, wearing or containing a virulent poison. And people used to blather about curare."

I began to draw concentric arcs on the chart.

"I kept fetching water and testing and retreating all the way back to the plain. Pretty soon there's not going to be any place safe within miles of where these mutants can take root. Near the plain's camp, they're still innocuous—the original species. The propagation response is triggered by rain, all right, but the seeds just pop out, and, of course, the poison is undoubtedly weak—a bother only to insects."

"But they weren't a problem—" Moya interjected.

"Time," I said. "Five years. Look here on the chart. I figured this to be the center: the first team's permanent camp on the hill. Now what happened there? Heaters to destroy immediate vegetation, and Radio-Frequency beams to kill insects and their larvae over a wider area. R-F—don't you see? Cells react to certain portions of the radio spectrum. Some are destroyed, depending upon intensity. Some behave strangely—the 'marching protozoa,' the 'dancing amoeba.' In others, chromosomal aberrations occur, resulting in mutations. Remember the experiments with yeasts, garlic, grains? The growth of some microorganisms is stimulated by R-F irradiation."

"Then these glorified flytraps got mad at what was happening to their innards and decided to fight even harder for survival?"

"You're anthropomorphizing," I told Moya, "but that's the way I see it. They just responded along already established lines."

I paused and noted the expressions on the faces of the crew. Maybe it was that, and maybe it was the fact that my leg hadn't held up very well under the beating I'd given it. And maybe it was twelve good men—Anyway, I spent the next half hour pulling no punches. When I'd finished, Interstel had regained its reputation. Nobody—neither short-timer nor veteran—likes to hear dead comrades characterized as "stupid." But I figured the crew would remember.

Moya seemed unfazed, as if he'd paid scant attention to my speech; he rubbed his chin reflectively.

"The bug suits—"

"Were they any protection? At long range, probably. But up close—"

Moya apparently could think of nothing more to say.

We radiated the danger area, left 231 for a pick-up team, and headed for home.

* * * * *

Moya walked with me from Quarantine to the Terra Ramp. The leg still wasn't right.

"Did you mention me kindly in your report?"

"Of course not," I told him.

He chuckled and put his hand on my shoulder.

"About Ben Stuart—"

"It's a nasty job," I said.

"Did he rate getting cashiered?"

"He did, Tony."

"Well, take care of yourself, Ivy."

The redhead again was on duty at the outbound desk. She ignored me.

Xanadu!

It was night, and there was a heavy fog. Standing alone on the open promenade outside the dome, I was grateful that I couldn't see the sky—and the ominous stars that were not so far away.

A couple of months later, I heard that Epsilon-Terra had received its official name: Atri-Terra. Atri from attrition. I've wondered ever since whether GS based the choice upon the secular or the theological definition.

THE END

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By George Henry Weiss

Far under the sea-floor Solino's submarine carries two American soldiers of fortune to startling adventure among the Vampire Heads of Apex.
Justus Miles was sitting on a bench in the park, down at the heels, hungry, desperate, when a gust of wind whirled a paper to his feet. It was the advertising section of the New York Times. Apathetically, he picked it up, knowing from the past weeks' experience that few or no jobs were being advertised. Then with a start he sat up, for in the center of the page, encased in a small box and printed in slightly larger type than the ordinary advertisement, he read the following words: "Wanted: Soldier of Fortune, young, healthy; must have good credentials. Apply 222 Reuter Place, between two and four." It was to-day's advertising section he was scanning, and the hour not yet one.

Reuter Place was some distance away, he knew, a good hour's walk on hard pavement and through considerable heat. But he had made forced marches in Sonora as badly shod and on even an emptier stomach. For Justus Miles, though he might not have looked it, was a bona fide soldier of fortune, stranded in New York. Five feet eight in height, he was, loose and rangy in build, and with deceptively mild blue eyes. He had fought through the World War, served under Kemal Pasha in Turkey, helped the Riffs in Morocco, filibustered in South America and handled a machine-gun for revolutionary forces in Mexico. Surely, he thought grimly, if anyone could fill the bill for a soldier of fortune it was himself.

222 Reuter Place proved to be a large residence in a shabby neighborhood. On the sidewalk, a queue of men was being held in line by a burly cop. The door of the house opened, and an individual, broad-shouldered and with flaming red hair, looked over the crowd. Instantly Justus Miles let out a yell, "Rusty! By God, Rusty!" and waved his hands.

"Hey, feller, who do you think you're shovin'" growled a hard-looking fellow at the head of the line, but Justus Miles paid no attention to him. The man in the doorway also let out an excited yell.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Kid! Hey, Officer, let that fellow through: I want to speak to him."

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With the door shut on the blasphemous mob, the two men wrung each other's hands. Ex-Sergeant Harry Ward, known to his intimates as "Rusty," led Justus Miles into a large office and shoved him into a chair.

"I didn't know you were in New York, kid. The last I saw of you was when we quit Sandino."

"And I never suspected that 222 Reuter Place would be you, Rusty. What's the lay, old man, and is there any chance to connect?"

"You bet your life there's a chance. Three hundred a month and found. But the boss has the final say-so, though I'm sure he'll take you on my recommendation."

He opened a door, led Justus Miles through an inner room, knocked at a far door and ushered him into the presence of a man who sat behind a roll-topped desk. There was something odd about this old man, and after a moment's inspection Justus Miles saw what it was. He was evidently a cripple, propped up in a strange wheelchair. He had an abnormally large and hairless head, and his body was muffled to the throat in a voluminous cloak, the folds of which fell over and enveloped most of the wheelchair itself. The face of this old gentleman--though the features were finely molded--was swarthy: its color was almost that of a negro--or an Egyptian. He regarded the two men with large and peculiarly colored eyes--eyes that probed them sharply.

"Well, Ward, what is it?"

"The man you advertised for, Mr. Solino."

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Solino regarded Justus Miles critically.

"You have been a soldier of fortune?" he asked. He spoke English with the preciseness of an educated foreigner.

"Yes, sir. Rusty--that is, Mr. Ward knows my record."

"I was his sergeant in France, sir; saw fighting with him in Morocco, Turkey, Nicaragua--"

"You can vouch for him, then; his character, courage--"

"You couldn't get a better man, sir. If I had known he was in town I would have sent for him."

"Very well; that is sufficient. But Mr.--Miles did you say?--understands he is embarking on a dangerous adventure with grave chances of losing his life?"

"I have faced danger and risked my life before this," said Justus Miles quietly. The other nodded. "Then that is all I am prepared to tell you at this time."

Justus Miles accompanied Ward to his room where the latter laid out for him a change of clothing. It was luxurious to splash in warm water and bath-salts after the enforced griminess of weeks. The clothes fitted him fairly well, the two men being of a size. Lounging in his friend's room after a substantial meal, and smoking a Turkish cigarette, he questioned Ward more closely.

"Who is the old fellow?"

"I don't know. He hired me through an advertisement and then set me to employing others."

"But surely you know where we are going?"
"Hardly more than you do. Solino did say there was a country, a city to be invaded. Whereabouts is a secret. I
can't say I care for going it blind, but neither do I like starving to death. I was in about the same shape you were
when you applied. Desperate."

Justus Miles stretched himself comfortably.

"A spiggoty by the looks of him," he said; "negro blood, no doubt. Well, fighting's my trade. I'd rather cash in
fighting than sit on a park bench. I suppose the old boy will tell us more in good time, and until then we're sitting
pretty, with good eats to be had; so why worry?"

And yet if Justus Miles had been able to look ahead he might not have talked so blithely.

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During the week that followed his employment, he saw nothing of Solino, though Ward met the old man for a
few moments every day to receive his instructions. "It puzzles me," he confessed to Miles, "how the old chap lives.
There's a private exit to the street from his rooms, but I could swear he never goes out. How could he in that
wheelchair--no attendant. And yet he must. How would he get food?"

Justus Miles smiled lazily. "No mystery at all, Rusty. We're gone for hours at a time. What's to prevent him
from phoning to have his meals brought in?"

"But I've questioned them at the restaurant and they say--"

"Good Lord!--is there only one restaurant in Manhattan?"

Yet Justus Miles himself could not help feeling there was something mysterious about Solino, but just how
mysterious he did not realize--until, one evening, he stood with a half dozen of his fellow adventurers in a lonely
spot on the Long Island coast and watched the darkness deepen around them. "We shall wait," said Solino presently,
"until the moon comes up."

The moon rose at about nine o'clock, flooding the beach and the heaving expanse of water with a ghostly light.
From the folds of Solino's cloak, close about his muffled throat, a peculiar ray of green light flashed out over the
water. In answer, a green light flashed back, and presently, something low and black, like the body of a whale half
submerged, stole towards the beach. Scarcely a ripple marked its progress, and the nose of it slid up on the sand.
"Good Lord!" whispered Miles, grasping Ward by the arm: "it's a submarine!"

But the craft on which the surprised soldiers of fortune gazed was not an ordinary submarine. In the first place,
there was no conning tower; and, in the second, from the blunt nose projected a narrow gangway bridging the few
feet of water between the mysterious craft and the dry beach. But the men had little time to indulge in amazement.
"Quick," said Solino; "load those boxes onto the gangway. No need to carry them further." He himself wheeled his
chair into the interior of the submarine, calling back, "Hurry, hurry!"

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The adventurers accomplished the loading in a few minutes. "Now," came the voice of their employer, "stand
on the gangway yourselves. Steady; don't move."

Under their feet they felt the gangway vibrate and withdraw from the land. For a moment they were in utter
darkness; then a light flashed up and revealed a long, box-like room. The opening through which they had come had
closed, leaving no sign of its existence.

In the center of the room stood a mechanism like a huge gyroscope, and a plunging piston, smooth and black,
went up and down with frictionless ease. In front of what was evidently a control board sat a swarthy man with a
large hairless head and peculiarly colored eyes. The adventurers stared in surprise, for this man, too, sat in a
wheelchair, seemingly a cripple; but unlike Mr. Solino he wore no cloak, his body from the neck down being
enclosed in a tubular metal container. The body must have been very small, and the legs amputated at the hips, since
the container was not large and terminated on the seat of the peculiar wheel chair to which it seemed firmly attached.

Solino did not offer to introduce them to the man at the control board, who, aside from a quick look, paid them
no attention. He ushered them ahead into another, though smaller cabin, and after indicating certain arrangements
made for their comfort, withdrew. From the slight sway of the floor under their feet and the perceptible vibration of
the craft, the adventurers knew they were under way.

"Well, this is a rum affair and no mistake about it," said one of them.

"A freak--a bloomin' freak," remarked another whose cockney accent proclaimed the Englishman.

"Yuh're shore right," said a lean Texan. "That hombre out there had no legs."

"Nor hands either."

Miles and Ward glanced at one another. The same thought was in both minds. Neither of them had ever seen
Mr. Solino's hands. A rum affair all right!

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Hours passed. Some of the men fell to gambling. At intervals they ate. Twice they turned in and slept. Then,
after what seemed an interminable time, Solino summoned Miles and Ward to his presence in the control room. "It is
"time," he said, "that you should know more of the enterprise on which you have embarked. What I say, you can communicate to the other men. A year's salary for all of you lies to your credit at the Chase Bank of New York. And this money will not be your sole reward if you survive and serve faithfully."

"Thank you, sir," said Ward; "but now that we are well on our way to our destination, could you not tell us more about it? You have said something of a city, a country. Where is that country?"

"Down," was the astounding answer.

"Down?" echoed both men.

"Yes," said Solino slowly, "down. The gateway to that land is at the bottom of the ocean."

As the two men gaped at him, incredulous, an awful thing happened. With an appalling roar and a rending of steel and iron, the submarine halted abruptly in its headlong flight, reared upward at an acute angle and then fell forward with a tremendous crash. The adventurers were thrown violently against a steel bulkhead, and slumped down unconscious....

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How long they lay there insensible they never knew. Justus Miles was the first to come to, and he found himself in Stygian blackness. "Rusty!" he called, feeling terribly sick and giddy. Only silence answered him. "Good God!" he thought, "what has happened?" His hand went out and recoiled from something soft and sticky. Gingerly he sat up. There was a lump on his head. His body felt bruised and sore but it was evidently sound. He recollected the small but powerful flashlight in his pocket, and drew it forth and pressed the button. A reassuring pencil of light pierced through the gloom. Even as it did so, someone groaned, and Ward's voice uttered his name.

"Is that you, Kid?"

"It's me, all right."

"You ain't hurt?"

"Nothing to speak of. How about you?"

"O. K., I guess. An awful headache."

"Can you stand up?"

"Yes."

Ward's face appeared in the ray of light, pale and blood-streaked.

"I wonder what happened."

"It sounded like a collision."

They stared at one another with fearful eyes. A collision while underseas in a submarine is a serious matter.

"Where's Solino?"

Justus Miles ran the beam of his torch this way and that, and saw that the room was in a fearful confusion. The gyroscopic mechanism had broken from its fastenings and rolled forward. Somewhere beneath its crushing weight lay the control board and the swarthy operator. Then they saw Solino, still in his overturned wheelchair, the cloak drawn tightly about himself and it; but the top of his head was crushed in like an eggshell. Justus Miles had touched that head when he stretched out his hand in the darkness.

He and Ward had been saved from death as by a miracle. Over their heads the great piston had hurtled, killing Solino and tearing through the steel partition into the chamber beyond, visiting it with death and destruction. One hasty examination of that place was enough. The men in there were dead.

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Sick with horror, the two survivors faced the stark reality of their terrible plight. Trapped in an underwater craft, they saw themselves doomed to perish even more miserably than their companions. As the horrible thought sank home, a cool breath of air, suggesting the smell of stagnant salt water, blew through an opening created by the crushing of the plates in the vessel's hull—an opening larger than the body of a man. Miles and Ward stared at it with puzzled eyes. With such a hole in her hull, the boat should have been admitting water and not air. However, they approached the gap and examined it with their torches.

"Here goes," Ward said after a moment's hesitation, and clambered through the opening, followed by his friend. When they were able to make out their surroundings, they saw that they were in a vast tunnel or cavern, the extent of which was shrouded in darkness. How the submarine had left the ocean and penetrated to this cavern it was impossible to say; but evidently it had come so far over a shining rail, a break in which had caused the disaster. The cavern or tunnel was paved with disjointed blocks of stone which once might have been smooth and even, but which now were disarranged by time and slimy with dampness and seagrowths. In the clammy air Miles involuntarily shuddered. "Good Lord, Rusty, we're certainly up against it! The only fellow who could tell us our whereabouts is dead!"

Ward's jaw tightened. "That rail leads somewhere: it's our only hope. But first let us get our guns and some food."
They were fortunate enough to discover several thermos bottles unbroken. Hot coffee revived their fainting spirits. Treating their bruises and cuts as well as they could, they left the submarine or car--it seemed to have been convertible for use either in water or on rail--and trudged ahead.

Beyond the break that had caused the wreck, the rail stretched away into illimitable blackness. Over rough stones, stumbling into shallow pools of water, the light of their torches serving but faintly to show the depressing surroundings, the two men plunged. Neither of them was without fear, but both possessed the enduring courage of men habituated to facing danger and sudden death without losing control of their faculties.

Time passed, but they had no means of telling how much, since their wrist watches no longer functioned. But after a while they noticed that the grade was upward and the going easier. At the same moment, Ward called attention to the fact that, even without electric torches, it was possible to see. All around the two Americans grew a strange light--a weird, phosphorescent glow, revealing far walls and massive pillars.

Now they could see that they were in a vast chamber, undoubtedly the work of human hands; a room awe-inspiring to behold, and even more than awe-inspiring in the reflections it forced upon their minds. Passages radiated on either hand to mysterious depths, and great bulks loomed in the spectral light. Justus Miles gave a low cry of amazement when a closer investigation revealed those bulks to be the wrecks of mighty and intricate machines, the use of which was vain to conjecture. He looked at Ward.

"Solino spoke of a city down in the ocean. Can this be it?"

Ward shook his head. "Everything here is old, abandoned. Look--what is that?"

The figure of a giant creature, carved either from stone or marble and encrusted with phosphorous, stood lowering in their path. It was that of a winged beast with a human head. Its features were negroid in character; and so malignant was the expression of the staring face, so lifelike the execution of the whole statue, that a chill of fear ran through their veins. It was in Ward's mind that this gigantic carving was akin to the ones he had seen in Egypt, and as old, if not older.

Beyond the statue the rail curved and the grade leveled; and, rounding the bend, they were amazed to come upon a sort of "yard" where the rail stopped. In that enclosure, on several sidings, were submarine cars similar to the wrecked one they had abandoned. But that was not the sight which brought them to a breathless halt. Beyond the sidings stood what appeared to be a small building of gleaming crystal.

After a moment of breathless wonder they cautiously approached the bizarre structure. No dampness or phosphorus impaired the clarity of its walls. The material composing them felt vibrantly warm to the touch. It was not glass, yet it was possible to look without difficulty into the interior of the building, which appeared to be one large room containing nothing but a central device not unlike the filaments of an electric bulb. In fact, the whole building, viewed from the outside, reminded the two adventurers of a giant light globe. The filaments radiated a steady and somehow exhilarating light. The door--they knew it was a door because an edging of dark metal outlined its frame--gave admittance to the room.

