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Amazing stories

First in Science Fiction · Since 1926

WINSTON K. MARKS

Outstanding New Story

COLD COMFORT

First In Science Fiction ● Since 1926

Amazing stories

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THE FUTURE IN BOOKS

by HARRY HARRISON

Very briefly then, this is a column of reviews of science fiction books. Not much fantasy will be reviewed and only those nonfiction books that relate directly to science fiction. I have very positive views about SF and adhere to certain critical standards that I have no intention of boring you with now. My feelings about this medium should be obvious from the reviews themselves and, if there is an overwhelming demand, I shall be only too happy to go on at length at some future date about my beliefs and prejudices. But for the moment—let us talk about the books.

On top of the pile is "The Ragged Edge" by John Christopher (Simon and Schuster, $4.50). This is a happy sight because Christopher is one of the best writers around: his "The Caves of Night," though not sf, is one of the most impressive novels of the past decade. It is too bad that "The Ragged Edge" is not in the same class, mainly because the author was licked before he started. It's the World Destroyed novel again, earthquakes this time. A new age of mountain-building starts and the world is nicely shaken up, civilization destroyed, seas drained from their present beds to cover great areas of land, etc. We've been over this ground before and, to give Christopher all credit, he does it very well. He captures us in the opening, describes the terrible quakes that shake the English Channel Isle of Guernsey and writes impressive word pictures of the results. Then what? After-the-catastrophe is just too old hat to hold anyone's attention and the book runs steadily downhill to the predictable ending. Too bad. Books from this author are too rare that one should be wasted in this maner.

(Continued on page 158)

If twinges of mortality are beginning to make you a little more than receptive to the cryogenic theories of R.C.W. Ettinger—Freeze Now, Thaw Later—then maybe the following Win Marks short will give you pause. For if—like his blunt, even outrageous narrator—you do go ahead, one day you might find yourself thawing out in a future where world population has reached 13-trillion—and where world-wide temperatures have gone up to 121 during the day and 99 at night!

COLD COMFORT

WINSTON K. MARKS

Illustrated by GREY MORROW

I remember reading stories about time-travel into the future, but they all stumbled over the paradox that the returnee to present time, by revealing what's in the future, changes the future... so what he experienced in the future was a damned lie in the first place, and how could he change the future by coming back and lying about it in the second place?

And what jerk would launch himself into the future on a one-way ticket?

As you know, the answer is ME, the first out of the multitudes who chose the long, cold nap rather than the eternity bit, and my new kidneys are doing very well, indeed thank you.

You ask, how does it feel to be the first to be thawed out and restored to the land of the living? Well, thirty-two years ago when they asked me a similar question, I told them how it felt to decide to be the first person to choose the deep-freeze. I told them it was better than nothing, and it wasn't a difficult decision at all when you had a pair of stoned kidneys and a belly full of pain.

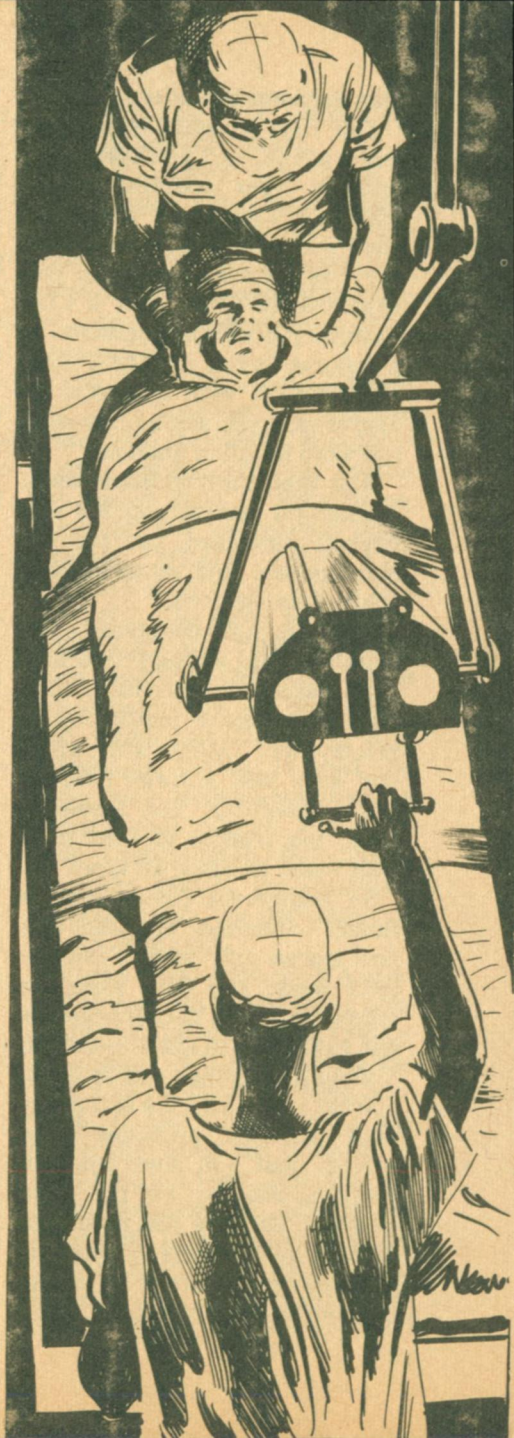
But what I've seen so far just makes me wish I *had* arrived here by a time-machine with a reverse lever. I'd take my new kidneys back to 1967 and screw up the future beyond all recog-

nition, if I could, which I'm sure I couldn't. Even the people who listened and believed me and wrote me up and published me and made a Southern California cult of me would finally ignore everything I told them, because most of what I would have to tell them they knew already and weren't vigorous enough to take any decisive action.

So this is the inevitable. This is what's happening, if you'll pardon the quaint old expression. And you want to know my impression? You have the guts to ask? Okay, I was known as blunt. They said my M.D. stood for Mean Dean, and not without reason.

If it will mitigate your discomfort, I will say that the indictment you are about to hear would more properly be directed to my own generation, but the only ones left by now are in the freezer, and I have just that amount of mercy in my heart to plead that you leave them there.

In fairness, I will acknowledge those things I find good in this brave new world, and Aldous didn't miss it by a hell of a lot. For example, it doesn't surprise me unduly that Prudential and Metropolitan inherited control instead of Ford, although I find it disgraceful that this lousy thing in Vietnam is still going on. If the day of the altruistic society has finally arrived, why are you still maintaining a nine-million-



man garrison in Eastern Asia?

You say, it could have been much worse, and you point with pride at your restraint in not engaging China and using nuclear weapons. Well, as you must very well know, the bomb you exploded in China was a CIA-inspired paperback translation of a volume called *HUMAN SEX RESPONSE,* with full color illustrations, yet, and a reassuring foreword by Allan Sherman.

And then through some weird ecumenical process which I still haven't unravelled, you ban the manufacture and dissemination of all contraceptives.

Oh, I am quite delighted in the results of your strategy! One hundred percent successful! China converted into a matriarchy, a sex-oriented Orient with king-size beds and pint-size food rations. Beautiful! Too feeble to fight, too fruitful to feed their own issue, let alone an army.

So belligerent communism is finally contained. The nine million troops only work a twenty-hour week, and both sides are armed only with 22-caliber pistols and instructed to shoot to wound. You do have things well in hand.

What really kills me is the way your domestic problems were solved, and I'm sure you will make allowances for my point of view. There is just no way to explain how it feels to wake up and discover yourself to be the only white-skinned mortal alive. Not that I have any prejudices on this score. Some of my best friends were non-whites.

Ah, what a bright, clean, sparkling world I find today. Your rivers and streams run pure, free from pollution. And we thought government guidelines could never really produce effective industry self-policing. We should have trusted science more. They were bound to come up with the solution of garbage disposal, including what to do with the non-returnable beverage bottle. You casually refer to it as atomic implosion, but I find it very impressive. I can't get over seeing a half-ton junked vehicle reduced to a slug the size of a bb, then slipping down through the topsoil under its own weight, down until it hits hardpan. A half-ton bb! How about that!

It is even more thought-provoking to consider how you have managed to support a world population of 13-trillion beings, notwithstanding the chronic food shortages in China and India. I never fully appreciated seafood until I tasted your dogfish stuffed with soy meal and served with jellyfish aspic and plankton dressing.

I am not at all astonished to discover myself among a people that has reduced its wardrobe to a jock for a man and a bra for a woman. Even in my day the open neck sport shirt and the super-abbreviated women's

skirts spelled out this trend. And I can't see how much more practical your fleece-lined muu-muus could be for cold weather. Your foot-wear is something else, however. I'm still not used to slipping around on those silly little obsidian marbles you imbed in the soles of your sandals. Give me a good old pair of roller skates any day. Of course, *in* my day we weren't clever enough to realize a good thing even after we had it. We confined the wear of roller skates to recreation.

Your music jangles me. Sounds as though everyone is conspiring to avoid harmony and rhythm, which still had a certain standing in my day. And your art! I never thought I'd yearn for a still life, but how many variations on pure pornography can you endure? Just the same, I am only now recovering from my first exposure to your local art gallery. Who the hell invented quivering pigments? If I intended to remain with your society, it would also be interesting to track down the composer of that great inscription in the sandstone over your art museum's entrance: *IF IT ISN'T EROTIC IT ISN'T EXOTIC.*

Watching a bunch of high school kids pass under such an arch was very disquieting. I'll admit that I was pleased to note that the boys were wearing crewcuts again, but the pity is that so are the girls. You couldn't tell them apart if it weren't for the jock-bra differential.

I was treated very nicely at the hospital, and I have to compliment your surgeons on my fine new kidneys. And your internists on their conquering cancer, eczema, tuberculosis, psoriasis and all.

The American Safety Council has made progress too, it would seem, with their lobby to enforce traffic regulations and reduce the speed limit to nine miles-per-hour. The old freeway signs reading, *"SLOW TRAFFIC PLEASE KEEP TO THE RIGHT,"* do strike me as somewhat ludicrous, though. Under such conditions the return of the horse-and-buggy was inevitable, and I find this charming. It is refreshing, indeed, to read the daily stock market quotations on International Buggy-Whip and hear straight-faced Dow Jones reporters explain the security's ascendancy on the popularity of the straight stick.

At the same time, it is a little sad to note the diminishing popularity of the old Western movie as a staple of the Worldwide Replay Hell-for-Leather-Vision Network. It looks like Telstar has given the world all it wants to see of the old West, and once too often, because the ratings are falling off. How anyone manages to identify with that ancient Hoot Gibson film I can scarcely believe. Even in my day we called

this genre.,. "DAMP. CAMP..'

I'll admit that now that Detroit is a business shambles, it was time to reintroduce the two-way streets. You know, with free on-street parking at both curbs, and I think your high-rise brothels with metered parking in the basement area are innovations with a future. Charge too much for the drinks, but the parking fees are reasonable.

In the light of your control of post-nasal drip, I am even disposed to treat with charity the near-total breakdown of your anti-perspirant industry, but I must say this is a considerable concession. I never did smoke tobacco, so my olfactory facilities are as un-dulled as yours. Yet while you were purifying the air from meridian to meridian planet-wide, you have replaced the impurities you removed with others very obnoxious to this revolted time-traveler. No matter where I have travelled on this glorious continent, from the Grand Canyon to the previously unoccupied hinterlands of Canada, I have smelled mainly human sweat, and this, no matter how often you wash your bodies, is something hard to get used to, even though I played basketball and developed a certain reminiscent liking for the smell of a locker-room full of overheated players, stinky sweatsocks and all.

The smell even contaminates the winds aloft, and whoever said never the twain should meet wasn't looking ahead. At least not this far. And I find the exudation and evaporation from an Oriental armpit no more aesthetic than the Occidental . . . a particularly annoying combination. Especially when a crosswise wind is blowing.

Your achievement in melting the polar ice-caps hits me two ways. Okay, so by so doing you have kept the world-*mean* temperature to 118 degreed Farenheit, with minimums at 92. If one wants to accept your premises, I can see how you justified flooding the seaboards of all continents and moving most major cities of the world inland as much as a hundred miles. What distresses me is that the world-wide temperature has crept up to 121 during the days, and 99 at nights. Now, one would think that would be enough to inhibit sex. But no! You are content to slip around in slick embrace and ignore the drip. You've simply let it get too damned hot! And every time you exhale you are making it hotter and hotter for yourself. You know all this and you keep on doing it.