"Shall we?" questioned Miles; and Ward answered doubtingly, "I don't know. Perhaps...."

But at last they turned the golden knob, felt the door give to their pressure, and stepped through the entrance into the soft radiance of the interior. Unthinkingly, Ward released his hold on the knob and the door swung shut behind them. Instantly there was a flash of light, and they were oppressed by a feeling of nausea: and then, out of a momentary pit of blackness, they emerged to find that the room of crystal had oddly changed its proportions and opaqueness. "Quick!" cried Ward; "let us get out of this place." Both men found the door and staggered forth.

Then, at sight of what they saw, they stood rooted to the spot in sheer amazement. The gloomy tunnel and the sidings of submarine cars had vanished, and they were standing in a vast hall, an utterly strange and magnificent hall, staring up into the face of a creature crudely human and colored green!

The green man was almost of heroic proportions; he was clad in but a breech-clout, and was so broad as to appear squat in stature. He carried a short club, and appeared almost as dumbfounded as the two Americans. A moment he regarded them, then, with a ferocious snarl of rage, he hurled himself upon the startled Ward and half clubbed, half pushed him to the floor. Recovering from his momentary inaction and realizing the danger in which his friend stood, Miles shouted and leaped upon the green man's back, fastening his sinewy fingers about the giant's throat.

But the latter was possessed of incredible strength, and, straightening up, he shook off Miles as a bear might shake off an attacking dog, and threw him heavily to the floor. Then the green giant whirled up his club, and it would have gone hardly with Miles if Ward had not remembered his automatic and fired in the nick of time. As if poleaxed, the green man fell; and both the adventurers recovered their feet.
"Look out!" shouted Ward.
Through a wide entrance came charging a dozen greenish giants. Miles fired both his pistols. The leader of the greenish men paused in mid-leap, clawing at his stomach.
"This way, Kid!" yelled Ward; "this way!"
Taking advantage of the confusion in the ranks of the attackers, the two sprang to where an exit in the far wall promised an avenue of escape. Down a broad passage they rushed. Seemingly the passage ended in a cul-de-sac, for a wall of blank whiteness barred further progress. Behind them came charging the greenish giants uttering appalling cries. Desperately the two Americans turned, resolved to sell their lives as dearly as possible; but at that moment happened a sheer miracle. The blank wall divided, revealing a narrow crevice through which they sprang. Noiselessly the crevice closed behind them, shutting out the green pursuers, and a voice said—a voice in precise but strangely accented English:
"We have been expecting you, gentlemen, but--where is Solino?"

Never would Miles and Ward forget the amazement of that moment. They were in a place which looked not unlike a huge laboratory. Then they saw it was a lofty room containing a variety of strange mechanisms. But it was not on these their eyes focussed. Confronting them in odd wheelchairs, with hairless heads projecting from tubular containers like the one they had seen encasing the man at the control board of the submarines, were all of half a hundred crippled men!
"Good Lord!" exclaimed Miles, "I must be seeing things!"
"Where is Solino?" demanded the voice in strangely accented English.
Ward saw that the question came from an individual in a wheelchair a few feet in front of them.
"Solino is dead," he answered.
"Dead?" A ripple of sound came from the oddly seated men.
"Yes, the submarine car was wrecked in the tunnel, and everyone aboard was killed save us two."
The hairless men looked at one another. "This is Spiro's work," said one of them, still in English; and another said, "Yes, Spiro has done this."
Miles and Ward were recovering somewhat from their initial astonishment. "What place is this?" asked the former.
"This is Apex--or, rather, the Palace of the Heads in Apex."
The Palace of the Heads! The two Americans tried to control their bewilderment.
"Pardon us if we don't understand. Everything is so strange. First the submarine was wrecked. Then we entered the crystal room and the tunnel vanished. We can't understand how this place can be at the bottom of the Atlantic."
"It isn't at the bottom of the Atlantic."
"Not at the bottom? Then where?"
"It isn't," said the voice slowly, "in your world at all."
The import of what was said did not at first penetrate the minds of the Americans. "Not in our world?" they echoed stupidly.
"Come," said the crippled man smiling inscrutably, "you are tired and hungry. Later I shall explain more." His strangely colored eyes bored into their own. "Sleep," said his voice softly, imperatively; and though they fought against the command with all the strength of their wills, heaviness weighted down their eyelids and they slept.

From dreamless sleep they awakened to find that fatigue had miraculously vanished, that their wounds were healed and their bodies and clothes were free of slime and filth. All but one of the crippled men—for so in their own minds they termed the odd individuals—had gone away. That one was the man who had first addressed them.
"Do not be alarmed," he said. "In our own fashion we have given you food and rest and attended to your comfort."
Ward smiled, though a trifle uncertainly. "We are not easily frightened," he replied.
"So! That is good. But now listen: my name is Zoro and I am Chief of the Heads of Apex. Ages ago we Heads lived on a continent of your Earth now known to scholars as Atlantis. When Atlantis sank below the waves—in your sacred book that tragedy is known as the Flood—all but a scattered few of its people perished. I and my companions were among the survivors."
The Americans stared at him unbelievingly. "But that was a hundred thousand years ago!" exclaimed Ward.
"Three hundred thousand," corrected Zoro.
They stared at him dumbly.
"Yes," said Zoro; "it sounds incredible to your ears, but it is true. Mighty as is the industrial civilization of your day, that of Atlantis was mightier. Of course, the country wasn't then called Atlantis; its real name was A-zooma. A-
zooma ruled the world. Its ships with sails of copper and engines of brass covered the many seas which now are lands. Its airships clove the air with a safety and speed your own have still to attain. The wealth of the world poured into A-zooma, and its rulers waxed vain-glorious and proud. Time after time the enslaved masses of A-zooma and of conquered countries rose in great rebellions. Then against them marched the "iron baylas" breathing death and destruction, and from the air mighty ships poured down the yellow fog...."

Zoro paused, but presently went on: "So we ruled--for ten thousand years; until the scientists who begot those engines of destruction became afraid, because the serfs themselves began to build secret laboratories. We of the priesthood of science saw the inevitable disaster. Long ago we had put off our bodies--"

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Zoro smiled at the Americans' amazement. "No," he said, "I am not a cripple in a wheelchair. This tubular container holds no fleshly body. Inside of it is a mechanical heart which pumps artificial blood--blood purified by a process I will not describe--through my head. It also contains certain inner devices under my mental control, devices that take the place of human hands and feet. Only by accident or through lack of certain essentials can I die."

His listeners stared at him in awe. "You mean," faltered Miles, "that save for your head you are all--machine?"

"Practically, yes. We priest-scientists of the Inner Mystery prolonged life in such fashion. I was three thousand years old when--But enough! I will not weary you with a recital of how the slaves burrowed the bowels of A-zooma and of how the masters loosed against them the forces of the atom. Suffice it to say that on an island we built our vast system of buildings--or tunnel as you choose to call it--and sealed them away from the outside world, entrance being made by submarines through automatically controlled locks.

"At about this time our experiments opened up another realm of existence, manifesting at a vibratory rate above that of earth. To this new realm we brought workers who built the City of Apex and the palace you are in. But, unfortunately, we brought with us no weapons of offense, and in the new world we had neither the material nor the delicate mechanisms and factories to reproduce them. However, for countless ages there was no rebellion on the part of the workers who, even in A-zooma, had worshipped us as gods. They were born, grew old and died, but we abode forever. Besides, in the City of Apex they were freer than they had ever been before, merely having to furnish our laboratories with certain raw materials and the wherewithal to sustain the blood supply on which our lives depend. But, of late, they have made common cause with the original inhabitants of this plane, the green men--"

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The green men! As if the words were a signal, a dreadful thing happened. Out of a far shadow leaped a lean and hideous monster. To Miles' startled eyes it seemed to grow as it leaped. Thin, unbelievably thin it was, yet swelling at the head. From between two goggle-eyes writhed a rope-like trunk. Twelve feet in the air its head towered over Zoro. "Look out!" screamed the American.

Zoro's chair seemed to jump. Too late! Around the tubular container wrapped the snake-like trunk, plucking the wheelchair and its occupant from the floor and dangling them high in air. "Shoot!" cried Zoro.

Miles shot. His bullet ploughed through the unbelievably thin body and ricocheted from a pillar beyond. Ward fired with better effect. One of the goggle eyes spattered like glass. Under a fusillade of bullets the monster moaned, giving expression to a weird, shrill cry. Zoro dangled head downwards. To drop from such a height on his skull would probably be fatal.

But the monster did not drop him. Instead, in its death agony, its grip tightened, and the Americans witnessed an incredible sight. Before their very eyes the monster began rapidly to shrink. Its tenuous body telescoped together, becoming thinner and thinner in the process, until on the floor there lay the lifeless body of a snake-like creature not more than six inches in length!

"Good Lord!" breathed Miles.

Zoro who had escaped unscathed from his perilous plight, regarded it with his peculiarly colored eyes.

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"It is a tah-a-la," he said, "and must have entered the room at the same time you did. The green men often capture and train them for hunting. When about to seize their prey their bodies have the power of enormously stretching." Outwardly he seemed unaffected by the danger safely passed and waved away several of his fellows who had wheeled to the spot attracted by the noise of the pistols. The Americans were more shaken. "Perhaps," said Ward, "there is danger of--"

"None," replied Zoro. "I know there are no other tah-a-las inside these rooms, since it is the nature of these beasts to rush to each other's aid when they scream. And as for outside attacks, the laboratories are insulated against any the insurgent workers can make. Their weapons are poor--the green men use but clubs. No, it is not their attacks we fear but their refusal to furnish us with supplies. They worshipped us as gods, and the giving of supplies was long a religious rite. But now they doubt our divinity, and, since they no longer listen to or obey our decrees, we have no means of punishing them. Spiro is responsible for this."
"Spiro?" questioned the two men.

"He whom we raised to the dignity of godhead on the accidental death of Bah-koo, causing a deep sleep to fall upon him in the temple and grafting his head upon the mechanical body left by the latter. Twice before we had done this with citizens of Apex, and how were we to know that Spiro would resent it? True, he was in love with Ah-eeda, but the physical passions of men die with the organisms that give them birth. For three years he dwelt with us in the laboratories, learning the wisdom of the Heads, and then,"--Zoro's face became forbidding--"he denounced us to the people. Though there was more or less discontent, they would never have dared defy us save for him. He told them that our curses could do no harm, that we were merely the heads of men like himself and would die if they refused to give us the wherewithal to renew blood.

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"But this refusal of theirs is an evil thing," he cried, looking at the Americans with his strangely colored eyes. "It violates the custom of ages, and strikes at the very roots of our existence. So we held council and sent two of our number to Earth after men and weapons to enforce our demands. For years we had watched Earth, seen its myriad civilizations rise and fall, studied the coming of America to power and importance. So it was to America that Solino went, by way of the tunnel that still exists under the Atlantic--"

"And hired us," interrupted Ward, "and brought us to the tunnel in the submarine-car where we--"

"Stepped into the crystal chamber," finished Zoro. "That chamber is a re-vibrating device of certain rays and chemicals. The shutting of the door closed the switches and hurled your bodies to where a receiving-station on this plane integrated them again."

So they were not at the bottom of the ocean. They were--stupendous thought--living in a new world of matter!

"Spiro suspected our plans," continued Zoro. "He isolated us in our laboratories, and, by means of a crystal tube, went through to the tunnel, tore up a section of track, and wrecked the submarine-car. But his act was only partially successful. You two escaped death; you are here; you are ready to keep faith and fight in our service."

"We are ready to fight," assented Miles and Ward. The situation was certainly an unusual one, and one they did not clearly understand; but theirs was the simple code of the mercenary soldier--they would fight for whoever hired them, and be loyal as long as their wages were paid.

"Then there is no time to lose," exclaimed Zoro. "Already our blood grows thin. You must go back to the wrecked submarine and retrieve your weapons."

"But how?"

"There is a sending tube in the next compartment."

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They followed Zoro through lofty rooms filled with amber light until they came to one wherein were assembled the rest of the Heads. Zoro spoke to them swiftly in a strange, flowing tongue. Then he conducted the two Americans to a crystal chamber at the end of the room and bade them enter it. The vibrant light caressed their limbs.

"When I close this door," he said, "you will find yourselves back in the tunnel. Board one of the submarine-cars on the siding and proceed to the wreck." He gave them detailed instructions how to operate the car. "Then get your weapons and return. Do you understand?"

They nodded.

"The workers possess no arms the equal of machine-guns and bombs. They will be at your mercy. Remember that you are fighting for our lives and that, if you save them, your reward will be great. Fear nothing."

The door closed. After a moment there was a blinding flash, a moment of swooning darkness, and then they were staring through transparent walls into the phosphorescent gloom of the underseas crypt. Suddenly, what they had recently undergone seemed the product of an illusion, a dream. Ward shook himself vigorously. "I guess it was real enough," he said. "Let us see if the car works."

They ran out to the wreck and returned without trouble. The machine-gun was mounted for action and the gas-bombs slung over their shoulders in convenient bags. "All right," said Miles tensely, "let us go."

Again they entered the crystal chamber; again there was the flash of light and the sensation of falling into darkest space. Then, in a moment it seemed, they were stepping into the hall from which they had fled pursued by the green men--only for the second time, to be confronted by a crowd of hostile giants. "Don't fire, Kid!" yelled Ward. "It's no use to kill them uselessly. Give them the bombs!"

Disconcerted by the attack of tear-gas, the green men broke and fled. "After them," panted Ward: "we've got them on the run!"

* * * * *

Thrilling to the lust of battle, the two Americans emerged into an open square. They had little time to note the odd buildings and strange statues. Coming towards them with leveled weapons, the nature of which they did not know, was a band of short men--that is, short in comparison with the greenish giants. Behind this company appeared
still another, and another. Tear-gas was useless to stop their onward rush. "All right," yelled Miles, "it's lead they want!"

The machine-gun spat a hail of bullets. Before the first withering blast the swarthy men recoiled in confusion. Then a second volley scattered them like chaff. Miles and Ward were conscious of no pity for the dead and wounded lying on the pavement of yellow stone. This was their profession, the stern business of which they were masters. In France they had seen worse sights, and in Nicaragua and Mexico. They swept destructively out of the square and into a long tree-lined avenue. This might be another world or dimension but its trees looked not unlike those of tropical America.

In a short while the radiating streets were cleared of crowds and the cries of the mob died away. Miles and Ward paused in the shadow of an overhanging wall and wiped their faces. "That was quick work, all right," said Ward; and, even as he said it, the wall seemed to fall upon their unprotected heads and crush them into unconsciousness....

* * * * *

Out of a sick darkness they came. At first they thought they were confronting Zoro. Then, as the mists of unconsciousness cleared from aching heads, they perceived that they were in a vast hall crowded with swarthy men in short tunics, and with greenish giants wearing nothing but breech-clouts and swinging short clubs. The fierce eyes of the greenish giants were upon them, and the vengeful ones of the swarthy men. But the desire of both to rend and tear was held in check by the dominant head emerging from a tubular container mounted upon a wheelchair. The Americans stared. This was not the head of Zoro. No!

"The head of Spiro," thought Miles and Ward with sinking hearts.

They had fallen into the power of the leader of the insurgent workers!

Spiro—for it was indeed he—regarded them with pitiless eyes. His English was slower and not as fluent as that of Zoro, and his words harder to understand.

"You Americans, beings of another world, have come here at the bidding of the Heads to slay and kill for gold."

He paused. "I who for three years studied your country, learned its language, history, did not believe men of your race could be so vile."

He paused again, and Ward broke out hotly, "It is true that we came here to fight for gold, but who are you to speak of vileness? Have you not turned on the Heads, your benefactors, now your brothers, who raised you to their height? Are you not leading a revolt of the workers which would denounce the means of sustaining life? Are you not seeking to perpetrate—murder?"

Spiro regarded him slowly. "Is it possible you are in ignorance of what those means are? Listen, then, while I tell you the hideous truth. Since the dawn of our history, until the present moment, the Heads have maintained their lives by draining blood from the veins of thousands of Apexans yearly!"

The Americans' faces whitened. "What do you mean?" breathed Ward.

"I mean that the artificial blood pumped by mechanical hearts through the brains of the Heads—yes, and that is now being pumped through my own!" cried Spiro bitterly—"is manufactured from human blood. Human blood is the basis of it. And to get that blood every Apexan must yield his quota in the temple. Slowly but surely this practice is sapping the vitality of the race. But though the Apexans realized this they were afraid to speak against the custom. For the Heads were worshipped as gods; and when the gods spoke, blasphemers died—horribly."

* * * * *

Miles and Ward shuddered.

"Even I," went on Spiro, "denounced blasphemers and thought it holy that each should yield a little of his blood to the Almighty Ones. Then I woke from darkness to find myself—a Head. At first I could not understand, for I was in love with Ah-eeda—and can a machine mate? But it is true that love is largely desire, and desire of the body. With the death of the body, desire died; and it may be that pride and ambition took its place. But, for all that, there were moments when I remembered my lost manhood and dreamed of Ah-eeda. Yes, though the laboratory of the Heads revealed wonders of which I had never dreamed, though I looked into your world and studied its languages and history, though I was worshipped as a god and endless life stretched ahead of me—nevertheless, I could see that the strength of my race was being sapped, its virility lost!"

His voice broke. "In the face of such knowledge what were immortality and power? Could they compensate for one hour of life and love as humanity lived it? So I brooded. Then one day in the temple I looked into the face of a girl about to be bled and recognized Ah-eeda. In that moment, hatred of the fiends posing as gods and draining the vitality of deluded worshippers, crystallized and drove me to action. So it was I who denounced the Heads, aroused the people!" Spiro's voice broke; died. Miles and Ward stared at him, horrified; and after a while Miles exclaimed, "We never suspected! We would never have fought to maintain such a thing had we known!"
"Nonetheless," said Spiro inflexibly, "you fought for it, and many people died and more are afraid. Superstition is a hard thing to kill. Already there are those who murmur that truly the Heads are gods and have called up demons from the underworld, as they threatened they would, to smite them with thunder until once more they yield blood in the temple. But I know that without blood the Heads must die miserably and the people be freed from their vampire existence. It is true that I too shall die, but that is nothing. I die gladly. Therefore, to keep the people from sacrificing blood, to show them that you are mortal and the Heads powerless to save the demons they have raised, you must be slain in front of the great palace.

"Yes; you, too, must die for the people!"

* * * * *

Bound and helpless, lying on their backs and staring into the gloom of the small chamber into which they had been thrown, Miles and Ward had time to ponder their desperate situation. Spiro was delaying their death until the workers of Apex would have time to gather and witness it. At first they had struggled to loosen their bonds, but such efforts served only to tighten them. Then they had tried the trick of rolling together so that the fingers of one might endeavor to undo the knots securing the other. On a memorable occasion in Turkey they had freed themselves in this manner. But the attempts proved fruitless now. The floor of the chamber was smooth, nor could they find any rough projection on which to saw the cords.

Exhausted, they finally desisted. The same thought was in both minds: Were they doomed to die in this strange world, fated never to see Earth again? Well, a soldier of fortune must expect to meet with reverses. Still, it was a tough break. After a long silence Ward said, "How were we to know that the heads lived on the blood of the people?"

"Would it have made any difference if we had known?" asked Miles.

"Perhaps not." Ward tried to shrug his shoulders. "After all, we have fought to maintain systems not much better. There is little difference, save in degree, between draining the life-blood of a race and robbing it of the fruits of its labor."

"But sometimes we fought to liberate people," protested Miles.

"Yes, I like to think of that. It's good to have something to our credit when we cash in. And it looks," he said pessimistically, "as if our time to do so has come."

* * * * *

They ceased talking. Time passed cheerlessly. Finally both of them fell into a heavy slumber from which they were aroused by the sudden flashing in their eyes of a bright light, bright only in comparison with the former intense darkness. "What's that!" cried Ward, startled.

"S-sh," said a soft voice warningly, and when their eyes became accustomed to the illumination, they were amazed to perceive the slender form of a young girl carrying a torch. She was marvelously lovely to look at, with her blue-black hair brushed straight back from a low, broad forehead and her smooth skin as dark as that of an Egyptian. Nor was she dressed unlike pictures Miles had seen of people of ancient Egypt. The embroidered plates covering the small breasts shone and glittered; bracelets and bangles flashed on bare arms and shapely ankles; while from the waist to below the knees was a skirt of rich material. On the small feet were sandals of intricate design. Besides the torch, the girl carried a slim, gleaming knife, and for a moment the adventurers were guilty of imagining she had come to slay them where they lay. But her manner quickly dispelled their fear. Sinking on her knees beside them, she said, "Do not be afraid; Ah-eea will not harm you."

* * * * *

So this was Ah-eea, the girl of whom Spiro had spoken. Miles and Ward devoured her loveliness with their eyes; her coming flooded their bosoms with renewed hope. She continued speaking. Her English was not at all fluent, and she was often compelled to make it clear with expressions in her own tongue and with explanatory gestures. But to Miles and Ward, who knew nothing of temple training, her speaking English at all was a miracle.

"Is it true that you are men from another world?"

"Yes."

"And you came to make the people give their blood to the Heads?"

"No, that is not true. We were in ignorance of what it was we fought for. Had we known the truth we would have refused to fight for the Heads."

"Then, if I were to set you free, you would go back to your own world and not fight my people any more?"

They nodded vigorously.

"Oh, I am so glad," exclaimed the girl; "I did not want to see you die!" She looked at Miles as she spoke. "I saw you before Spiro this afternoon. Poor Spiro!" she murmured as she cut their bonds. It was some time before circulation was restored to their limbs. Miles asked anxiously, "How many guards are there at the door?"

"Twelve," said the girl; "but they are playing wong-wong in the room outside and drinking soola." She
pantomimed her meaning. "I came here through a secret passage beyond," she indicated by a wave of her hand. "Now that you can walk, let us hurry." Shyly she took Miles' hand. The warm clasp of her fingers made the blood course faster in his veins.

Through a long passage they glided to another room. There were several confusing turns and dark hallways, and twice they had to cower in shadowy corners while Ah-eeda boldly advanced and held converse with occasional persons encountered, though for the most part the way was silent and deserted. At last they came to a low door opening on a narrow street and the girl put out her torch.

"To return to our own world we must first reach the Palace of the Heads," said Ward. The girl nodded. "I will guide you there. But we must hurry: the workers will soon be gathered."

Never were Miles and Ward to forget that breathless flight. The girl led them through narrow and devious byways over which dark buildings leaned, evidently avoiding the more direct and open thoroughfares. It seemed as if they were to escape without hindrance when, suddenly, out of a dimly lighted doorway, lurched the gigantic figure of a green man carrying a flare. This flare threw the figures of the fugitives into relief.

"Ho!" roared the green man, and came at them like a furious bull. It seemed characteristic of his kind to attack without parley. The torch dropped as he came. There was no resisting that mighty bulk. Unarmed, and with scant room to move backward, the two Americans went down; and that would have been the end of the battle if Ah-eeda, who had shrunk to one side out of the way of the combatants, had not snatched up the still flaming torch and held it against the naked back of the greenish giant. With a scream of anguish the latter ceased throttling the Americans, clapped his hands to his scorched back and rolled clear of them.

Instantly they staggered to their feet and fled down the roadway after the light-footed Ah-eeda. Behind them the screams of the green man made the night hideous. "Damn him!" panted Ward; "he'll have the whole town on our heels!" Providentially, at that moment the road debouched into the great square. This they crossed at a run, and so, for the last time, entered the Palace of the Heads. Its wide halls and chambers were practically deserted.

Past the crystal chamber where they had first materialized into this strange world they dashed, and through the far door and down the corridor to the blank wall. Already in the rear could be heard the sound of pursuit, the rising clamor of the mob. Ward hammered on the wall with both fists. "Zoro! Zoro! let us in!" Now the first of the mob had entered the corridor. "Zoro! Zoro!" Noiselessly, and just in time, the wall parted and they sprang through, Miles half carrying the slender form of Ah-eeda. The wall closed behind them, obliterating the fierce cries and footbeats of their pursuers.

In front of them was Zoro, his hairless head projecting from the tubular container. Ah-eeda shrank fearfully into Miles' embrace. All the other Heads were ranged back of Zoro, but there was something odd about them. The massive craniums lolled loosely to one side or another and the curiously colored eyes were glazed or filmed. Zoro held his head erect, but only with an effort, and his features were drawn and ghastly looking.

"Yes," he said in a feeble voice, "the Heads are dying. You need not tell me that you have failed. In the end force always fails. No longer will the veins of the people yield their blood to us, and without their blood we cannot live. Soon three hundred thousand years of intelligence will be no more." His voice faltered.

Miles and Ward had learned to feel nothing but horror and detestation of the Heads, but now in the face of their tragic end, hearing the dying words of Zoro, awe and sympathy struggled with other emotions in their hearts. These mighty intellects had lived before the days of the flood; their eyes filming now in death had seen the ancient empires of Earth rise and fall.... Sumeria, Babylon.... Stupendous thought; and yet in the face of death a hundred thousand years of life was of no more importance than that of a day. Suddenly Ward sprang forward and shook the fainting Head. "Zoro! Zoro! what of us? We served you faithfully and would now return to Earth."

Visibly Zoro made a great effort to reply. "Go to the crystal tube in the laboratory beyond," he said at last. "It still works. I have told you how to run the car. Mend the tracks. The locks open automatically and let the car into the ocean when it strikes the switch. Your reward is in...." The words died away. Then, with a sudden influx of strength, the hairless head straightened, the strangely colored eyes cleared, and in a loud voice Zoro called out something in an unknown tongue and then collapsed.

Out of that chamber of death the Americans fled, suddenly afraid of its weird occupants. In time the workers of Apex would break into that strange laboratory and find the vampires of the ages dead. And in a very short time Spiro himself would die--Spiro the avenger.

At the crystal tube Miles paused. "Ah-eeda," he said softly, "we return to Earth, but I shall never forget you, never!"

A moment he hesitated, and then bent and kissed her swiftly. Instantly she was in his arms, clinging to him...
passionately.

"I too," she cried; "I too!"
"She means," said Ward, "that she wants to go back with us. What do you say?"
"God knows I am tempted to take her," said Miles; "but would it be right? What does she know of Earth?"
"Nothing," said Ward; "but I believe she loves you. And have you thought that after helping us to escape she may not be safe among her own people?"
Miles bowed his head. "Very well," he said; "so be it. I swear to make her happy."
So there were three of them who entered the crystal tube.

Two slitted green eyes loomed up directly in front of him. He plunged into them immediately.

He had just made the voyage, naked through the dimension stratum, and he scurried into the first available refuge, to hover there, gasping.

The word "he" does not strictly apply to the creature, for it had no sex, nor are the words "naked," "scurried," "hover" and "gasping" accurate at all. But there are no English words to describe properly what it was and how it moved, except in very general terms. There are no Asiatic, African or European words, though perhaps there are mathematical symbols. But, because this is not a technical paper, the symbols have no place in it.

He was a sort of spy, a sort of fifth-columnist. He had some of the characteristics of a kamikaze pilot, too, because there was no telling if he'd get back from his mission.

Hovering in his refuge and gasping for breath, so to speak, he tried to compose his thoughts after the terrifying journey and adjust himself to his new environment, so he could get to work. His job, as first traveler to this new world, the Earth, was to learn if it were suitable for habitation by his fellow beings back home. Their world was about ended and they had to move or die.

He was being discomfited, however, in his initial adjustment. His first stop in the new world--unfortunately, not only for his dignity, but for his equilibrium--had been in the mind of a cat.

* * * * *

It was his own fault, really. He and the others had decided that his first in a series of temporary habitations should be in one of the lower order of animals. It was a matter of precaution--the mind would be easy to control, if it came to a contest. Also, there would be less chance of running into a mind-screen and being trapped or destroyed.

The cat had no mind-screen, of course; some might even have argued that she didn't have a mind, especially the human couple she lived with. But whatever she did have was actively at work, feeling the solid tree-branch under her claws and the leaves against which her tail switched and seeing the half-grown chickens below.

The chickens were scratching in the forbidden vegetable garden. The cat, the runt of her litter and thus named Midge, often had been chased out of the garden herself, but it was no sense of justice which now set her little gray behind to wriggling in preparation for her leap. It was mischief, pure and simple, which motivated her.

Midge leaped, and the visitor, who had made the journey between dimensions without losing consciousness, blacked out.

When he revived, he was being rocketed along in an up-and-down and at the same time side-ward series of motions which got him all giddy. With an effort he oriented himself so that the cat's vision became his, and he watched in distaste as the chickens scurried, scrawny wings lifted and beaks achirp, this way and that to escape the monstrous cat.

The cat never touched the chickens; she was content to chase them. When she had divided the flock in half, six in the pea patch and six under the porch, she lay down in the shade of the front steps and reflectively licked a paw.

The spy got the impression of reflection, but he was baffledly unable to figure out what the cat was reflecting on. Midge in turn licked a paw, rolled in the dust, arched her back against the warm stone of the steps and snapped cautiously at a low-flying wasp. She was a contented cat. The impression of contentment came through very well.

The dimension traveler got only one other impression at the moment--one of languor.

The cat, after a prodigious pink yawn, went to sleep. The traveler, although he had never known the experience of voluntary unconsciousness, was tempted to do the same. But he fought against the influence of his host and, robbed of vision with the closing of the cat's eyes, he meditated.
He had been on Earth less than ten minutes, but his meditation consisted of saying to himself in his own way that if he was ever going to get anything done, he'd better escape from this cat's mind.

He accomplished that a few minutes later, when there was a crunching of gravel in the driveway and a battered Plymouth stopped and a man stepped out. Midge opened her eyes, crept up behind a row of stones bordering the path to the driveway and jumped delicately out at the man, who tried unsuccessfully to gather her into his arms.

Through the cat's eyes from behind the porch steps, where Midge had fled, the traveler took stock of the human being it was about to inhabit:

Five-feet-elevenish, thirtyish, blond-brown-haired, blue-summer-suited.

And no mind-screen.

The traveler traveled and in an instant he was looking down from his new height at the gray undersized cat.

Then the screen door of the porch opened and a female human being appeared.

* * * * *

With the male human impressions now his, the traveler experienced some interesting sensations. There was a body-to-body togetherness apparently called "gimmea hug" and a face-to-face-touching ceremony, "kiss."

"Hmm," thought the traveler, in his own way. "Hmm."

The greeting ceremony was followed by one that had this catechism:

"Suppareddi?"

"Onnatable."

Then came the "eating."

This eating, something he had never done, was all right, he decided. He wondered if cats ate, too. Yes, Midge was under the gas stove, chewing delicately at a different kind of preparation.

There was a great deal of eating. The traveler knew from the inspection of the mind he was inhabiting that the man was enormously hungry and tired almost to exhaustion.

"The damn job had to go out today," was what had happened. "We worked till almost eight o'clock. I think I'll take a nap after supper while you do the dishes."

The traveler understood perfectly, for he was a very sympathetic type. That was one reason they had chosen him for the transdimensional exploration. They had figured the best applicant for the job would be one with an intellect highly attuned to the vibrations of these others, known dimly through the warp-view, one extremely sensitive and with a great capacity for appreciation. Shrewd, too, of course.

The traveler tried to exercise control. Just a trace of it at first. He attempted to dissuade the man from having his nap. But his effort was ignored.

The man went to sleep as soon as he lay down on the couch in the living room. Once again, as the eyes closed, the traveler was imprisoned. He hadn't realized it until now, but he evidently couldn't transfer from one mind to another except through the eyes, once he was inside. He had planned to explore the woman's mind, but now he was trapped, at least temporarily.

Oh, well. He composed himself as best he could to await the awakening. This sleeping business was a waste of time.

There were footsteps and a whistling noise outside. The inhabited man heard the sounds and woke up, irritated. He opened his eyes a slit as his wife told the neighbor that Charlie was taking a nap, worn out from a hard day at the office, and the visitor, darting free, transferred again.

But he miscalculated and there he was in the mind of the neighbor. Irritated with himself, the traveler was about to jump to the mind of the woman when he was caught up in the excitement that was consuming his new host.

"Sorry," said the neighbor. "The new batch of records I ordered came today and I thought Charlie'd like to hear them. Tell him to come over tomorrow night, if he wants to hear the solidest combo since Muggsy's Roseland days."

The wife said all right, George, she'd tell him. But the traveler was experiencing the excited memories of a dixieland jazz band in his new host's mind, and he knew he'd be hearing these fantastically wonderful new sounds at first hand as soon as George got back to his turntable.

They could hardly wait, George and his inhabitant both.

* * * * *

His inhabitant had come from a dimension-world of vast, contemplative silences. There was no talk, no speech vibrations, no noise which could not be shut out by the turning of a mental switch. Communication was from mind to mind, not from mouth to ear. It was a world of peaceful silence, where everything had been done, where the struggle for physical existence had ended, and where there remained only the sweet fruits of past labor to be enjoyed.

That had been the state of affairs, at any rate, up until the time of the Change, which was something the beings of the world could not stop. It was not a new threat from the lower orders, which they had met and overcome before,
innumerable times. It was not a threat from outside--no invasion such as they had turned back in the past. Nor was it a cooling of their world or the danger of imminent collision with another.

The Change came from within. It was decadence. There was nothing left for the beings to do. They had solved all their problems and could find no new ones. They had exhausted the intricate workings of reflection, academic hypothetica and mind-play; there hadn't been a new game, for instance, in the lifetime of the oldest inhabitant.

And so they were dying of boredom. This very realization had for a time halted the creeping menace, because, as they came to accept it and discuss ways of meeting it, the peril itself subsided. But the moment they relaxed, the Change started again.

Something had to be done. Mere theorizing about their situation was not enough. It was then that they sent their spy abroad.

Because they had at one time or another visited each of the planets in their solar system and had exhausted their possibilities or found them barren, and because they were not equipped, even at the peak of their physical development, for intergalactic flight, there remained only one way to travel--in time.

Not forward or backward, for both had been tried. Travel ahead had been discouraging--in fact, it had convinced them that their normal passage through the years had to be stopped. The reason had been made dramatically clear--they, the master race, did not exist in the future. They had vanished and the lower forms of life had begun to take over.