By sheer technology you have kept your civilization going. Which, in a sense, is a success. But I don't like it! It stinks to high heaven. To me at least. And I have other complaints, mostly based on too many people, which at this point you enter-

tain. I look at your factories and larger offices. The block-long lines queued up at the time-clock. They have to get there two hours early in order to punch in on time. And *why wouldn't* they be striking for portal-to-time-clock pay? They're putting in their time.

But this is really rather a bit of persiflage in comparison with what I have to tell you about the real reason why I don't buy this bit. No bit of it at all!

You are a bunch of nuts who have ignored the facts of human survival on this planet.

You and your deep-breathing exercises! You and your vehicular exhaust restrictions, double afterburners and filters! Yes, I understand your technicians are working on similar devices for your horses. Little late, don't you think? But . . . luck!

How . . . *how* could a scientifically enlightened society overlook to this day the ultimate results of carbonating the atmosphere at the rate you have permitted to develop? Just because carbon dioxide is colorless, odorless and invisible, you have chosen to let it accumulate to the point that your respiration rate at sea level has had to double, and people go around saying, "Let's go inside. It's stuffy out here."

And those lime-water respirators dangling from everyone's neck, just in case you have to go down in the basement, or you happen to wander into a concentrated pool of CO2 that gets you to gasping! Well, you've eliminated one family argument, whether to vacation at the seashore or the mountains. Already, this old pair of archaic lungs must seek 2500 feet of altitude before they can breathe comfortably.

You must admit your weather and climate has really gone to hell. I'm used to looking at a barometer whose needle moves too slowly to note its motion. Now it jumps around like a yo-yo, and you read it in averages by the hour in order to know what's going on. And the prediction of what's about to happen is always "Hot and/or stormy."

Back awhile I asked your local meteorologist what had happened to the adiabatic lapse rate, and he just sneered, "You worry too much about that bleached-out skin of yours."

Which brings us to the particular piece of irony. This guy's skin was like mahogany, and yet he was only a minor official. And in a day when you boast that each year millions of Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians are crossing the color line and passing for black, this is understandable. He's too light-skinned to have status.

In my day, you must remember, the term, "Jet Set," referred

to something else, and we had yet to elect our first colored president.

Perhaps it's just as well you haven't invented a Dick Tracy wrist-radio that communicates with the past. Why try to accelerate the pace to an inevitability like your present condition? Besides, as I said, who would pay attention? Oh, some editor somewhere would be sure to headline the story: *KEY TO DESEGREGATION TOLD!* With a sub-head: *BAN THE PILL AND MAN THE BEDS.* And the lead would probably go: "Super-population of the world and clarification of the atmosphere were offered as the two-fold projects most certain to solve America's thorny Civil Rights problems . . . ."

And while one reader was reading even this far, a thousand others would be turning to the sports headlines, *THE METS WIN ONE,* and devouring every word of a two-column story.

Elsewhere in the same edition, back among the lingerie ads, which you find so hilarious these days, the science editor might expound a little on my conclusions, which need no expounding. In a time when heavy pigmentation of the skin has become a major survival factor, the ascendancy of the bloodlines that provide the heaviest pigmentation protection against old fireball up there glaring down through a crystal clear atmosphere of heat-trapping, high-carbon-dioxide content air, is not difficult to figure out. So much for the brotherhood of man. You accomplished the impossible . . . by accident! So don't take any credit for it.

You give me little confidence that you will cope with the crisis that you call the hots, which has arisen and become a major epidemic in just the few short weeks since I've been observing you. I am appalled at the rising death rate from what appears to be a relatively innocuous disease. I am even more appalled at the panic, even within your medical institutions.

The surgeon who zipped me up after my kidney bit—cute gimmick that, abdominal zippers for easy access in case of complications—this surgeon had just heard of the outbreak of the hots, which seems to have started right in this community. And he scoffed at such a rumor that an incurable communicable disease, or a communicable disease of any nature, still existed in the solar system. Rest his soul, the hots got him before any internist even cracked a book on the decadent subject of contagious diseases.

Your medics have been preoccupied by surgical transplants for so long there isn't a virologist left among them, and they can't find a single book on the generation of antibodies.

As you have learned in previous interviews, I was once Dean of Men at a medical college. So when I visited your microfilm medical library at City Hospital yesterday, I thought it wouldn't be too much trouble to compile a bibliography of the volumes you so desperately need to retrieve the practices and remedies to control your epidemic, before it wipes out mankind completely, which conceivably, it could. But the compilation wasn't easy. Whatever your medics lack in knowledge of general practice, they made up in proliferation of literature within their specialties.

You might think this is my way of thanking you for my new kidneys, and for granting my wish to return to my deep-freeze for another generation or two. I want you to know there was nothing altruistic at all in my decision. The key to quick access to vital medical information is an important legacy to you, but it's just as important to me. It adds just a shred of peace of mind to feel that some of you may, through expedited study and damned quick medical action, survive so your offspring will be around to thaw me out some decades hence.

At such a time, I expect to be exhumed with full civil and military honors as some sort of anachronistic savior of your times, who retold the story of lost immunities, antibodies . . . and found viruses. And I expect the ceremony to be conducted under the strictest conditions of quarantine this time. Population decimation should be enough of a reminder to give emphasis to my advice.