Travel into the past would be even more boring than continued existence in the present, they realized, because they would be reliving the experiences they had had and still vividly remembered, and would be incapable of changing them. It would be both tiresome and frustrating.

That left only one way to go--sideways in time, across the dimension line--to a world like their own, but which had developed so differently through the eons that to visit it and conquer the minds of its inhabitants would be worth while.

In that way they picked Earth for their victim and sent out their spy. Just one spy. If he didn't return, they'd send another. There was enough time. And they had to be sure.

* * * * *

George put a record on the phonograph and fixed himself a drink while the machine warmed up.

The interdimensional invader reacted pleasurably to the taste and instant warming effect of the liquor on George's mind.

"Ahh!" said George aloud, and his temporary inhabitant agreed with him.

George lifted the phonograph needle into the groove and went to sit on the edge of a chair. Jazz poured out of the speaker and the man beat out the time with his heels and toes.

The visitor in his mind experimented with control. He went at it subtly, at first, so as not to alarm his host. He tried to quiet the beating of time with the feet. He suggested that George cross his legs instead. The beating of time continued. The visitor urged that George do this little thing he asked; he bent all his powers to the suggestion, concentrating on the tapping feet. There wasn't even a glimmer of reaction.

Instead, there was a reverse effect. The pounding of music was insistent. The visitor relaxed. He rationalized and told himself he would try another time. Now he would observe this phenomenon. But he became more than just an observer.

The visitor reeled with sensation. The vibrations gripped him, twisted him and wrung him out. He was limp, palpitating and thoroughly happy when the record ended and George got up immediately to put on another.

Hours later, drunk with the jazz and the liquor, the visitor went blissfully to sleep inside George's mind when his host went to bed.

He awoke, with George, to the experience of a nagging throb. But in a few minutes, after a shower, shave and breakfast with steaming coffee, it was gone, and the visitor looked forward to the coming day.

It was George's day off and he was going fishing. Humming to himself, he got out his reel and flies and other paraphernalia and contentedly arranged them in the back of his car. Visions of the fine, quiet time he was going to have went through George's mind, and his inhabitant decided he had better leave. He had to get on with his exploration; he mustn't allow himself to be trapped into just having fun.

But he stayed with George as the fisherman drove his car out of the garage and along a highway. The day was sunny and warm. There was a slight wind and the green trees sighed delicately in it. The birds were pleasantly vocal and the colors were superb.

The visitor found it oddly familiar. Then he realized what it was.

His world was like this, too. It had the trees, the birds, the wind and the colors. All were there. But its people had long since ceased to appreciate them. Their existence had turned inward and the external things no longer were of interest. Yet the visitor, through George's eyes, found this world delightful. He reveled in its beauty, its
breathtaking panorama and its balance. And he wondered if he was able to appreciate it for the first time now because he was being active, although in a vicarious way, and participating in life, instead of merely reflecting on it. This would be a clue to have analyzed by the greater minds to which he would report.

Then, with a wrench, the visitor chided himself. He was allowing himself to identify too closely with this mortal, with his appreciation of such diverse pursuits as jazz and fishing. He had to get on. There was work to be done.

George waved to a boy playing in a field and the boy waved back. With the contact of their eyes, the visitor was inside the boy's mind.

* * * * *

The boy had a dog. It was a great, lumbering mass of affection, a shaggy, loving, prankish beast. A protector and a playmate, strong and gentle.

Now that the visitor was in the boy's mind, he adored the animal, and the dog worshiped him.
He fought to be rational. "Come now," he told himself, "don't get carried away." He attempted control. A simple thing. He would have the boy pull the dog's ear, gently. He concentrated, suggested. But all his efforts were thwarted. The boy leaped at the dog, grabbed it around the middle. The dog responded, prancing free.

The visitor gave up. He relaxed.

Great waves of mute, suffocating love enveloped him. He swam for a few minutes in a pool of joy as the boy and dog wrestled, rolled over each other in the tall grass, charged ferociously with teeth bared and growls issuing from both throats, finally to subside panting and laughing on the ground while the clouds swept majestically overhead across the blue sky.

He could swear the dog was laughing, too.

As they lay there, exhausted for the moment, a young woman came upon them. The visitor saw her looking down at them, the soft breeze tugging at her dark hair and skirt. Her hands were thrust into the pockets of her jacket. She was barefoot and she wriggled her toes so that blades of grass came up between them.
"Hello, Jimmy," she said. "Hello, Max, you old monster."
The dog thumped the ground with his tail.
"Hello, Mrs. Tanner," the boy said. "How's the baby coming?"
The girl smiled. "Just fine, Jimmy. It's beginning to kick a little now. It kind of tickles. And you know what?"
"What?" asked Jimmy. The visitor in the boy's mind wanted to know, too.
"I hope it's a boy, and that he grows up to be just like you."
"Aw." The boy rolled over and hid his face in the grass. Then he peered around. "Honest?"
"Honest," she said.
"Gee whiz." The boy was so embarrassed that he had to leave. "Me and Max are going down to the swimmin' hole. You wanna come?"
"No, thanks. You go ahead. I think I'll just sit here in the Sun for a while and watch my toes curl."
As they said good-by, the visitor traveled to the new mind.

* * * * *

With the girl's eyes, he saw the boy and the dog running across the meadow and down to the stream at the edge of the woods.

The traveler experienced a sensation of tremendous fondness as he watched them go.

But he mustn't get carried away, he told himself. He must make another attempt to take command. This girl might be the one he could influence. She was doing nothing active; her mind was relaxed.

The visitor bent himself to the task. He would be cleverly simple. He would have her pick a daisy. They were all around at her feet. He concentrated. Her gaze traveled back across the meadow to the grassy knoll on which she was standing. She sat. She stretched out her arms behind her and leaned back on them. She tossed her hair and gazed into the sky.

She wasn't even thinking of the daisy.

Irritated, he gathered all his powers into a compact mass and hurled them at her mind.

But with a swoop and a soar, he was carried up and away, through the sweet summer air, to a cloud of white softness.

This was not what he had planned, by any means.

A steady, warm breeze enveloped him and there was a tinkle of faraway music. It frightened him and he struggled to get back into contact with the girl's mind. But there was no contact. Apparently he had been cast out, against his will.

The forces of creation buffeted him. His dizzying flight carried him through the clean air in swift journey from horizon to horizon, then up, up and out beyond the limits of the atmosphere, only to return him in a trice to the
breast of the rolling meadow. He was conscious now of the steady growth of slim green leaves as they pressed confidently through the nurturing Earth, of the other tiny living things in and on the Earth, and the heartbeat of the Earth itself, assuring him with its great strength of the continuation of all things.

Then he was back with the girl, watching through her eyes a butterfly as it fluttered to rest on a flower and perched there, gently waviing its gaudy wings.

He had not been cast out. The young woman herself had gone on that wild journey to the heavens, not only with her mind, but with her entire being, attuned to the rest of creation. There was a continuity, he realized, a oneness between herself, the mother-to-be, and the Universe. With her, then, he felt the stirrings of new life, and he was proud and content.

He forgot for the moment that he had been a failure.

* * * * *

The soft breeze seemed to turn chill. The Sun was still high and unclouded, but its warmth was gone. With the girl, he felt a prickling along the spine. She turned her head slightly and, through her eyes, he saw, a few yards away in tall grass, a creeping man.

The eyes of the man were fixed on the girl's body and the traveler felt her thrill of terror. The man lay there for a moment, hands flat on the ground under his chest. Then he moved forward, inching toward her.

The girl screamed. Her terror gripped the visitor. He was helpless. His thoughts whirled into chaos, following hers.

The eyes of the creeping man flicked from side to side, then up. The visitor quivered and cringed with the girl when she screamed again. As the torrent of frightened sound poured from her throat, the creeping man looked into her eyes. Instantly the visitor was sucked into his mind.

It was a maelstrom. A tremendous conflict was going on in it. One part of it was urging the body on in its fantastic crawl toward the young woman frozen in terror against the sky. The visitor was aware of the other part, submerged and struggling feebly, trying to get through with a message of reason. But it was handicapped. The visitor sensed these efforts being nullified by a crushing weight of shame.

The traveler fought against full identification with the deranged part of the mind. Nevertheless, he sought to understand it, as he had understood the other minds he'd visited. But there was nothing to understand. The creeping man had no plan. There was no reason for his action.

The visitor felt only a compulsion which said, "You must! You must!"

The visitor was frightened. And then he realized that he was less frightened than the man was. The terror felt by the creeping man was greater than the fear the visitor had experienced with the girl.

There were shouts and barking. He heard the shrill cry of a boy. "Go get him, Max!"

There was a squeal of brakes from the road and a pounding of heavy footsteps coming toward them.

With the man, the visitor rose up, confused, scared. A great shaggy weight hurled itself and a growling, sharp-toothed mouth sought a throat.

A voice yelled, "Don't shoot! The dog's got him!"

Then blackness.

* * * * *

"Mersey." The voice summoned the visitor, huddling in a corner of the deranged mind, fearing contamination. The eyes opened, looked up at the ceiling of a barred cell.

"Dr. Cloyd is here to see you," the voice said.

The visitor felt the mind of his host seeking to close out the words and the world, to return to sheltering darkness.

There was a rattle of keys and the opening of an iron door.

The eyes opened as a hand shook the psychotic Mersey by the shoulder. The visitor sought escape, but the eyes avoided those of the other.

"Come with me, son," the doctor's voice said. "Don't be frightened. No one will hurt you. We'll have a talk."

Mersey shook off the hand on his shoulder.

"Drop dead," he muttered.

"That wouldn't help anything," the doctor said. "Come on, man."

Mersey sat up and, through his eyes, the traveler saw the doctor's legs. Were they legs or were they iron bars? The traveler cringed away from the mad thought.

A room with a desk, a chair, a couch, and sunlight through a window. Crawling sunlit snakes. The visitor shuddered. He sought the part of the mind that was clear, but he sought in vain. Only the whirling chaos and the distorted images remained now.

There was a pain in the throat and with Mersey he lifted a hand to it. Bandaged--gleaming teeth and a snarling
animal’s mouth--fear, despair and hatred. With the prisoner, he collapsed on the couch.

"Lie down, if you like," said Dr. Cloyd's voice. "Try to relax. Let me help you."

"Drop dead," Mersey replied automatically. The visitor felt the tenseness of the man, the unreasoning fear, and the resentment.

But as the man lay there, the traveler sensed a calming of the turbulence. There was an urgent rational thought. He concentrated and tried to help the man phrase it.

"The girl--is she all right? Did I...?"

"She's all right." The doctor's voice was soothing. It pushed back the shadows a little. "She's perfectly all right."

The visitor sensed a dulled relief in Mersey's mind. The shadows still whirled, but they were less ominous. He suggested a question, exulted as Mersey attempted to phrase it: "Doctor, am I real bad off? Can...?"

But still the shadows.

"We'll work together," said the doctor's voice. "You've been ill, but so have others. With your help, we can make you well."

The traveler made a tremendous effort. He urged Mersey to say: "I'll help, doctor. I want to find peace."

But then Mersey's voice went on: "I must find a new home. We need a new home. We can't stay where we are."

* * * * *

The traveler was shocked at the words. He hadn't intended them to come out that way. Somehow Mersey had voiced the underlying thoughts of his people. The traveler sought the doctor's reaction, but Mersey wouldn't look at him. The man's gaze was fixed on the ceiling above the couch.

"Of course," the doctor said. His words were false, the visitor realized; he was humoring the madman.

"We had so much, but now there is no future," Mersey said. The visitor tried to stop him. He would not be stopped. "We can't stay much longer. We'll die. We must find a new world. Maybe you can help us."

Dr. Cloyd spoke and there was no hint of surprise in his voice.

"I'll help you all I can. Would you care to tell me more about your world?"

Desperately, the visitor fought to control the flow of Mersey's words. He had opened the gate to the other world--how, he did not know--and all of his knowledge and memories now were Mersey's. But the traveler could not communicate with the disordered mind. He could only communicate through it, and then involuntarily. If he could escape the mind ... but he could not escape. Mersey's eyes were fixed on the ceiling. He would not look at the doctor.

"A dying world," Mersey said. "It will live on after us, but we will die because we have finished. There's nothing more to do. The Change is upon us, and we must flee it or die. I have been sent here as a last hope, as an emissary to learn if this world is the answer. I have traveled among you and I have found good things. Your world is much like ours, physically, but it has not grown as fast or as far as ours, and we would be happy here, among you, if we could control."

* * * * *

The words from Mersey's throat had come falteringly at first, but now they were strong, although the tone was flat and expressionless. The words went on:

"But we can't control. I've tried and failed. At best we can co-exist, as observers and vicarious participants, but we must surrender choice. Is that to be our destiny--to live on, but to be denied all except contemplation--to live on as guests among you, accepting your ways and sharing them, but with no power to change them?"

The traveler shouted at Mersey's mind in soundless fury: "Shut up! Shut up!"

Mersey stopped talking.

"Go on," said the doctor softly. "This is very interesting."

"Shut up!" said the traveler voicelessly, yet with frantic urgency.

The madman was silent. His body was perfectly still, except for his calm breathing. The visitor gazed through his eyes in the only possible direction--up at the ceiling. He tried another command. "Look at the doctor."

With that glance, the visitor told himself, he would flee the crazed mind and enter the doctor's. There he would learn what the psychiatrist thought of his patient's strange soliloquy--whether he believed it, or any part of it.

He prayed that the doctor was evaluating it as the intricate raving of delusion.

* * * * *

Slowly, Mersey turned his head. Through his eyes, the visitor saw the faded green carpet, the doctor's dull-black shoes, his socks, the legs of his trousers. Mersey's glance hovered there, around the doctor's knees. The visitor forced it higher, past the belt around a tidy waist, along the buttons of the opened vest to the white collar, and finally to the kindly eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses.

Again he had commanded this human being and had been obeyed. The traveler braced himself for the leap from the tortured mind to the sane one.
But his gaze continued to be that of Mersey. The gray eyes of the doctor were on his patient. Intelligence and kindness were in those eyes, but the visitor could read nothing else.

He was caught, a prisoner in a demented mind. He felt panic. This must be the mind-screen he'd been warned about.

"Look down," the visitor commanded Mersey. "Shut your eyes. Don't let him see me."

But Mersey continued to be held by the doctor's eyes. The visitor cowered back into the crazed mental tangle.

Gradually, then, his fear ebbed. There was more likelihood that Cloyd did not believe Mersey's words than that he did. The doctor treated hundreds of patients and surely many of them had delusions as fanciful as this one might seem.

The traveler's alarm simmered down until he was capable of appreciating the irony of the situation.

But at the same time, he thought with pain, "Is it our fate that of all the millions of creatures on this world, we can establish communication only through the insane? And even then to have only imperfect control of the mind and, worse, to have it become a transmitter for our most secret thoughts?"

It was heartbreaking.

Dr. Cloyd broke the long silence. Pulling at his ear, he spoke calmly and matter-of-factly:

"Let me see if I understand your problem, Mersey. You believe yourself to be from another world, although not physically. Your world is not a material one, as far as its people are concerned. Your civilization is a mental one, which has been placed in danger. You must resettle your people, but this cannot be done here, on Earth, except in the minds of the mentally ill--and that would not be a satisfactory solution. Have I stated the case correctly?"

"Yes," Mersey's voice said over the traveler's mental protests. "Except that it is not a 'case,' as you call it. I am not Mersey. He is merely a vehicle for my thoughts. I am not here to be treated or cured, as the human being Mersey is. I'm here with a life-or-death problem affecting an entire race, and I would not be talking to you except that, at the moment, I'm trapped and confused."

The madman was doing it again, the traveler thought helplessly--spilling out his knowledge, betraying him and his kind. Was there no way to muffle him?

"I must admit that I'm confused myself," Dr. Cloyd said. "Humor me for a moment while I think out loud. Let me consider this in my own framework, first, and then in yours, without labeling either one absolutely true or false.

"You see," the doctor went on, "this is a world of vitality. My world--Earth. Its people are strong. Their bodies are developed as well as their minds. There are some who are not so strong, and some whose minds have been injured. But for the most part, both the mind and the body are in balance. Each has its function, and they work together as a coordinated whole. My understanding of your world, on the other hand, is that it's in a state of imbalance, where the physical has deteriorated almost to extinction and the mind has been nurtured in a hothouse atmosphere. Where, you might say, the mind has fed on the decay of the body."

"No," said Mersey, voicing the traveler's conviction. "You paint a highly distorted picture of our world."

"I theorize, of course," Dr. Cloyd agreed. "But it's a valid theory, based on intimate knowledge of my own world and what you've told me of yours."

"You make a basic error, I think," Mersey said, speaking for the unwilling visitor. "You assume that I have been able to make contact only with this deranged mind. That is wrong. I have shared the experiences of many of you--a man, a boy, a woman about to bear a child. Even a cat. And with each of these, my mind has been perfectly attuned. I was able to share and enjoy their experiences, their pleasures, to love with them and to fear, although they had no knowledge of my presence.

"Only since I came to this poor mind have I failed to achieve true empathy. I have been shocked by his madness and I've tried to resist it, to help him overcome it. But I've failed and it apparently has imprisoned me. Whereas I was able to leave the minds of the others almost at will, with poor Mersey I'm trapped. I can't transfer to you, for instance, as I could normally from another. If there's a way out, I haven't found it. Have you a theory for this?"

In spite of his distress at these revelations, the traveler was intrigued, now that they had been voiced for him, and he was eager to hear Dr. Cloyd's interpretation of them.

The psychiatrist took a pipe out of his pocket, filled it, lighted it and puffed slowly on it until it was drawing well.

"Continuing to accept your postulate that you're not Mersey, but an alien inhabiting his mind," the doctor said finally, "I can enlarge on my theory without changing it in any basic way.

"Your world is not superior to ours, much as it may please you to believe that it is. Nature consists of a balance,
and that balance must hold true whether in Sioux City, or Mars, or in the fourth dimension, or in your world, wherever that may be. Your world is out of balance. Evidently it has been going out of balance for some time.

"Your salvation lies not in further evolution in your world--since your way of evolving proved wrong, and may prove fatal--but in a change in course, back along the evolutionary path to a society which developed naturally, with the mind and the body in balance. That society is the one you have found here, in our world. You found it pleasant and attractive, you say, but that doesn't mean you're suited to it.

"Nature's harsh rules may have operated to let you observe a way of life here that you enjoy, but to exclude you otherwise--except from a mind that is not well. In nature's balance, it could be that the refuge on this world most closely resembling your needs is in the mind of the psychotic. One conclusion could be that your race is mentally ill--by our standards, if not by yours--and that the type of person here most closely approximating your way of life is one with a disordered mind."

* * * * *

Dr. Cloyd paused. Mersey had no immediate reply.

The traveler made use of the silence to consider this plausible, but frightening theory. To accept the theory would be to accept a destiny of madness here on this world, although the doctor had been kind enough to draw a distinction between madness in one dimension and a mere lack of natural balance in another.

Mersey again seized upon the traveler's mind and spoke its thoughts. But as he spoke, he voiced a conclusion which the traveler had not yet admitted even to himself.

"Then the answer is inescapable," Mersey said, his tone flat and unemotional. "It is theoretically possible for all of our people to migrate to this world and find refuge of a sort. But if we established ourselves in the minds of your normal people, we'd be without will. As mere observers, we'd become assimilated in time, and thus extinguished as a separate race. That, of course, we could not permit. And if we settled in the minds most suitable to receive us, we would be in the minds of those who by your standards are insane--whose destiny is controlled by the others. Here again we could permit no such fate.

"That alone would be enough to send me back to my people to report failure. But there is something more--something I don't think you will believe, for all your ability to synthesize acceptance of another viewpoint."

"And what is that?"

"First I must ask a question. In speaking to me now, do you still believe yourself to be addressing Mersey, your fellow human being, and humoring him in a delusion? Or do you think you are speaking through him to me, the inhabitant of another world who has borrowed his mind?"

* * * * *

The doctor smiled and took time to relight his pipe.

"Let me answer you in this way," he said. "If I were convinced that Mersey was merely harboring a delusion that he was inhabited by an alien being, I would accept that situation clinically. I would humor him, as you put it, in the hope that he'd be encouraged to talk freely and perhaps give me a clue to his delusion so I could help him lose it. I would speak to him--or to you, if that were his concept of himself--just as I am speaking now.

"On the other hand, if I were convinced by the many unusual nuances of our conversation that the mind I was addressing actually was that of an alien being--I would still talk to you as I am talking now."

The doctor smiled again. "I trust I have made my answer sufficiently unsatisfactory."

The visitor's reaction was spoken by Mersey. "On the contrary, you have unwittingly told me what I want to know. You'd want your answer to be satisfactory if you were speaking to Mersey, the lunatic. But because you'd take delight in disconcerting me by scoring a point--something you wouldn't do with a patient--you reveal acceptance of the fact that I am not Mersey. Your rules would not permit you to give him an unsatisfactory answer."

"Not quite," contradicted Dr. Cloyd, still smiling. "To Mersey, my patient, troubled by his delusion and using all his craft to persuade both of us of its reality, the unsatisfactory answer would be the satisfactory one."

* * * * *

Mersey's voice laughed. "Dr. Cloyd, I salute you. I will leave your world with a tremendous respect for you--and completely unsure of whether you believe in my existence."

"Thank you."

"I am leaving, you know," Mersey's voice replied.

The traveler by now was resigned to letting the patient be his medium and speak his thoughts. Thus far, he had spoken them all truly, if somewhat excessively. The traveler thought he knew why, now, and expected Mersey to voice the reason for him very shortly. He did.

"I'm leaving because I must report failure and advise my people to look elsewhere for a new home. Part of the reason for that failure I haven't yet mentioned:

"Although it might appear that I, the visitor, am manipulating Mersey to speak the thoughts I wished to
communicate, the facts are almost the opposite. My control over either Mersey's body or mind is practically nil.

"What you have been hearing and what you hear even now are the thoughts I am thinking—not necessarily the ones I want you to know. What has happened is this, if I may borrow your theory:

"My mind has invaded Mersey's, but his human vitality is too strong to permit him to be controlled by it. In fact, the reverse is true. His vitality is making use of my mind for its own good, and for the good of your human race. His own mind is damaged badly, but his healthy body has taken over and made use of my mind. It is using my mind to make it speak against its will—to speak the thoughts of an alien without subterfuge, as they actually exist in truth. Thus I am helplessly telling you all about myself and the intentions of my people.

"What is in operation in Mersey is the human body's instinct of self-preservation. It is utilizing my mind to warn you against that very mind. Do you see? That would be the case, too, if a million of us invaded a million minds like Mersey's. None of us could plot successfully against you, if that were our desire—which, of course, it is—because the babbling tongues we inherited along with the bodies would give us away."

The doctor no longer smiled. His expression was grave now.

"I don't know," he said. "Now I am not sure any longer. I'm not certain that I follow you—or whether I want to follow you. I think I'm a bit frightened."

"You needn't be. I'm going. I'll say good-by, in your custom, and thank you for the hospitality and pleasures your world has given me. And I suppose I must thank Mersey for the warning of doom he's unknowingly given my people, poor man. I hope you can help him."

"I'll try," said Dr. Cloyd, "though I must say you've complicated the diagnosis considerably."

"Good-by. I won't be back, I promise you."

"I believe you," said the doctor. "Good-by."

Mersey slumped back on the couch. He looked up at the ceiling, vacantly.

* * * * *

For a long time there was no sound in the room.

Then the doctor said: "Mersey."

There was no answer. The man continued to lie there motionless, breathing normally, looking at the ceiling.

"Mersey," said the doctor again. "How do you feel?"

The man turned his head. He looked at the doctor with hostility, then went back to his contemplation of the ceiling.

"Drop dead," he muttered.

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Contents

LONGEVITY
By THERESE WINDSER

A morality tale—1960 style.

Legend had it, that many thousands of years ago, right after the Great Horror, the whole continent of the west had slowly sunk beneath the West Water, and that once every century it arose during a full moon. Still, Captain Hinrik clung to the hope that the legend would not be borne out by truth. Perhaps the west continent still existed; perhaps, dare he hope, with civilization. The crew of the Semilunis thought him quite mad. After all, hadn't the east and south continents been completely annihilated from the great sky fires; and wasn't it said that they had suffered but a fraction of what the west continent had endured?

The Semilunis anchored at the mouth of a great river. The months of fear and doubt were at end. Here, at last, was the west continent. A small party of scouts was sent ashore with many cautions to be alert for luminescent areas which meant certain death for those who remained too long in its vicinity. Armed with bow and arrow, the party made its way slowly up the great river. Nowhere was to be seen the color green, only dull browns and greys. And no sign of life, save for an occasional patch of lichen on a rock.

After several days of rowing, the food and water supply was almost half depleted and still no evidence of either past or present habitation. It was time to turn back, to travel all the weary months across the West Water, the journey all in vain. What a small reward for such an arduous trip ... just proof of the existence of a barren land mass, ugly and useless.

On the second day of the return to the Semilunis, the scouting party decided to stop and investigate a huge opening in the rocky mountainside. How suspiciously regular and even it looked, particularly in comparison to the
rest of the countryside which was jagged and chaotic.

They entered the cave apprehensively, torches aflame and weapons in hand. But all was darkness and quiet. Still, the regularity of the cave walls led them on. Some creature, man or otherwise, must have planned and built this ... but to what end? Now the cave divided into three forks. The torches gave only a hint of the immensity of the chambers that lay at the end of each. They selected the center chamber, approaching cautiously, breath caught in awe and excitement. The torches reflected on a dull black surface which was divided into many, many little squares. The sameness of them stretched for uncountable yards in all directions. What were these ungodly looking edifices? The black surface was cold and smooth to the touch and quite regular except for a strange little hole at the bottom of each square and a curious row of pictures along the top.

They would copy these strange pictures. Perhaps back home there would be a scholar who would understand the meaning behind these last remains of the people of the west continent. The leader took out his slate and painstakingly copied:

Safeguard your valuables at ALLEGHANY MOUNTAIN VAULTS Box #4544356782

THE END

Contents

THE MINUS WOMAN
By Russ Winterbotham

Red Brewer had plugged his electric razor into the lab circuit and he was running it over his pink jowls while I tried to discover what was haywire about the balance scales.

"Have you noticed," Red said above the clatter of his shaver, "how much less you have to shave on an asteroid?"

"I still shave every day," I said. There was something definitely wrong with the scales. The ten-gram weight didn't balance two five-gram weights. Instead it weighed 7.5 grams. And then, suddenly, the cockeyed scales would get ornery and the two five-gram weights would weigh 7.5 grams and the ten-gram slug would weigh what it should.

"I don't," said Red. "I shave once a week. Back on terra I shaved every day, but not here. And I don't even have a beard to show for it."

I didn't answer. There were tougher problems on my mind than whiskers, but of course Red Brewer wouldn't understand them. He was good at machinery, and with a camera, and for company on a lonely asteroid which right now was 300,000,000 miles from the earth, but he certainly wasn't a brain.

"What do you make of it, Jay?" he asked. "Oh, Mr. Hayling, I'm speaking to you."

"Maybe it's your thyroid," I said. "Shut up."

"I'm twenty-seven," said Red. "Too old to have thyroids."

"You mean adenoids."

Red growled and shut off the razor. He ran his hand over his face. "I've got a face like a school-kid's," he said. "If there was only a girl on this god-forsaken piece of rock to see it."

There were no girls on Asteroid 57GM. This place didn't have anything excepting a lonely shack with paper-thin walls made of special heat-insulating material. There wasn't a blade of grass; not a puff of wind; no soil for violets; not even a symmetrical shape, it was lopsided like a beaten-up baseball. Or at least that was what I thought until something happened to the balance scales.

The idea of sending Jay Hayling, which is me, and ruddy Red Brewer to Asteroid 57GM, was simply to check up on some figures which said that this little 10-mile chunk of rock didn't have the right mass. Twice it had been clocked on near passages to Jupiter and twice it had behaved differently, as if it had suddenly lost some of its mass. So Red and I had been sentenced to fifteen months alone in space on an asteroid just to find out that somebody had made a mistake in arithmetic.

The sonar equipment showed what kind of rock it was--iron and basalt. And I'd made borings which checked. We'd tested the speed of escape which was a good push so we had to be careful, and its force of gravity, which wasn't much. And then I'd discovered that the balance in the lab had a habit of being 25 per cent wrong one way or the other every time I tried to use it.

Red put away his razor and went through the little door leading to the living quarters. The partition was crystal clear plastic so I could see him pulling himself along by the hand rail toward the bookcase. I knew he would presently find himself something to read while I worked.
We seldom walked in the laboratory. Our muscles, conditioned by terrestrial gravity, were too strong for walking. We'd have bumped our heads on the ceiling at every step and possibly we might even have punched a hole in the roof, losing our air. So we sort of pulled ourselves along by a system of hand rails on all of the anchored desks, furniture and walls. It was like pulling yourself along the bottom of the ocean by hanging onto rocks, since the air in the lab was dense enough to support our almost weightless bodies.

I checked the scales every way I could and finally gave up. I'd tackle the problem again tomorrow. Maybe something on the asteroid, some magnetic rock or something, threw it off. I washed my hands in the laboratory sink and then, while I wiped them on a towel, glanced at Red, who was lying on his bunk reading. For the first time I noticed how skinny he was getting. Lack of exercise, I presumed. We were going to have to do something to build up our muscles again. I supposed I had lost weight just as much as he had. It would be tough to weigh ourselves here, since we had only the balance in the laboratory. Spring scales wouldn't work on the asteroid--we wouldn't have weighed enough to register, even though our mass was probably about the same as an average man's on earth.

Red put the book aside, closed his eyes and smiled. My eyes fell on the book for some reason. Then suddenly I saw a page flip over. I didn't realize at first that this couldn't happen.

There wasn't any draft in the place, I was sure of that. A draft would mean a leak in the laboratory and alarms would tell us when that happened. There was no motion, nothing to cause a page in the book to turn.

Another page turned and I was sure I wasn't dreaming. I pulled myself over to the door, opened it a trifle.

"Red!" I called softly.

"Dollie!" He was dreaming. Dollie was one of the dozen or so girls he was always talking about in his sleep.

I pulled myself to his side and punched him gently. Red woke up. "You're a hell of a guy," he said.

"Yes," I said. "You were dreaming about Dollie. But I saw something happen here and I wanted you to see it too." I pointed at the book. The pages were still now. Suddenly one of them flipped over.

"Somebody, or something is reading your book," I said.

We didn't figure it out then and I wasn't even sure that I'd made the right diagnosis, but things went on every day afterwards that left me convinced there was something else living on this hunk of rock besides Red and me. It didn't have mass, apparently, because we tried our best to touch it.

Once when it got to fooling around with the laboratory balance, Red and I encircled the balance with our arms and then squeezed together without feeling a thing.

It wasn't energy, because we tried every instrument to detect electricity, heat, light, and radio. But it was alive, because it moved. It read books and monkeyed with the lab scales.

And at last I decided that maybe _it_ had something to do with the apparent discrepancy in the asteroid's change in mass. After that I had a great deal to work on.

Red began behaving queerly too. He swore that he was getting too small for his clothing. His shoes, he said, were almost a size too large. I was too busy to check, so I put it down as a loss in weight.

We'd spent a year on the asteroid when we were due to pass Mars. So our first anniversary was spent in checking our movements with a telescope, a camera and a chronometer. We discovered our mass--or that of Asteroid 57GM--had depreciated another 25 per cent. It now had only half the mass it was supposed to have. This was too much of an error for even a grade school student.

"I'll bet some astronomers back on earth will get redder than my hair when we get home," Red said.

I shook my head. "It hasn't anything to do with their observations," I said. "It's what is happening now to you and me. We're losing mass someway."

There was only one way to check it and that was to weigh ourselves. So I rigged up a rude sort of a balance by weighing out chunks of rock until we had a mass equal to what we should weigh, placing them on a teeter-totter arrangement I rigged up in the lab.

"It'll be close enough to learn if we've lost half our mass," I said.

Red showed a weight loss equal to about 20 pounds on earth. I had gained a little weight. These figures were only relative, and dependent on whether or not the rocks we'd used on the balance had lost mass also. But something was wrong with Red and I decided to watch him carefully.

"Your scales are cockeyed," Red said. "I feel fine. Never felt better, in fact. Except that I'm lonesome ... not that I don't enjoy your company, pal, ole pal, but I'd like Dollie's better."

Something on the far side of the room caught my eye. It was along the glass partition between the lab and the living room. It might have been a reflection of some sort, because the sun was up and its beams were coming right through the transparent roof at that moment. But for a fleeting instant I thought I saw a figure there. A tall, shapely, black-haired girl, dressed in a flowing robe of orange. The next instant she was gone.
"I said I thought it might be a reflection, but I was pretty sure it wasn't. "Red," I said. "We've got company."
"Huh?"
"I'm sure of it, Red. There's somebody else here besides us."
"There's no one else. You're crazy." Red looked around the room. Then he looked at me. His gaze was sharp and penetrating.
"You can't see it now," I said. "But I'm sure I saw something. A woman. Over there." I pointed to where I'd seen the thing that might have been a reflection.
"Maybe you'd better lie down, Jay. You've been working too hard. A year out on this rock could make a man see King Solomon's harem."
"No, Red," I said. "Those funny things we saw, your book pages turning; the cockeyed balance; maybe your loss of weight. They aren't natural. Something is here and what I just saw makes me think it's human and it's trying to get in touch with us."
Red's stomach muscles squeezed with laughter and he held onto a guard rail to keep from being sent across the room by the exertion.
"What I saw was a woman, Red," I went on. Red laughed out loud and hung on again. "I could use a babe," he said. Suddenly he jerked. "Who hit me?" he asked. Across his face was a red welt, the shape of a woman's hand.

* * * * *

We called them "manifestations" after that and Red called her his ghost sweetheart, although the slap had convinced him it wasn't a ghost. Red's getting slapped was the first indication that perhaps this thing did have matter of some sort, but its ability to remain invisible made it appear that the matter wasn't the ordinary kind.