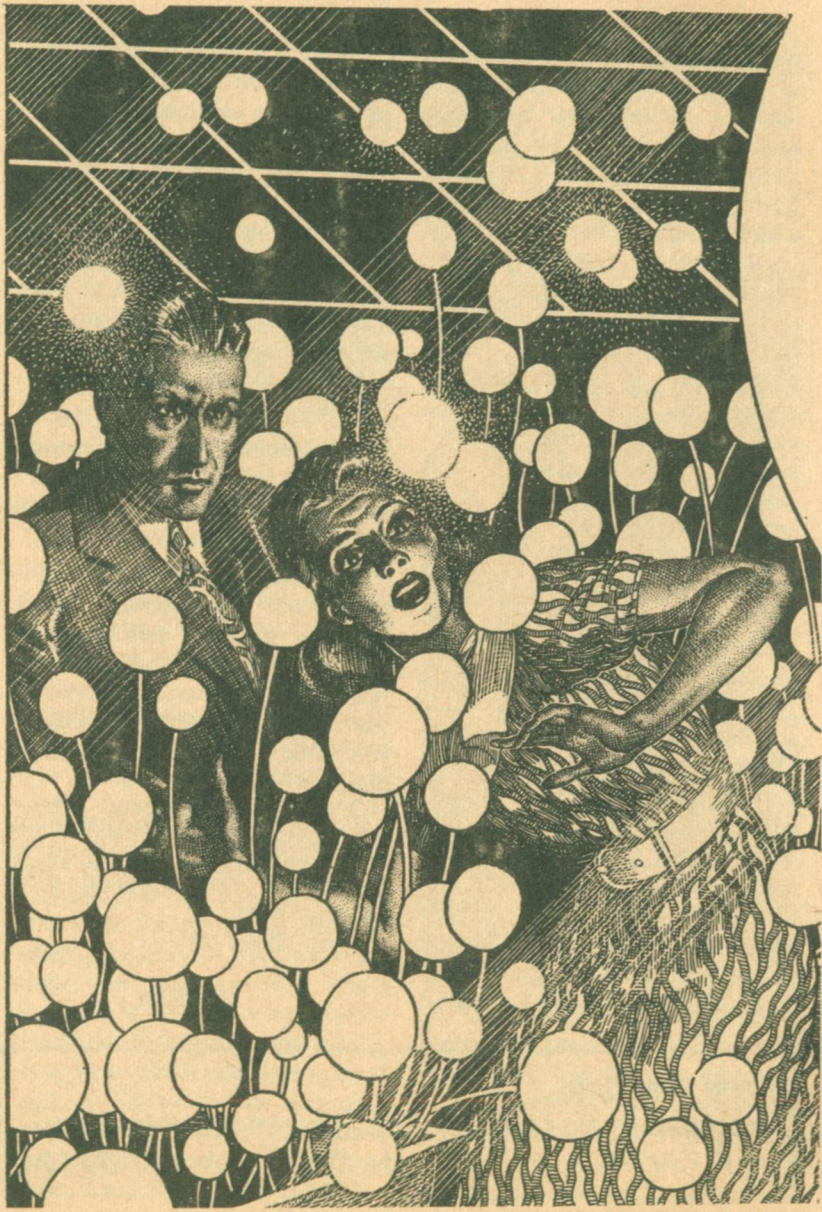
And now this old body is weary of the whole mary-ann, and I am ready for another nap, if you please. Cool it, man!

One more thing. When you've done your homework, I think you may discover you have misnamed the disease that is cutting you down. Because you run a fever with it, you call it the hots. It's what we call the common cold.

If you'll recall, the first thing I did after you took me out of the icebox was to sneeze right in your faces.

Sorry about that.

The End

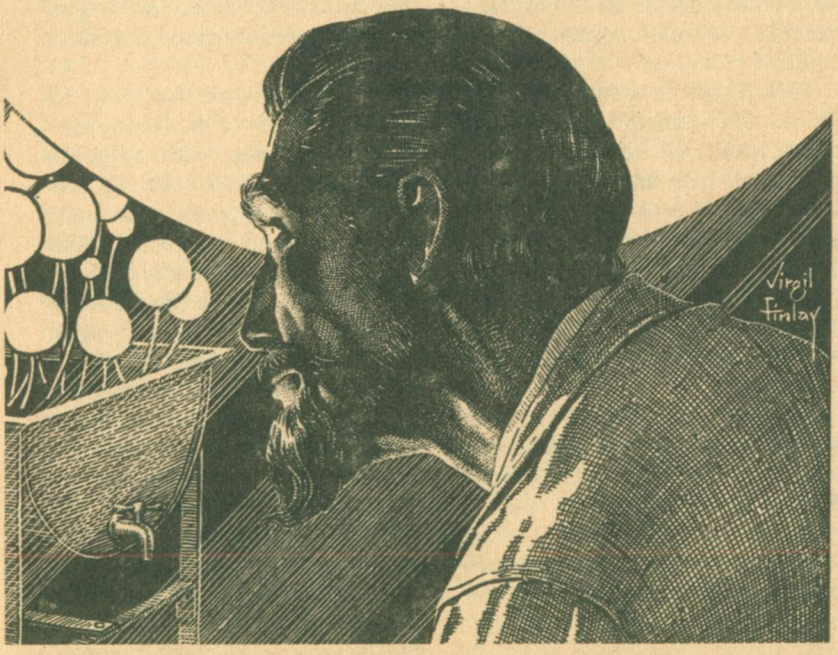


The Mad Scientist

ROBERT BLOCH

Illustrated by VIRGIL FINLAY

Although most of us know him best as a master of the macabre, a teller of shocking tales like Psycho *and "The Creeper in the Crypt," from time to time Robert Bloch has turned to straight science fiction, generally with very happy results. Such as "Daybroke," "Almost Human," "The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton," and the following serio-comic novelet in which a brash young sciencefiction writer is hoist by his own petard—because of some mushrooms he picked for a friend!*



"THE hell you say!" snorted Rick Hanson.

"No." Professor Lippert raised a pudgy hand in protest. "That isn't what I said at all. I said that the writer of science-fiction is the world's most potentially dangerous type."

Rick Hanson's eyebrows formed a sardonic hirsute arch.

"You giving me the needles?" he asked. "Just because I write science-fiction, does that mean I'm not human?"

"Probably." Lippert shook his leonine head until the grey curls dropped over his forehead. "The reactions of a science-fiction writer are not human, in the psychiatrically normal sense of the word."

Rick Hanson poured another drink. It seemed to help. "All right, pal," he drawled. "Let's you and me have a good old drunken and profound discussion about science-fiction writers, huh? Then I'll remember all the good cracks and stuff 'em into my next yarn. You're the Professor—go ahead and get brilliant on me."

Lippert's buddha-like bulk shook with suppressed mirth. "I mean it," he protested. "Men like you are dangerous."

"Lean and hungry, eh?"

Lippert smiled ruefully. "Don't rub it in. I've aged a lot in ten years and you look as fit as ever. But stick to the point. I'm still talking about you as a science-fiction writer."

"And I'm not a human being?"

"Right. Not an adult one. The science-fiction writer is dangerous because his mind knows no barriers. His imagination is not curbed by any normal rules."

Rick Hanson sat up, suddenly interested. "Rave on," he urged.

"Look at it this way. Most children grow up and learn to curb the extravagances of their imaginations. So-called 'imaginative' adults manage to confine their fantasies to recognized art forms or prescribed culture patterns. Even when fantasy is translated into anti-social behavior, it generally follows accepted psychotic lines.

"But the science-fiction writer is an exception to all these rules. He's a grownup with a child's imagination. He's an opium-smoker with a perpetual supply of opium, and no recognizable stigma or deterrent physical decay to hamper him. He's a super Jack the Ripper with a wide background of knowledge. What in others is regarded as juvenile daydreaming, or hasheesh visions, or sadistic mania is merely the accepted stock-in-trade of the average science-fictioneer.

"Now do you get what I'm driving at? You and your kind are the only ones on earth who can, with perfect safety, indulge in perpetual flight from reality—

of the most dangerous sort. You brood on destroying the world, the universe. You hatch fiendish plots, plan gruesome crimes. You create weird monstrosities, actuated by no human emotion or purpose. You cultivate your abnormality as a matter of course, seek to justify the aberrations in your stories—and worse than that, attempt to develop a *modus operandi* for your death-rays and blastors and disintegrators."

Rick Hanson raised both hands above his head and grinned. "All right, pal—you got me. I admit I'm nuts. I buried the body under the cellar floor. You'll find the head in the furnace."

"Many a true word spoken in jest." Lippert leaned forward, without returning the grin in kind. "I'm glad the army is taking your kind into G.I. units. Better to have your imaginations working for authority than against it.

"But I'm just afraid that when the barricades are built, science-fiction writers will stand on them in the van—armed with deadly weapons of their own creation. Science-fiction writers, if they ever awaken, will stop writing horrible fiction and start making history. Horrible history."

Rick still grinned, but he wasn't listening. He was studying Lippert, in disappointment.

His old school friend wasn't a good professor at all. He was too fat for the part. His pudgy face was too benign. He had no charming eccentricities. He didn't seem to be fanatical. His language was too commonplace, his word-choices too non-technical. And he didn't marshall his arguments with the scholarly logic Rick would employ if he were writing him into a story.

Rick the fantasy-writer examined Professor Lippert and discarded him. No possibilities here.

And then, Sheila walked into the room.

Sheila was something different.

Sheila was young, slim, an angel with a halo of copper hair.

Her eyes sparkled—either in appreciation of her husband's argument, or in admiration of Rick.

Yes, Sheila was definitely in character. Just the type for a heroine. The old Professor's girl-wife in one of those triangle plots.

Rick lost no time in mentally casting himself in the hero's role. Lippert, of course, would be getting the short end of the triangle. "And another thing." Rick heard the words and realized, with a jolt, that Professor Lippert was still hammering away with his heavy-handed humor.

"And another thing—I've got a personal score to settle with you science-fiction writers. Look what you do to professors like myself in your yarns! According to you, we're all a bunch of crack-

pots. Either we're elderly eccentrics with a lot of absent-minded mannerisms or we're mad scientists. Do I look like a mad scientist? I'll leave it to Sheila to decide."

The girl in the doorway stepped forward and put her arms around Lippert's neck. Rick watched the play of her slim fingers, wondered if they would be warm to the touch or cool and soothing. Rick looked at her sensual mouth as it curved in a smile. No question there—that mouth would be hot. Hot, and clinging.

The words evoked other images in Rick's brain, but he maintained a sardonic smile. Sheila spoke.

"Of course you're not a mad scientist, darling," she giggled. "Except when you lose a collar-button or something."

Her eyes met Rick's. "On the other hand. I've been listening to your little discussion, and I'm inclined to agree with you about science-fiction writers. They *are* dangerous, I'm sure."

She didn't sound very afraid to Rick, and what he read in her eyes was not fear, but a challenge.

"Why would I be dangerous?" Rick asked calmly. "After all, Lippert and I are good friends. We went to school together ten years ago. He drifted into this and I went into writing. But I think our interests are still similar. I know him and he knows me. Where's the big danger?"

"Plagiarism."

"What do you mean?"

"I know you writers," Sheila laughed. "I'm willing to bet you'll try to steal my husband's ideas for your stories."

Rick, gazing at her, knew very well that if he wanted to steal anything of her husband's, it wouldn't be his ideas. But he remained bland.

"Wasn't aware he had any ideas," he said, pitching his voice to mock sarcasm.

"Darling!" Sheila stared at Professor Lippert. "Don't tell me you've been talking to Rick all this time and haven't even mentioned your hydroponics?"

"His *what?*"

"His hydroponics! You know—water gardening. He's gone positively dizzy over it. We have the whole lab rigged up with the apparatus. Usually all he does is buttonhole visitors about his hobby. Perhaps he had a hunch himself that you'd steal his theories."

"Quit kidding, my dear." Lippert rose from the chair. "I'm not worried about Rick, here. Hydroponics is a definite science. And there's no science in Rick's yarns. Matter of fact, I doubt if he'd understand my work."

Rick took the ribbing in good grace, returned smile for smile.

"Now I'm interested," he said. "What's with your hydro-whatever-it-is?"

"You see?" Lippert smirked

triumphantly. "Told you he doesn't even know what hydroponics might be."

"Of course, I've got a few hunches." Rick stared at Sheila and forced an elaborately casual tone of voice as he drawled on.

"I imagine you are referring to what is known as chemiculture, or water-culture of plant life. This method of growth employs a large tank of metal, wood, glass or concrete—the material does not matter if the tank is watertight. The tank is generally covered with a perforated plate holding a foot or more of sawdust, shavings, excelsior, or peat moss. Above this layer is a rack or frame trellis arrangement to guide the growth of the plant organisms.

"The tank is filled with water, properly aerated by a syringe or pressure pump, and the water contains chemicals and salts of elements, placed there in correct proportions to insure the growth of the seeds used.

"Among common ingredients are auxin, the plant growth hormone; boron, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium, nitrogen, sulphur—and other forms of nitrates, sulphates and phosphates, depending on the formula required for the growth of a particular variety of plant.