Finally I came up with some sort of an answer. It was just a crazy idea and there was no way to prove that I was right. I tried to explain it to Red, who didn't know much about atomic physics, but he seemed to get the idea.
"You see, Red, it could be _negative_ matter," I explained.
"What's that?"
"Well, you know what an electron is, I suppose, a negatively charged sub-atomic particle?"
Red nodded.
"And a proton, which is positively charged?"
Again he nodded.
"Well, scientists have learned that there could be positive electrons, as well as negative, and negative protons. In other words each sub-atomic particle has a 'minus quantity' counterpart."
"You're saying it, I'm believing it," said Red. "A guy's gotta believe something."
"Well, this leads to a great deal of speculation. If these minus quantities got together they might form a minus matter."
"You've got me in a hole, so I'm minus too."
"You don't have to understand it, but try to imagine that two universes could exist side by side, one minus, one plus, and that neither could be aware of the other. Every star, every planet and every speck of matter could have its counterpart, but neither would be aware of that counterpart's existence."
Red grinned and shook his head. "Crazy," he said.
"Yes, crazy. But dig this, supposing that some sixth sense made it possible for one of our minus counterparts to get in contact with us through extra-sensory perception."
"How'd they do it?" Red asked.
"I don't know. We don't know how to do it, but it may be that our scientific progress wouldn't keep abreast of each other. We might know more than our minus counterparts in some fields, and they might know more in others. But their special knowledge enabled them to bridge the gap briefly--long enough to see us, and watch us--"
"And read our books." Red nodded.
"And perhaps learn our language--remember you got slapped."
"I'll watch it," said Red.
"There's no reason why the gap couldn't be bridged. Science and minds have done a lot of things that looked impossible."

We went to bed on that and all night long I dreamed of negative universes, with suns like old Sol except that they shone black in bright heavens and planets of space floating in vacuums of matter. Red must have dreamed about it too, because he had a question over the dehydrated ham and eggs the next morning.
"Does that explain the loss in mass for this asteroid?"
"I think it does. Either the method our minus counterparts have in bridging the gap, or perhaps some sort of space warp that permits them to do it. At any rate enough of the minus world has been projected through to our side..."
of the equation to displace the mass of this planetoid. Our lab scales being haywire might be the result of a being's nearness to it, or something."

Red didn't digest it all, but I could see he was thinking. "I wonder what all this has to do with my whiskers," he mused.

We were busy making some further checks on the planetoid's mass later in the day when Red got a glimpse of the vision I'd seen. Red didn't take it quietly. He yelled loud and pointed.

I turned just in time to see her fade away. It was the same woman, dressed the same. But this time she had been a bit more than a vapor.

Red forgot where he was and made a dive toward her. His body shot like a bullet across the room, skimming over laboratory equipment, and his head crashed solidly against the telescope.

Red literally bounced back halfway again. Then a long thin arm seemed to reach out of nowhere and seize him by the jacket and hold him long enough to stop him.

Red drifted down to the floor, knocked cold.

* * * * *

It had happened so swiftly that I hadn't had time to move. Now I pulled myself toward Red. The arm was still there in space, and it had added a shoulder, a rather pretty shoulder. Next there was a body, clothed in the flowing orange cape, and finally a woman's head. It was the same one--the minus woman.

"It's true," I said.

The woman seemed to understand. "Yes," she said. "All that you told Red Brewer is true, Jay Hayling. For you, I am a minus woman. For me, you are a minus man. But we have bridged the gap. For the first time in eternity, plus and minus, positive and negative, can meet on even terms."

"Better not come too close," I said.

"Nothing will happen," she replied. "We are now alike." She stooped toward the fallen figure on the floor. "Help me with this child. He's unconscious."

"Child!" I said. "If he's a child, they grow 'em big in the minus world."

But as I lifted Jay off the floor I wondered if he was as big as I'd always thought. It wasn't his weight. Nothing weighed very much on this asteroid, but it was his frail body. He seemed to be a boy of sixteen, rather than a man stationed 300,000,000 miles in space.

I carried him out of the laboratory into the living quarters and placed him on his bunk. I loosened his clothing, noting at the time that he had been right about his garments not fitting him.

"You've made him lose weight," I said.

"What makes you think so?" the woman asked.

"Because every screwy thing that has happened since we came here a year ago must have an explanation."

The woman smiled. "Don't think too harshly of me." She looked very solid now. Her body had lost that tenuous look. She was no longer nebulous and cloud-like. "Certain things were necessary in order for me to proceed safely through the gap between the positive and negative worlds," she explained.

I looked at Red again. His face was smooth and I knew he hadn't shaved in more than a week. "You've made him younger," I said. "Well, he shouldn't kick at that."

The woman nodded. "I turned the young man inside out. In a moment the transition will be complete. You will be our next entrance to this universe...."

From Red's bunk came a wail. A bawl, like a tiny baby. A dying baby.

Some people die of age. Red died an infant. As for the minus woman--she was murdered on an asteroid.

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Contents

THE SERVANT PROBLEM
by Robert J. Young

If you have ever lived in a small town, you have seen Francis Pfleuger, and probably you have sent him after sky-hooks, left-handed monkey-wrenches and pails of steam, and laughed uproariously behind his back when he set forth to do your bidding. The Francis Pfleugers of the world have inspired both fun and laughter for generations out of mind.

The Francis Pfleuger we are concerned with here lived in a small town named Valleyview, and in addition to suffering the distinction of being the village idiot, he also suffered the distinction of being the village inventor.
These two distinctions frequently go hand in hand, and afford, in their incongruous togetherness, an even greater inspiration for fun and laughter. For in this advanced age of streamlined electric can openers and sleek pop-up toasters, who but the most naive among us can fail to be titillated by the thought of a buck-toothed, wall-eyed moron building Rube Goldberg contrivances in his basement?

The Francis Pfleuger we are concerned with did his inventing in his kitchen rather than in his basement; nevertheless, his machines were in the Rube Goldberg tradition. Take the one he was assembling now, for example. It stood on the kitchen table, and its various attachments jutted this way and that with no apparent rhyme or reason. In its center there was a transparent globe that looked like an upside-down goldfish bowl, and in the center of the bowl there was an object that startlingly resembled a goldfish, but which, of course, was nothing of the sort. Whatever it was, though, it kept growing brighter and brighter each time Francis added another attachment, and had already attained a degree of incandescence so intense that he had been forced to don cobalt-blue goggles in order to look at it. The date was the First of April, 1962--April Fool's Day.

Actually, the idea for this particular machine had not originated in Francis' brain, nor had the parts for it originated in his kitchen-workshop. When he had gone out to get the milk that morning he had found a box on his doorstep, and in the box he had found the goldfish bowl and the attachments, plus a sheet of instructions entitled, DIRECTIONS FOR ASSEMBLING A MULTIPLE MÖBIUS-KNOT DYNAMO. Francis thought that a machine capable of tying knots would be pretty keen, and he had carried the box into the kitchen and set to work forthwith.

He now had but one more part to go, and he proceeded to screw it into place. Then he stepped back to admire his handiwork. Simultaneously his handiwork went into action. The attachments began to quiver and to emit sparks; the globe glowed, and the goldfishlike object in its center began to dart this way and that as though striking at flies. A blue halo formed above the machine and began to rotate. Faster and faster it rotated, till finally its gaseous components separated and flew off in a hundred different directions. Three things happened then in swift succession: Francis' back doorway took on a bluish cast, the sheet of instructions vanished, and the machine began to melt.

A moment later he heard a whining sound on his back doorstep.

Simultaneously all of the residents of Valleyview heard whining sounds on their back doorsteps.

Naturally everybody went to find out about the whining.

* * * * *

The sign was a new one. At the most it was no more than six months old. YOU ARE ENTERING THE VILLAGE OF VALLEYVIEW, it said. PLEASE DRIVE CAREFULLY--WE ARE FOND OF OUR DOGS.

Philip Myles drove carefully. He was fond of dogs, too.

Night had tiptoed in over the October countryside quite some time ago, but the village of Valleyview had not turned on so much as a single streetlight--nor, apparently, any other kind of light. All was in darkness, and not a soul was to be seen. Philip began to suspect that he had entered a ghost town, and when his headlights darted across a dark intersection and picked up the overgrown grass and unkempt shrubbery of the village park, he was convinced that he had. Then he saw the girl walking the dog.

He kitty-cornered the intersection and pulled up alongside her. She was a blonde, tall and chic in a gray fall suit. Her face was attractive--beautiful even, in a cold and classic way--but she would never see twenty-five again. But then, Philip would never again see thirty. When she paused, her dog paused too, although she did not have it on a leash. It was on the small side, tawny in hue, with golden-brown eyes, a slender white-tipped tail, and shaggy ears that hung down on either side of its face in a manner reminiscent of a cocker spaniel's. It wasn't a cocker spaniel, though. The ears were much too long, for one thing, and the tail was much too delicate, for another. It was a breed--or combination of breeds--that Philip had never seen before.

He leaned across the seat and rolled down the right-hand window. "Could you direct me to number 23 Locust Street?" he asked. "It's the residence of Judith Darrow, the village attorney. Maybe you know her."

The girl gave a start. "Are you the real-estate man I sent for?"

Philip gave a start, too. Recovering himself, he said, "Then you're Judith Darrow. I'm ... I'm afraid I'm a little late."

The girl's eyes flashed. The radiant backwash of the headlights revealed them to be both green and gray. "I specified in my letter that you were supposed to be here at nine o'clock this morning!" she said. "Maybe you'll tell me how you're going to appraise property in the dark!"

"I'm sorry," Philip said. "My car broke down on the way, and I had to wait for it to be fixed. When I tried to call you, the operator told me that your phone had been disconnected. If you'll direct me to the hotel, I'll stay there overnight and appraise your property in the morning. There is a hotel, isn't there?"

"There is--but it's closed. Zarathustra--down!" The dog had raised up on its hind legs and placed its forepaws on the door in an unsuccessful attempt to peer in the window. At the girl's command, it sank obediently down on its haunches. "Except for Zarathustra and myself," she went on, "the village is empty. Everyone else has already moved
out, and we'd have moved out, too, if I hadn't been entrusted with arranging for the sale of the business places and the houses. It makes for a rather awkward situation."

She had leaned forward, and the light from the dash lay palely upon her face, softening its austerity. "I don't get this at all," Philip said. "From your letter I assumed you had two or three places you wanted me to sell, but not a whole town. There must have been at least a thousand people living here, and a thousand people just don't pack up and move out all at once." When she volunteered no explanation, he added, "Where did they move to?"

"To Pfleugersville. I know you've never heard of it, so save the observation." Then, "Do you have any identification?" she asked.

He gave her his driver's license, his business card and the letter she had written him. After glancing at them, she handed them back. She appeared to be undecided about something. "You must have the key if it's one of the places I'm supposed to appraise."

She shook her head. "I have the key, but there's not a stick of furniture in the place. We had a village auction last week and got rid of everything that we didn't plan on taking with us." She sighed. "Well, there's nothing for it, I guess. The nearest motel is thirty miles away, so I'll have to put you up at my house. I have a few articles of furniture left--wedding gifts, mostly, that I was too sentimental to part with." She got into the car. "Come on, Zarathustra."

Zarathustra clambered in, leaped across her lap and sat down between them. Philip pulled away from the curb. "That's an odd name for a dog," he said.

"I know. I guess the reason I gave it to him is because he puts me in mind of a little old man sometimes."

"But the original Zarathustra isn't noted for his longevity."

"Perhaps another association was at work then. Turn right at the next corner."

A lonely light burned in one of number 23 Locust Street's three front windows. Its source, however, was not an incandescent bulb, but the mantle of a gasoline lantern. "The village power-supply was shut off yesterday," Judith Darrow explained, pumping the lantern into renewed brightness. She glanced at him sideways. "Did you have dinner?"

"As a matter of fact--no. But please don't--"

"Bother? I couldn't if I wanted to. My larder is on its last legs. But sit down, and I'll make you some sandwiches. I'll make a pot of coffee too--the gas hasn't been turned off yet."

The living room had precisely three articles of furniture to its name--two armchairs and a coffee table. After Judith left him, Philip set his brief case on the floor and sat down in one of the chairs. He wondered idly how she expected to make the trip to Pfleugersville. He had seen no car in the driveway, and there was no garage on the property in which one could be concealed. Moreover, it was highly unlikely that buses serviced the village any more. Valleyview had been bypassed quite some time ago by one of the new super-duper highways. He shrugged. Getting to Pfleugersville was her problem, not his.

He returned his attention to the living room. It was a large room. The house was large, too--large and Victorianesque. Judith, apparently, had opened the back door, for a breeze was wafting through the downstairs rooms--a breeze laden with the scent of flowers and the dew-damp breath of growing grass. He frowned. The month was October, not June, and since when did flowers bloom and grass grow in October? He concluded that the scent must be artificial.

Zarathustra was regarding him with large golden eyes from the middle of the living-room floor. The animal did somehow bring to mind a little old man, although he could not have been more than two or three years old. "You're not very good company," Philip said.

"Ruf," said Zarathustra, and turning, trotted through an archway into a large room that, judging from the empty shelves lining its walls, had once been a library, and thence through another archway into another room--the dining room, undoubtedly--and out of sight.

Philip leaned back wearily in the armchair he had chosen. He was beat. Take six days a week, ten hours a day, and multiply by fifty-two and you get three hundred and twelve. Three hundred and twelve days a year, hunting down clients, talking, walking, driving, expounding; trying in his early thirties to build the foundation he should have begun building in his early twenties--the foundation for the family he had suddenly realized he wanted and someday hoped to have. Sometimes he wished that ambition had missed him altogether instead of waiting for so long to strike. Sometimes he wished he could have gone right on being what he once had been. After all, there was nothing wrong in living in cheap hotels and even cheaper rooming houses; there was nothing wrong in being a lackadasical door-to-door salesman with run-down heels.

Nothing wrong, that is, except the aching want that came over you sometimes, and the loneliness of long and empty evenings.
Zarathustra had re-entered the room and was sitting in the middle of the floor again. He had not returned empty-handed—or rather, empty-mouthed—although the object he had brought with him was not the sort of object dogs generally pick up. It was a rose—

A green rose.

Disbelievingly, Philip leaned forward and took it from the animal's mouth. Before he had a chance to examine it, however, footsteps sounded in the next room, and prompted by he knew not what, he thrust the rose into his suitcoat pocket. An instant later, Judith Darrow came through the archway bearing a large tray. After setting it down on the coffee table, she poured two cups of coffee from a little silver pot and indicated a plate of sandwiches. "Please help yourself," she said.

She sat down in the other chair and sipped her coffee. He had one of the sandwiches, found that he didn't want any more. Somehow, her proximity, coupled with her silence, made him feel uncomfortable. "Has your husband already left for Pfleugersville?" he asked politely.

Her gray-green eyes grew cold. "Yes, he left quite some time ago," she said. "A year ago, as a matter of fact. But for parts unknown, not Pfleugersville. Pfleugersville wasn't accessible then, anyway. He had a brunette on one arm, a redhead on the other, and a pint of Cutty Sark in his hip pocket."

Philip was distressed. "I ... I didn't mean to pry," he said. "I'm--"

"Sorry? Why should you be? Some men are born to settle down and raise children and others are born to drink and philander. It's as simple as that."

"Is it?" something made Philip ask. "Into which category would you say I fall?"

"You're in a class by yourself." Tiny silver flecks had come into her eyes, and he realized to his astonishment that they were flecks of malevolence. "You've never married, but playing the field hasn't made you one hundred per cent cynical. You're still convinced that somewhere there is a woman worthy of your devotion. And you're quite right--the world is full of them."

His face tingled as though she had slapped it, and in a sense, she had. He restrained his anger with difficulty. "I didn't know that my celibacy was that noticeable," he said.

"It isn't. I took the liberty of having a private investigator check into your background. It proved to be unsavory in some respects, as I implied before, but unlike the backgrounds of the other real-estate agents I had checked, it contained not the slightest hint of dishonesty. The nature of my business is such that I need someone of maximum integrity to contract it with. I had to go far and wide to find you."

"You're being unfair," Philip said, mollified despite himself. "Most real-estate agents are honest. As a matter of fact, there's one in the same office building with me that I'd trust with the family jewels--if I had any family jewels."

"Good," Judith Darrow said. "I gambled on you knowing someone like that."

He waited for her to elaborate, and when she did not he finished his coffee and stood up. "If you don't mind, I'll turn in," he said. "I've had a pretty hard day."

"I'll show you your room."

She got two candles, lit them, and after placing them in gilt candlesticks, handed one of the candlesticks to him. The room was on the third floor in under the eaves—as faraway from hers, probably, as the size of the house permitted. Philip did not mind. He liked to sleep in rooms under eaves. There was an enchantment about the rain on the roof that people who slept in less celestial bowers never got to know. After Judith left, he threw open the single window and undressed and climbed into bed. Remembering the rose, he got it out of his coat pocket and examined it by candlelight. It was green all right—even greener than he had at first thought. Its scent was reminiscent of the summer breeze that was blowing through the downstairs rooms, though not at all in keeping with the chill October air that was coming through his bedroom window. He laid it on the table beside the bed and blew out the candle. He would go looking for the bush tomorrow.

Philip was an early riser, and dawn had not yet departed when, fully dressed, he left the room with the rose in his coat pocket and quietly descended the stairs. Entering the living room, he found Zarathustra curled up in one of the armchairs, and for a moment he had the eerie impression that the animal had extended one of his shaggy ears and was scratching his back with it. When Philip did a doubletake, however, the ear was back to normal size and reposing on its owner's tawny cheek. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he said, "Come on, Zarathustra, we're going for a walk."

He headed for the back door, Zarathustra at his heels. A double door leading off the dining room barred his way and proved to be locked. Frowning, he returned to the living room. "All right," he said to Zarathustra, "we'll go out the front way then."

He walked around the side of the house, his canine companion trotting beside him. The side yard turned out to
be disappointing. It contained no roses—green ones, or any other kind. About all it did contain that was worthy of
notice was a dog house—an ancient affair that was much too large for Zarathustra and which probably dated from the
days when Judith had owned a larger dog. The yard itself was a mess: the grass hadn't been cut all summer, the
shrubbery was ragged, and dead leaves lay everywhere. A similar state of affairs existed next door, and glancing
across lots, he saw that the same desuetude prevailed throughout the entire neighborhood. Obviously the good
citizens of Valleyview had lost interest in their real estate long before they had moved out.

At length his explorations led him to the back door. If there were green roses anywhere, the trellis that adorned
the small back porch was the logical place for them to be. He found nothing but bedraggled Virginia creeper and
more dead leaves.

He tried the back door, and finding it locked, circled the rest of the way around the house. Judith was waiting
for him on the front porch. "How nice of you to walk Zarathustra," she said icily. "I do hope you found the yard in
order."

The yellow dress she was wearing did not match the tone of her voice, and the frilly blue apron tied round her
waist belied the frostiness of her gray-green eyes. Nevertheless, her rancor was real. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't know
your back yard was out of bounds." Then, "If you'll give me a list of the places you want evaluated, I'll get started
right away."

"I'll take you around again personally—after we have breakfast."

Again he was consigned to the living room while she performed the necessary culinary operations, and again
she served him by tray. Clearly she did not want him in the kitchen, or anywhere near it. He was not much of a one
for mysteries, but this one was intriguing him more and more by the minute.

Breakfast over, she told him to wait on the front porch while she did the dishes, and instructed Zarathustra to
keep him company. She had two voices: the one she used in addressing Zarathustra contained overtones of summer,
and the one she used in addressing Philip contained overtones of fall. "Some day," Philip told the little dog, "that
chip she carries on her shoulder is going to fall off of its own accord, and by then it will be too late—the way it was
too late for me when I found out that the person I'd been running away from all my life was myself in wolf's
clothing."

"Ruf," said Zarathustra, looking up at him with benign golden eyes. "Ruf-ruf!"

* * * * *

Presently Judith re-appeared, sans apron, and the three of them set forth into the golden October day. It was
Philip's first experience in evaluating an entire village, but he had a knack for estimating the worth of property, and
by the time noon came around, he had the job half done. "If you people had made even half an effort to keep your
places up," he told Judith over cold-cut sandwiches and coffee in her living room, "we could have asked for a third
again as much. Why in the world did you let everything go to pot just because you were moving some place else?"

She shrugged. "It's hard to get anyone to do housework these days—not to mention gardening. Besides, in
addition to the servant problem, there's another consideration—human nature. When you've lived in a shack all your
life and you suddenly acquire a palace, you cease caring very much what the shack looks like."

"Shack!" Philip was indignant. "Why, this house is lovely! Practically every house you've shown me is lovely.
Old, yes—but oldness is an essential part of the loveliness of houses. If Pfleugersville is on the order of most housing
developments I've seen, you and your neighbors are going to be good and sorry one of these fine days!"

"But Pfleugersville isn't on the order of most housing developments you've seen. In fact, it's not a housing
development at all. But let's not go into that. Anyway, we're concerned with Valleyview, not Pfleugersville."

"Very well," Philip said. "This afternoon should wind things up so far as the appraising goes."

"I'll keep in touch with you there then. All you have to do is give me your address and phone number."

She shook her head again. "I could give you both, but neither would do you any good. But that's beside the
point. Valleyview is your responsibility now—not mine."

Philip sat back down again. "You can start explaining any time," he said.

"It's very simple. The property owners of Valleyview signed all of their houses and places of business over to me. I, in turn, have signed all of them over to you—with the qualification, of course, that after selling them you will be entitled to no more than your usual commission." She withdrew a paper from one of the manila envelopes. "After selling them," she went on, "you are to divide the proceeds equally among the four charities specified in this contract." She handed him the paper. "Do you understand now why I tried so hard to find a trustworthy agent?"

Philip was staring at the paper, unable, in his astonishment, to read the words it contained. "Suppose," he said presently, "that circumstances should make it impossible for me to carry out my end of the agreement?"

"In case of illness, you will already have taken the necessary steps to transfer the property to another agent who, in your opinion, is as completely honest as you are, and in case of death, you will already have taken the necessary steps to bequeath the property to the same agent; and he, in both cases, will already have agreed to the terms laid down in the contract you're holding in your hands. Why don't you read it?"

* * * * *

Now that his astonishment had abated somewhat, Philip found that he could do so. "But this still doesn't make sense," he said a short while later. "Obviously you and the rest of the owners have purchased new houses. Would it be presumptuous of me to ask how you're going to pay for them when you're virtually giving your old houses away?"

"I'm afraid it would be, Mr. Myles." She withdrew another paper from the envelope and handed it to him. "This is the other copy. If you'll kindly affix your signature to both, we can bring our business to a close. As you'll notice, I've already signed."

"But if you're going to be incommunicado," Philip pointed out, anger building up in him despite all he could do to stop it, "what good will your copy do you?"

Judith's countenance took on a glacial quality. So did her voice. "My copy will go into the hands of a trusted attorney, sealed in an envelope which I have already instructed him not to open till five years from this date. If, at the time it is opened, you have violated the terms of our agreement, he will institute legal proceedings at once. Fortunately, although the Valleyview post office is closed, a mail truck passes through every weekday evening at eight. It's not that I don't trust you, Mr. Myles—but you are a man, you know."

Philip was tempted to tear up the two copies then and there, and toss the pieces into the air. But he didn't, for the very good reason that he couldn't afford to. Instead, he bore down viciously on his pen and brought his name to life twice in large and angry letters. He handed Judith one copy, slipped the other into his breast pocket and got to his feet. "That," he said, "brings our official business to a close. Now I'd like to add an unofficial word of advice. It seems to me that you're exacting an exorbitant price from the world for your husband's having sold you out for a brunette and a redhead and a pint of Scotch. I've been sold out lots of times for less than that, but I found out long ago that the world doesn't pay its bills even when you ask a fair price for the damages done to you. I suggest that you write the matter off as a bad debt and forget about it; then maybe you'll become a human being again."

She had risen to her feet and was standing stiffly before him. She put him in mind of an exquisite and fragile statue, and for a moment he had the feeling that if he were to reach out and touch her, she would shatter into a million pieces. She did not move for some time, nor did he; then she bent down, picked up three of the manila envelopes, straightened, and handed them to him. "Two of these contain the deeds, maps and other records you will need," she said in a dead voice. "The third contains the keys to the houses and business places. Each key is tagged with the correct address. Good-by, Mr. Myles."

"Good-by," Philip said.

He looked around the room intending to say good-by to Zarathustra, but Zarathustra was nowhere to be seen. Finally he went into the hall, opened the front door and stepped out into the night. A full moon was rising in the east. He walked down the moonlit walk, climbed into his car and threw his brief case and the manila envelopes into the back seat. Soon, Valleyview was far behind him.

But not as far as it should have been. He couldn't get the green rose out of his mind. He couldn't get Judith Darrow out of his mind either. Nor could he exorcise the summer breeze that kept wafting through the crevices in his common sense.

A green rose and a grass widow and a breeze with a green breath. A whole town taking off for greener pastures....

He reached into his coat pocket and touched the rose. It was no more than a stem and a handful of petals now, but its reality could not be denied. But roses do not bloom in autumn, and green roses do not bloom at all—"Ruf!"

He had turned into the new highway some time ago, and was driving along it at a brisk sixty-five. Now,
disbelievingly, he slowed, and pulled over onto the shoulder. Sure enough, he had a stowaway in the back seat—a
tawny-haired stowaway with golden eyes, over-sized ears, and a restless, white-tipped tail. "Zarathustra!" he gasped.
"Ruf," Zarathustra replied.

Philip groaned. Now he would have to go all the way back to Valleyview. Now he would have to see Judith
Darrow again. Now he would have to--He paused in midthought, astonished at the abrupt acceleration of his
heartbeat. "Well I'll be damned!" he said, and without further preamble transferred Zarathustra to the front seat, U-
turned, and started back.

The gasoline lantern had been moved out of the living-room window, but a light still showed beyond the panes.
He pulled over to the curb and turned off the ignition. He gave one of Zarathustra's over-sized ears a playful tug,
absently noting a series of small nodules along its lower extremity. "Come on, Zarathustra," he said. "I may as well
deliver you personally while I'm at it."

After locking the car, he started up the walk, Zarathustra at his heels. He knocked on the front door. Presently
he knocked again. The door creaked, swung partially open. He frowned. Had she forgotten to latch it? he wondered.
Or had she deliberately left it unlatched so that Zarathustra could get in? Zarathustra himself lent plausibility to the
latter conjecture by rising up on his hind legs and pushing the door the rest of the way open with his forepaws, after
which he trotted into the hall and disappeared.

Philip pounded on the panels. "Miss Darrow!" he called. "Judith!"

No answer. He called again. Still no answer.

A summer breeze came traipsing out of the house and engulfed him in the scent of roses. What kind of roses?
he wondered. Green ones?

He stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him. He made his way into the living room. The two chairs
were gone, and so was the coffee table. He walked through the living room and into the library; through the library
and into the dining room. The gasoline lantern burned brightly on the dining-room table, its harsh white light
bathing bare floors and naked walls.

The breeze was stronger here, the scent of roses almost cloying. He saw then that the double door that had
thwarted him that morning was open, and he moved toward it across the room. As he had suspected, it gave access
to the kitchen. Pauing on the threshold, he peered inside. It was an ordinary enough kitchen. Some of the appliances
were gone, but the stove and the refrigerator were still there. The back doorway had an odd bluish cast that caused
the framework to shimmer. The door itself was open, and he could see starlight lying softly on fields and trees.

Wonderingly he walked across the room and stepped outside. There was a faint sputtering sound, as though live
wires had been crossed, and for a fleeting second the scene before him seemed to waver. Then, abruptly, it grew
still.

He grew still, too—immobile in the strange, yet peaceful, summer night. He was standing on a grassy plain, and
the plain spread out on either hand to promontories of little trees. Before him, the land sloped gently upward, and
was covered with multicolored flowers that twinkled like microcosmic stars. In the distance, the lights of a village
showed. To his right, a riotous green-rose bush bloomed, and beneath it Zarathustra sat, wagging his tail.

Philip took two steps forward, stopped and looked up at the sky. It was wrong somehow. For one thing,
Cassiopeia had changed position, and for another, Orion was awry. For still another, there were no clouds for the
moon to hide behind, and yet the moon had disappeared.

Zarathustra trotted over to where he was standing, gazed up at him with golden eyes, then headed in the
direction of the lights. Philip took a deep breath, and followed him. He would have visited the village anyway,
Zarathustra or no Zarathustra. Was it Pfleugersville? He knew suddenly that it was.

He had not gone far before he saw a highway. A pair of headlights appeared suddenly in the direction of the
village and resolved rapidly into a moving van. To his consternation, the van turned off the thoroughfare and headed
in his direction. He ducked into a coppice, Zarathustra at his heels, and watched the heavy vehicle bounce by. There
were two men in the cab, and painted on the paneling of the truckbed were the words, PFLEUGERSVILLE
MOVERS, INC.

The van continued on in the direction from which he had come, and presently he guessed its destination. Judith,
clearly, was in the midst of moving out the furniture she had been too sentimental to sell. The only trouble was, her
house had disappeared. So had the village of Valleyview.

He stared at where the houses should have been, saw nothing at first except a continuation of the starlit plain.
Then he noticed an upright rectangle of pale light hovering just above the ground, and presently he identified it as
Judith's back doorway. He could see through it into the kitchen, and by straining his eyes, he could even see the
stove and the refrigerator.

Gradually he made out other upright rectangles hovering just above the ground, some of them on a line with Judith's. All of them, however, while outlined in the same shimmering blue that outlined hers, lacked lighted interiors.

As he stood there staring, the van came to a halt, turned around and backed up to the brightest rectangle, hiding it from view. The two men got out of the cab and walked around to the rear of the truck bed. "We'll put the stove on first," Philip heard one of them say. And then, "Wonder why she wants to hang onto junk like this?"

The other man's voice was fainter, but his words were unmistakable enough: "Grass widows who turn into old maids have funny notions sometimes."

Judith Darrow wasn't really moving out of Valleyview after all. She only thought she was.

Philip went on. The breeze was all around him. It blew through his hair, kissed his cheeks and caressed his forehead. The stars shone palely down. Some of the land was under cultivation, and he could see green things growing in the starlight, and the breeze carried their green breath to his nostrils. He reached the highway and began walking along it. He saw no further sign of vehicles till he came opposite a large brick building with bright light spilling through its windows. In front of it were parked a dozen automobiles of a make that he was unfamiliar with.

He heard the whir of machinery and the pounding of hammers, and he went over and peered through one of the windows. The building proved to be a furniture factory. Most of the work was being done by machines, but there were enough tasks left over to keep the owners of the parked cars busily occupied. The main manual task was upholstering. The machines cut and sewed and trimmed and planed and doweled and assembled, but apparently none of them was up to the fine art of spitting tacks.

* * * * *

Philip returned to the highway and went on. He came to other buildings and peered into each. One was a small automobile-assembly plant, another was a dairy, a third was a long greenhouse. In the first two the preponderance of the work was being performed by machines. In the third, however, machines were conspicuously absent. Clearly it was one thing to build a machine with a superhuman work potential, but quite another to build one with a green thumb.

He passed a pasture, and saw animals that looked like cows sleeping in the starlight. He passed a field of newly-sprouted corn. He passed a power plant, and heard the whine of a generator. Finally he came to the outskirts of Pfleugersville.

There was a big illuminated sign by the side of the road. It stopped him in his tracks, and he stood there staring at its embossed letters:

PFEUGERSVILLE, SIRIUS XXI Discovered April 1, 1962 Incorporated September 11, 1962

Philip wiped his forehead.

Zarathustra had trotted on ahead. Now he stopped and looked back. Come on, he seemed to say. Now that you've seen this much, you might as well see the rest.

So Philip entered Pfleugersville ... and fell in love--

Fell in love with the lovely houses, and the darling trees in summer bloom. With the parterres of twinkling star-flowers and the expanses of verdant lawns. With the trellised green roses that tapestried every porch. With the hydrangealike blooms that garnished every corner. With Pfleugersville itself.

Obviously the hour was late, for, other than himself, there was no one on the streets, although lights burned in the windows of some of the houses, and dogs of the same breed and size as Zarathustra occasionally trotted by. And yet according to his watch the time was 10:51. Maybe, though, Pfleugersville was on different time. Maybe, here in Pfleugersville, it was the middle of the night.

The farther he progressed into the village, the more enchanted he became. He simply couldn't get over the houses. The difference between them and the houses he was familiar with was subtle, but it was there. It was the difference that exists between good- and not-quite-good taste. Here were no standardized patios, but little marble aprons that were as much a part of the over-all architecture as a glen is a part of a woods. Here were no stereotyped picture windows, but walls that blended imperceptibly into pleasing patterns of transparency. Here were no four-square back yards, but rambling star-flowered playgrounds with swings and seesaws and shaded swimming holes; with exquisite doghouses good enough for little girls' dolls to live in.

He passed a school that seemed to grow out of the very ground it stood on. He passed a library that had been built around a huge tree, the branches of which had intertwined their foliage into a living roof. He passed a block-long supermarket built of tinted glass. Finally he came to the park.

He gasped then. Gasped at the delicate trees and the little blue-eyed lakes; at the fairy-fountains and the winding, pebbled paths. Star-flowers shed their multicolored radiance everywhere, and starlight poured prodigiously down from the sky. He chose a path at random and walked along it in the twofold radiance till he came to the
The cynosure was a statue--a statue of a buck-toothed, wall-eyed youth gazing steadfastly up into the heavens. In one hand the youth held a Phillips screwdriver, in the other a six-inch crescent wrench. Standing several yards away and staring raptly up into the statue's face was the youth himself, and so immobile was he that if it hadn't been for the pedestal on which the statue rested, Philip would have been unable to distinguish one from the other.

There was an inscription on the pedestal. He walked over and read it in the light cast by a nearby parterre of star-flowers:

FRANCIS FARNSWORTH PFLEUGER, DISCOVERER OF PFLEUGERSVILLE

Born: May 5, 1941. Died: ----

Profession Inventor. On the first day of April of the year of our Lord, 1962, Francis Farnsworth Pfleuger brought into being a Möbius coincidence field and established multiple contact with the twenty-first satellite of the star Sirius, thereby giving the people of Valleyview access, via their back doorways, to a New World. Here we have come to live. Here we have come to raise our children. Here, in this idyllic village, which the noble race that once inhabited this fair planet left behind them when they migrated to the Greater Magellanic Cloud, we have settled down to create a new and better Way of Life. Here, thanks to Francis Farnsworth Pfleuger, we shall know happiness prosperity and freedom from fear.