"The seeds are placed in the shavings on the rack above the tank. Roots, naturally, grow down until they are suspended in the liquid from which they derive nourishment. Growth occurs due to a process of capillary attraction.

"Experiments have been made with electricity, with ultra-violet and infrared rays. Budding and grafting are accepted techniques in the process, and by employing high temperatures and extra chemicals, a number of amazing hybrids and monstrosities can be produced at will.

"But generally, hydroponics merely accelerates speed of growth, size of the plant organism, and stimulates profusion."

Rick stopped and made a mocking bow. "I rest my case," he murmured.

Lippert's mouth formed an astonished oval. Sheila brushed coppery curls from her forehead and giggled.

"I guess he told you that time, honey," she said.

Professor Lippert simulated despair. "After such a lecture, a visit to the laboratory is mere redundancy," he told Rick.

"Like to see it anyway."

"Come on, then." Lippert bustled ahead in a fatherly fashion as Rick and Sheila brought up the rear. At least Rick thought of Lippert's movements as "fatherly." He wondered if the same idea wasn't shared by the girl. Surely, after comparing her husband with himself, she couldn't help but see that Lippert was getting to be an old man. And—

Abruptly, Rick forced the notion away. Lippert was carrying on a running tirade as they moved down the hall towards the laboratory door.

"—must admit you fooled me completely. Never knew you had to have an actual scientific basis of knowledge for those nightmares you dream up. Of course, while you've given the rudimentary explanation of hydroponics, you haven't even touched the theoretical aspect—the really significant points.

"Do you realize what hydroponics will mean to the human race? Right now it's all experimental dabbling, but in a few years, with large-scale development, hydroponics will actually revolutionize our way of living. Matter of fact, it will exercise greater potentialities for change than the invention of the steam-engine."

"Who's dreaming now?" Rick asked.

"It's no dream, my lad. The essential fact hydroponics brings forth is that plant life can be controlled. Utterly controlled.

"Man has always been chained to the soil. His life pattern, his culture, his basic philosophy has been eternally earth-bound. Hydroponics brings true relief, new freedom to all humanity! Freedom from manual labor, for plants grown hydroponically require only a minimum of care. Freedom from the very laws of Nature—for plants can be grown anywhere, in any climate, all the year round. Hydroponic planting will give you bananas at the North Pole."

"And bananas at the North Pole brings the new Utopia," Rick chuckled. "I get it."

"Don't say such things," Sheila chided him. "He's such a fanatic he might cut your throat." She pressed Rick's arm as though in warning, but her slim fingers remained on his left bicep as Lippert unlocked the laboratory door.

"That's not what I mean," Lippert answeed. "Can't you see the possibilities? We'll get better food, cheaper food—for the whole world. Think of the social implications! No longer will four-fifths of the population be reduced to agrarian slavery. The coolie hordes of the east, the peasantry of Europe, freed at last from their earthly bondage, will be able to attain their rightful status as mature human beings. No more hunger, no more want, no more caste system!

"Think of the eugenic possibilities! A proper diet for all! Scientifically-controlled nutrition; with proper nourishment bred into the vegetables and fruit. Disease will be banished—"

"Who writes your stuff—Henry Wallace?" Rick winked at Sheila. She winked back. Rick shook his head in feigned despair. "Don't understand you, Lippert—you always talk in exclamation points and italics."

"You always talk," Lippert rejoined, shortly. "But step in and see for yourself."

They entered the laboratory proper.

Professor Lippert, when not engaged at the University, had made good use of his time. He had chosen to house his hobby in an actual greenhouse, converted from the left wing of the building.

Here, under a transparent roof, set against the background of glassed-in walls, stood the hydroponic equipment which constituted Lippert's botanical laboratory.

A row of tanks stood against the farther walls, each carefully segregated from its fellows. Rick noted the details; the thermometers, pressure-gauges, aeration pumps, and other apparatus. He saw the charting table before each tank, littered with scribbled notes and calculations.

Over against the near wall was a huge rack filled with bottles and stoppered decanters containing liquids and powdered chemicals. The table below it was strewn with utensils for the measurement and treatment of the substances employed.

But a single glance sufficed Rick for the moment. He stared at the plants.

Rising from the tanks in nodding rows, the bulbous heads of gigantic vegetables seemed to peer and stare through the moist heat of the glass-enclosed jungle. Flowers extended petals like the livid lips of Ubangis, thrust forth flaming dragon's tongues from ensanguined mouths.

Rick's imagination kindled at the sight. Giant vegetables! Monster plants! Yes, and you could create hybrids at will. Monstrosities.

Something of his thoughts seeped through his intent stare, for Lippert suddenly laughed.

"I know what you're thinking! You're looking at my cabbages and squash and wishing I had human heads growing in their place. You're wondering why I haven't tried to produce mutants and biological sports.

"You're thinking about a plot, aren't you?"

Rick nodded. "Yes," he muttered. "That's one reason I came up for a visit, you know. I wanted to get a plot from you."

He turned to Sheila. The girl stood quite close, and her arm brushed his. He tried to read her smile as Lippert chuckled beside him.

"I know just what you're thinking about, too," Lippert persisted. "What you're cooking up runs something like this.

"Typical mad scientist, interested in hydroponics, gets Venus fly trap or some invented variant of a carnivorous plant, and raises it hydroponically. Result—the plant becomes seven or eight feet

tall in short order; just the right size to eat the hero alive when he comes to pay court to the scientist's daughter. In a vicious battle, during which the laboratory is wrecked, the hero feeds the mad scientist to the giant fly trap and runs off with the scientist's daughter. Right?"

Rick shrugged slowly. "Maybe," he said. "You're pretty close." Again he smiled at Sheila.

Lippert was close at that, Rick realized. It was just the plot he'd had in mind, except for one detail. He wasn't thinking about using a scientist's daughter—he was thinking of a scientist's wife.

Now, all he needed was the fly-trap.

Rick put on his slack suit and did things to his black hair. He grinned at his reflection in the mirror. The reflection grinned back.

"Not bad," he said. "Not bad at all."

The verdict covered more than his appearance. He was thinking of the way he was making time with Sheila.

She was taking him on a "picnic" this afternoon—just a little basket lunch affair on the bluff above the river outside of town.