FRANCIS FARNSWORTH PFLEUGER, WE, THE NEW INHABITANTS OF SIRIUS XXI, SALUTE YOU!

Philip wiped his forehead again.

Presently he noticed that the flesh-and-blood Francis Pfleuger was looking in his direction. "Me," the flesh-and-blood Francis Pfleuger said, pointing proudly at the statue. "Me."

"So I gather," Philip said dryly. And then. "Zarathustra--come back here!"

The little dog had started down one of the paths that converged on the statue. At Philip's command, he stopped but did not turn; instead he remained where he was, as though waiting for someone to come down the path. After a moment, someone did--Judith Darrow.

She was wearing a simple white dress, reminiscent both in design and décor of a Grecian tunic. A wide gilt belt augmented the effect, and her delicate sandals did nothing to mar it. In the radiance of the star-flowers, her eyes were more gray than green. There were shadows under them, Philip noticed, and the lids were faintly red.

She halted a few feet from him and looked at him without saying a word. "I ... I brought your dog back," he said lamely. "I found him in the back seat of my car."

"Thank you. I've been looking all over Pfleugersville for him. I left my Valleyview doors open, hoping he'd come home of his own accord, but I guess he had other ideas. Now that you've discovered our secret, Mr. Myles, what do you think of our brave new world?"

"I think it's lovely," Philip said, "but I don't believe it's where you seem to think it is."

"Don't you?" she asked. "Then suppose you show me the full moon that rose over Valleyview tonight. Or better yet, suppose I show you something else." She pointed to a region of the heavens just to the left of the statue's turned-up nose. "You can't see them from here," she said, "but around that insignificant yellow star, nine planets are in orbit. One of them is Earth."

"But that's impossible!" he objected. "Consider the--"

"Distance? In the sort of space we're dealing with, Mr. Myles, distance is not a factor. In Möbius space--as we have come to call it for lack of a better term--any two given points are coincidental, regardless of how far apart they may be in non-Möbius space. But this becomes manifest only when a Möbius coincidence-field is established. As you probably know by now, Francis Pfleuger created such a field."

At the mention of his name, Francis Pfleuger came hurrying over to where they were standing. "E," he declared, "equals mc²."

"Thank you, Francis," Judith said. Then, to Philip, "Shall we walk?"

They started down one of the converging paths, Zarathustra bringing up the rear. Behind them, Francis returned to his Narcissistic study of himself in stone. "We were neighbors back in Valleyview," Judith said, "but I never dreamed he thought quite so much of himself. Ever since we put up that statue last week, he's been staring at it night and day. Sometimes he even brings his lunch with him."

"He seems to be familiar with Einstein."

"He's not really, though. He memorized the energy-mass equation in an attempt to justify his new status in life, but he hasn't the remotest notion of what it means. It's ironic in a way that Pfleugersville should have been discovered by someone with an IQ of less than seventy-five."

"No one with an IQ of less than seventy-five could create the sort of field you were talking about."

"He didn't create it deliberately--he brought it into being accidentally by means of a machine he was building to tie knots with. Or at least that's what he says. But we do know that there was such a machine because we saw its
fused parts in his kitchen, and there's no question but what it was the source of the field. Francis, though, can't remember how he made the parts or how he put them together. As a matter of fact, to this day he still doesn't understand what happened--though I have a feeling that he knows more than he lets on."

"What did happen?" Philip asked.

For a while Judith was silent. Then, "All of us promised solemnly not to divulge our secret to an outsider unless he was first accepted by the group as a whole," she said. "But thanks to my negligence, you know most of it already, so I suppose you're entitled to know the rest." She sighed. "Very well--I'll try to explain...."

When Francis Pfleuger's field had come into being, something had happened to the back doors of Valleyview that caused them to open upon a planet which one of the local star-gazers promptly identified as Sirius XXI. The good folk of Valleyview had no idea of how such a state of affairs could exist, to say nothing of how it could have come about, till one of the scientists whom they asked to join them as a part of the plan which they presently devised to make their forthcoming utopia self-sufficient, came up with a theory that explained everything.

According to his theory, the round-trip distance between any two planetary or stella bodies was curved in the manner of a Möbius strip--i.e., a strip of paper given a half-twist before bringing the two ends together. In this case, the strip represented the round-trip distance from Earth to Sirius XXI. Earth was represented on the strip by one dot, and Sirius XXI by another, and, quite naturally, the two dots were an equal distance--or approximately 8.8 light years--apart. This brought them directly opposite one another--one on one side of the strip, the other on the other side; but since a Möbius strip has only one surface--or side--the two dots were actually occupying the same space at the same time. In "Möbius space", then, Earth and Sirius XXI were "coincidental".

Philip looked over his shoulder at the little yellow sun twinkling in the sky. "Common sense," he said, "tells me differently."

"Common sense is a liar of the first magnitude," Judith said. "It has misled man ever since he first climbed down from the trees. It was common sense that inspired Ptolemy's theory of cosmogony. It was common sense that inspired the burning of Giordano Bruno...."

The fact that common sense indicated that 8.8 light years separated Earth and Sirius XXI in common-sense reality didn't prove that 8.8 light years separated them in a form of reality that was outside common-sense's dominion--i.e., Möbius space--and Francis Pfleuger's field had demonstrated as much. The back-door nodal areas which it had established, however, were merely limited manifestations of that reality--in other words, the field had merely provided limited access to a form of space that had been in existence all along.

"Though why," Judith concluded, "our back doors should have been affected rather than our front doors, for example, is inexplicable--unless it was because Francis built the machine in his kitchen. In any event, when they did become nodal areas, they manifested themselves on Sirius XXI, and the dogs in the immediate vicinity associated them with the doorways of their departed masters and began whining to be let in."

"Their departed masters?"

"The race that built this village. The race that built the factories and developed the encompassing farms. A year ago, according to the records they left behind them, they migrated to the Greater Magellanic Cloud."

Philip was indignant. "Why didn't they take their dogs with them?"

"They couldn't. After all, they had to leave their cars and their furniture behind them too, not to mention almost unbelievable stockpiles of every metal imaginable that will last us for centuries. The logistics of space travel make taking even an extra handkerchief along a calculated risk. Anyway, when their dogs 'found' us, they were overjoyed, and as for us, we fell in love with them at first sight. Our own dogs, though, didn't take to them at all, and every one of them ran away."

"This can't be the only village," Philip said. "There must be others somewhere."

"Undoubtedly there are. All we know is that the people who built this one were the last to leave."

The park was behind them now, and they were walking down a pleasant street. "And when you and your neighbors discovered the village, did you decide to become expatriates right then and there?" Philip asked.

She nodded. "Do you blame us? You've seen for yourself what a lovely place it is. But it's far more than that. In Valleyview, we had unemployment. Here, there is work for everyone, and a corresponding feeling of wantedness and togetherness. True, most of the work is farmwork, but what of that? We have every conceivable kind of machine to help us in our tasks. Indeed, I think that the only machine the Sirians lacked was one that could manufacture food out of whole cloth. But consider the most important advantage of all: when we go to bed at night we can do so without being afraid that sometime during our sleep a thermonuclear missile will descend out of the sky and devour us in one huge incandescent bite. If we've made a culture hero out of our village idiot, it's no more than right, for unwittingly or not, he opened up the gates of paradise."

"And you immediately saw to it that no one besides yourselves and a chosen few would pass through them."
Judith paused beside a white gate. "Yes, that's true," she said. "To keep our secret, we lived in our old houses while we were settling our affairs, closing down our few industries and setting up a new monetary system. In fact, we even kept our ... the children in the dark for fear that they would talk at school. Suppose, however, we had publicized our utopia. Can't you imagine the mockery opportunists would have made out of it? The village we found was large enough to accommodate ourselves and the few friends, relatives and specialists we asked to join us, but no larger; and we did, after all, find it in our own back yard." She placed her hand on the white gate. "This is where I live."

He looked at the house, and it was enchanting. Slightly less enchanting, but delightful in its own right, was the much smaller house beside it. Judith pointed toward the latter dwelling and looked at Zarathustra. "It's almost morning, Zarathustra," she said sternly. "Go to bed this minute!" She opened the gate so that the little dog could pass through and raised her eyes to Philip. "Our time is different here," she explained. And then, "I'm afraid you'll have to hurry if you expect to make it to my back door before the field dies out."

He felt suddenly empty. "Dies out?" he repeated numbly.

"Yes. We don't know why, but it's been diminishing in strength ever since it first came into being, and our 'Möbius-strip scientist' has predicted that it will cease to exist during the next twenty-four hours. I guess I don't need to remind you that you have important business on Earth."

"No," he said, "I guess you don't." His emptiness bowed out before a wave of bitterness. He had rested his hand on the gate, as close to hers as he had dared. Now he saw that while it was inches away from hers in one sense, it was light years away in another. He removed it angrily. "Business always comes first with you, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Business never lets you down."

"Do you know what I think?" Philip said. "I think that you were the one who did the selling out, not your husband. I think you sold him out for a law practice."

Her face turned white as though he had slapped it, and in a sense, he had. "Good-by," she said, and this time he was certain that if he were to reach out and touch her, she would shatter into a million pieces. "Give my love to the planet Earth," she added icily.

"Good-by," Philip said, his anger gone now, and the emptiness rushing back. "Don't sell us short, though--we'll make a big splash in your sky one of these days when we blow ourselves up."

He turned and walked away. Walked out of the enchanting village and down the highway and across the flower-pulsing plain to Judith's back doorway. It was unlighted now, and he had trouble distinguishing it from the others. Its shimmering blue framework was flickering. Judith had not lied then: the field was dying out.

He locked the back door behind him, walked sadly through the dark and empty house and let himself out the front door. He locked the front door behind him, too, and went down the walk and climbed into his car. He had thought he had locked it, but apparently he hadn't. He drove out of town and down the road to the highway, and down the highway toward the big bright bonfire of the city.

Dawn was exploring the eastern sky with pale pink fingers when at last he parked his car in the garage behind his apartment building. He reached into the back seat for his brief case and the manila envelopes. His brief case had hair on it. It was soft and warm. "Ruf," it barked. "Ruf-ruf!"

He knew then that everything was all right. Just because no one had invited him to the party didn't mean that he couldn't invite himself. He would have to hurry, though--he had a lot of things to do, and time was running out.

Noon found him on the highway again, his business transacted, his affairs settled, Zarathustra sitting beside him on the seat. One o'clock found him driving into Valleyview; two-five found him turning down a familiar street. He would have to leave his car behind him, but that was all right. Leaving it to rust away in a ghost town was better than selling it to some opportunistic dealer for a sum he would have no use for anyway. He parked it by the curb, and after getting his suitcase out of the trunk, walked up to the front door of Number 23. He unlocked and opened the door, and after Zarathustra followed him inside, closed and locked it behind him. He strode through the house to the kitchen. He unlocked and opened the back door. He stepped eagerly across the threshold--and stopped dead still.

There were boards beneath his feet instead of grass. Instead of a flower-pied plain, he saw a series of unkempt back yards. Beside him on an unpainted trellis, Virginia creeper rattled in an October wind.

Zarathustra came out behind him, descended the back-porch steps and ran around the side of the house. Looking for the green-rose bush probably.

"Ruf!"

Zarathustra had returned and was looking up at him from the bottom step. On the top step he had placed an offering.

The offering was a green rose.

Philip bent down and picked it up. It was fresh, and its fragrance epitomized the very essence of Sirius XXI. "Zarathustra," he gasped, "where did you get it?"
"Ruf!" said Zarathustra, and ran around the side of the house.

Philip followed, rounded the corner just in time to see the white-tipped tail disappear into the ancient dog house. Disappointment numbed him. That was where the rose had been then--stored away for safe-keeping like an old and worthless bone.

But the rose was fresh, he reminded himself.

Did dog houses have back doorways?

This one did, he saw, kneeling down and peering inside. A lovely back doorway, rimmed with shimmering blue. It framed a familiar vista, in the foreground of which a familiar green-rosebush stood. Beneath the rosebush Zarathustra sat, wagging his tail.

It was a tight squeeze, but Philip made it. He even managed to get his suitcase through. And just in time too, for hardly had he done so when the doorway began to flicker. Now it was on its way out, and as he watched, it faded into transparency and disappeared.

He crawled from beneath the rosebush and stood up. The day was bright and warm, and the position of the sun indicated early morning or late afternoon. No, not sun--suns. One of them was a brilliant blue-white orb, the other a twinkling point of light.

He set off across the plain in Zarathustra's wake. He had a speech already prepared, and when Judith met him at the gate with wide and wondering eyes, he delivered it without preamble. "Judith," he said, "I am contemptuous of the notion that some things are meant to be and others aren't, and I firmly believe in my own free will; but when your dog stows away in the back seat of my car two times running and makes it impossible for me not to see you again, then there must be something afoot which neither you nor I can do a thing about. Whatever it is, I have given in to it and have transferred your real estate to an agent more trustworthy than myself. I know you haven't known me long, and I know I'm not an accepted member of your group, but maybe somebody will give me a job raking lawns or washing windows or hoeing corn long enough for me to prove that I am not in the least antisocial; and maybe, in time, you yourself will get to know me well enough to realize that while I have a weakness for blondes who look like Grecian goddesses, I have no taste whatever for redheads, brunettes, or Cutty Sark. In any event, I have burned my bridges behind me, and whether I ever become a resident of Pfleugersville or not, I have already become a resident of Sirius XXI."

Judith Darrow was silent for some time. Then, "This morning," she said, "I wanted to ask you to join us, but I couldn't for two reasons. The first was your commitment to sell our houses, the second was my bitterness toward men. You have eliminated the first, and the second seems suddenly inane." She raised her eyes. "Philip, please join us. I want you to."

Zarathustra, whose real name was Siddenon Phenphonderill, left them standing there in each other's arms and trotted down the street and out of town. He covered the ground in easy lopes that belied his three hundred and twenty-five years, and soon he arrived at the Meeting Place. The mayors of the other villages had been awaiting him since early morning and were shifting impatiently on their haunches. When he clambered up on the rostrum they extended their audio-appendages and retractile fingers and accorded him a round of applause. He extended his own "hands" and held them up for silence, then, retracting them again, he seated himself before the little lectern and began his report, the idiomatic translation of which follows forthwith:

"Gentlemen, my apologies for my late arrival. I will touch upon the circumstances that were responsible for it presently.

"To get down to the matter uppermost in your minds: Yes, the experiment was a success, and if you will use your psycho-transmutative powers to remodel your villages along the lines my constituents and I remodeled ours and to build enough factories to give your 'masters' that sense of self-sufficiency so essential to their well-being, and if you will 'plant' your disassembled Multiple Möbius-Knot Dynamos in such a way that the resultant fields will be ascribed to accidental causes, you will have no more trouble attracting personnel than we did. Just make sure that your 'masters' quarters are superior to your own, and that you behave like dogs in their presence. And when you fabricate your records concerning your mythical departed masters, see to it that they do not conflict with the records we fabricated concerning ours. It would be desirable indeed if our Sirian-human society could be based on less deceitful grounds than these, but the very human attitude we are exploiting renders this impossible at the moment. I hate to think of the resentment we would incur were we to reveal that, far from being the mere dogs we seem to be, we are capable of mentally transmuting natural resources into virtually anything from a key to a concert hall, and I hate even more to think of the resentment we would incur were we to reveal that, for all our ability in the inanimate field, we have never been able to materialize so much as a single blade of grass in the animate field, and that our reason for coincidentalizing the planet Earth and creating our irresistible little utopias stems not from a need for companionship but from a need for gardeners. However, you will find that all of this can be ironed out eventually through the human children, with whom you will be thrown into daily contact and whom you will find to possess all
of their parents' abiding love for us and none of their parents' superior attitude toward us. To a little child, a dog is a companion, not a pet; an equal, not an inferior—and the little children of today will be the grown-ups of tomorrow.

"To return to the circumstances that occasioned my late arrival: I ... I must confess, gentlemen, that I became quite attached to the 'mistress' into whose house I sought entry when we first established our field and who subsequently adopted me when I convinced her real dog that he would find greener pastures elsewhere. So greatly attached did I become, in fact, that when the opportunity of ostracizing her loneliness presented itself, I could not refrain from taking advantage of it. The person to whom she was most suited and who was most suited to her appeared virtually upon her very doorstep; but in her stubbornness and in her pride she aggravated rather than encouraged him, causing him to rebel against the natural attraction he felt toward her. I am happy to report that, by means of a number of subterfuges—the final one of which necessitated the use of our original doorway—I was able to set this matter right, and that these two once-lonely people are about to embark upon a relationship which in their folklore is oftentimes quaintly alluded to by the words, 'They lived happily ever after.'

"And now, gentlemen, the best of luck to you and your constituents, and may you end up with servants as excellent as ours. I hereby declare this meeting adjourned."
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