Lippert was up at the University. Faculty meeting had been announced at the last moment, and he'd found it necessary to go. The picnic could have been postponed. But Sheila hadn't postponed it. That meant she was glad to be alone with him.

A nice romantic setting . . . a picnic in the woods . . .

"Ready?"

Sheila stuck her head in the bedroom door with an impudent toss of her curls. In her gingham play suit she looked almost like a little girl. Almost—but not quite. Rick appreciated the differences.

"Uh huh," he said. "Let's go."

They went. Rick carried the basket. Out of the house, down the side street, across a lot to the winding country road leading to the river-bank and the bluff above.

Sheila clasped Rick's free hand as they swung along. It was an artless gesture, deliberately calculated. Both of them were playing the game now; indulging in the most minute of small talk, but losing no nuance of expression, no tactile gradation of bodily contact.

Rick's grin was a permanent fixture now. This was going to be easy—and very pleasant. A casual affair, no harm done. He'd make the proper overtures when they reached the bluff and spread their lunch. Better not use the "I love you" theme. That was much too serious a note. He'd tell her that she was attractive, instead. That he found her stimulating. Yes. That was the cue. Stimulating. An inspiration. The old line. And then—

He was still waiting for the mo-

ment as they reached the top of the bluff. Panting slightly from the climb, Rick surveyed the river stretched below. The setting was an idyllic pastoral. It might have been Grecian if the landscape had not been marred by the cluster of University buildings to the left, and the dotted dwellings comprising campus-town that lay within the shadow of the academic halls.

Rick turned his back on civilization and began to contemplate the beauties of nature. Sheila, now, bending on one dimpled knee as she spread out the tablecloth. The flaming aureole of her hair swept forward, and a curl brushed his forehead.

Now was the time. He'd take her in his arms and make with the hearts and flowers. She'd put on the surprise act, fake a little resistance, and then everything would be rosy. Rick had it all figured out.

So he reached for her, and she closed her eyes and fell into his arms and whispered, "Darling—I love you."

Then she was kissing him, and Rick held her tight and close, and she kept whispering, "Rick, I love you so, I love you so!"

It wasn't supposed to be this way at all, but Rick didn't object. After that first kiss he had no resistance left. The second kiss removed scruples as well as resistance. And the third kiss did things to his sanity, so that Rick found himself murmuring, "I love you too—Sheila, darling—"

The dialogue was definitely corny. But somehow, it seemed to carry conviction.

And there was so much to talk about, so much to confess and to confide. Sheila told him about Lippert; how he bored her, how she despised his heavy-handed pleasantries, his pedantic mannerisms, his middle-aged romanticism.

Rick, in return told her that her hair was a splintered shaft of sunlight, her eyes twin glimpses of a dream, her lips a fountain of eternity. He hoped he'd remember some of the stuff to write down later. But at the moment he was quite content.

He readily agreed that Lippert was a bore, and that he, Rick, was wonderful. In all modesty he admitted that Sheila's opinion of his charm and talent was wholly justified by the facts.

"I feel as though I've always known you," the girl sighed, nestling in his arms. "I've read your stories ever since I can remember. I always wanted to meet you. I knew you'd be like this—clever, and whimsical, and—"

Rick was momentarily irritated when she hesitated. He could have thought of a dozen descriptive words to add.

But irritation faded. Sheila was murmuring on.

"Take me away with you, dar-

ling," she pleaded. "Let's get out of here, now."

It was just the type of thing Rick had meant to avoid. No scenes, no dramatics, no rash moves of any kind. And yet—she loved him. And she was a gorgeous armful. Rick hesitated a moment.

"But what about Lippert?"

"He has his work. He doesn't care about me, I swear it! He buries himself in that laboratory of his, with those awful plants. I've tried to understand, but it's no use. Don't you see, Rick? I'm young, I'm like you, I want fun and excitement and —"

It was strictly soap-opera, but Rick ate it up. And loved every word of it.

A momentary flash of common-sense intruded.

"Let's try to think this thing out, darling," said Rick. He sat up and watched Sheila pin up her hair.

"It's all very well to talk about running away and starting a new life. But this isn't the second act of a play. We don't want to start a lot of fuss and unpleasant scandal. Whatever we do, we'll do quietly and sensibly, after planning it out. After all, I'm staying here through the end of the week."

"End of the week? That reminds me." Sheila became abruptly practical. "We're throwing a party for you Saturday evening, you know."

"Party? I didn't know."

"His friends. From the faculty, of course. And their foolish wives. It'll be an awful bore, but we'd planned it before you came. Now we'll have to go through with it, so he won't suspect anything."

Rick helped himself to a hard-boiled egg and balanced it delicately on two fingers. When he spoke his voice was low.

"Uh—what do you think he'd do if he—suspected?"

"Darling, don't worry. He's never been the suspicious type, or jealous either. We could be kissing right under his nose and he'd still putter around in that lab of his. But what are we talking about? He isn't going to suspect. The trouble with you is you're thinking of what would happen if you were writing one of your stories. It's just the way you look at things. He was right, you know. You'd picture him as one of those mad scientists. He isn't at all mad—just dull.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

There was only one answer to this last question. As Sheila extended her arms, Rick forgot about the hardboiled egg and went into love's old sweet song.

It was some time later that they became aware of the gathering twilight.

"We'll be late," Sheila whispered. "Darling, from now on we must be careful. We'll have to decide what we're going to do,

and meanwhile he can't be allowed to see that anything is wrong. Let's think of an excuse for staying out here all this time."

"Shall we gather some flowers?" Rick suggested.

"No—wait! I've got a better idea. Let's pick some of these mushrooms for dinner."

The girl indicated a nearby cluster of mushrooms, interspersed with puffballs, fringing the border of the bluff beneath the trees.

Rick glanced at the large red-topped growths and shook his head.

"For a scientist's wife and a science-fiction writer's sweetheart you aren't very well educated," he chuckled. "If we gather these for dinner he certainly will suspect. You see, honey, these mushrooms are poisonous."

"How do you know?"

"Simple botany. Note the reddish tops. *Aminita muscaria.* Most deadly of them all. The poison works peculiarly, destroying the red corpuscles. In a word, it turns your blood to water. Death results in a few days after horrible suffering. There is no antidote."

Sheila shivered. Then she giggled. "Maybe we'd better pick some anyway."

Rick stared at her, hard. "That's not the way," he murmured. "That's not the way."

But as they picked up the lunch basket and descended the slope of the bluff, Rick glanced back. The round, bloated mushroom tops nodded like tiny heads as though in agreement with his secret thoughts . . .

"Got your plot yet?"

Professor Lippert glanced up absently from his lab table as he decanted a calcium solution.

Rick shrugged. "I don't know," he confessed. "I think I'm on the right track."

"Going to do a yarn about hydroponics?" asked Lippert. "Want any special information?"

"Why?"

"Just asked. I'm expanding, you know."

"Expanding?"

Lippert swung around on his stool. "Yes. The tanks out here are all filled. I'm putting two new ones in the cellar. Going to try something with puffballs. Be glad to explain my methods as I go along."

Rick shook his head. "I'm not going to write about hydroponics," he declared.

"Well, I don't know where else you'll find any inspiration around here. I admit I've been too busy to see much of you these past two days, and I'm sure Sheila's company is pretty boring. Tells me she's giving a party Saturday. Well, you might find a few quaint character types in that assemblage. Or have you taken up my suggestion about the mad scientist."

Lippert chuckled genially and slapped Rick on the back. "Cheer up," he said. "I think I know what's troubling you."

Rick blinked. "What do you mean?"

Lippert's voice was soft. "Sheila. She's making a play for you, isn't she, boy?"

"Why—you—I—"

"Don't bother!" Again the chuckle, a bit self-conscious this time. "I'm not blind, you know. And after being married to the woman for five years, I ought to know something about her. You aren't the first victim, by any means. She's bored. Doesn't seem very interested in my work, or in me, for that matter. So she plays around. I hope you haven't taken her seriously."

Rick thought it best to do a little chuckling himself. Inner tumult was stilled as he met Lippert's level gaze.

"Matter of fact, that's what I meant when I said I was getting an idea for a story. Sheila would make a great character; don't you think so?"

"Perhaps. Though what you want to write about a spoiled, selfish woman for I don't know. And where's your plot? If I were a jealous husband, now—"

"That would help." Rick smiled. "That, and a scientific angle of some sort. But we'll work it out, somehow."

"Yes." Lippert turned to his decanting once more. "Better run along and study your source-material now, Rick. I've got work to do."

"Maybe you're making a mistake," Rick said, softly. "Maybe you ought to be applying your efforts to another field."

"Meaning what?" The pudgy Professor wheeled around on his lab stool.

"Sheila isn't the only character I've studied. I've been watching you. Don't you think that if you devoted more time to her, developed common interests—"

"Quite the match-maker, aren't you?" Lippert sighed. "It's no use, Rick. She and I are worlds apart."

Now was the time. Rick took a deep breath. He hoped desperately that he'd put it over. He had to. He opened his mouth.

"Then why don't you divorce her?" he asked, striving to keep his voice pitched low. "If she's what you say she is, there isn't much hope of salvaging anything from your marriage. You're both intelligent people. Why not lead your own lives without restrictions? You can work without worrying and she can—well, she can find the companionship she needs."

Lippert frowned.

"Quit talking like a writer," he said. "This isn't some cheap love-story plot you're working out. It happens that I don't want to divorce Sheila. I need her to man-

age the house, take care of social duties here at the University."

His frown deepened incongruously as a curious smile creased his lips. "Besides, it amuses me to watch her squirm," he confessed. "I find it relaxing to contemplate her little deceptions. You might just as well forget your sociological impulses, Rick. I'll never divorce Sheila."

"Suit yourself, pal." Rick shrugged. "Merely a suggestion."

Rick left the laboratory. Once outside, inward tumult seethed upwards in boiling rage.

He had thought he was so clever in handling this affair. But Lippert had known all along! He had known, and laughed about it—laughed at him!

And Sheila was probably laughing, too. This wasn't the first time, Lippert said. And he had come along, actually fallen hook line and sinker for that "take me away from it all" line of hers.

Angrily, Rick strode into the living room. Sheila looked up from the davenport as he entered and put down a notebook.

"Darling—what's the matter?" she whispered.

Rick began to tell her, in no uncertain terms.

Then Sheila cried. She cried, wringing her hands like a hurt and pitiful child. Great sobs racked and shook her girl-body.

"The beast!" she sobbed. "And you—believed him! Rick, how could you? I love you—you're the only one I've ever told that to—look at me, Rick—look at me—"

So of course Rick looked at her and of course he took her in his arms and of course the first caress of consolation became an embrace of glowing ardor.

"Let him come in," Sheila murmured. "Let him see us, if he likes. I don't care, as long as you're here. Oh, darling—"

Caution conquered and Rick released the girl as the maid's footsteps sounded in the outer hall.

They were sitting there primly when the maid entered. Rick was lighting a cigarette and Sheila studied the list on her lap.

"Did you finish with the list, m'am?" asked the maid. I'm to order the things for the party this afternoon."

"It's all done, except for the liquor," Sheila said. "I'm running into town to buy that myself. Shaw's is the only place where you can still get gin, and Professor Lippert won't touch anything but a Tom Collins."

She turned to Rick with a covert smile. "Want to come along?" she asked.

Rick shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I'm going to take a walk. Want to work out my plot. Yes, that's it."

He left the room quickly.

It always happened that way with Rick. A story would take weeks to jell. All the elements had to be arranged subconsciously. And then a single chance word or phrase would resolve the situation and a plot would seemingly spring fullblown into being.

Now, after just three days, it had happened again. Everything had whirled around. The Professor's ribbing about the scientist and his daughter and the hero. The scene on the bluff. Lippert's sly admission of his wife's infidelities. And Rick's own picture of himself and Sheila as hero and heroine, with Lippert as the villain who must be removed. Then there was that insidious suggestion of Sheila's about the mushrooms. He had tried to reject the thought, but after Lippert's mocking he knew what he must do. The great question was—how to do it and get away with it?

Then Sheila had supplied the word necessary to complete the plot. The word and the phrase.

It echoed now, as Rick toiled up the slope towards the bluff.

"Gin," was the word. The phrase—"Professor Lippert won't touch anything but a Tom Collins."

The *aminita muscaria,* most deadly of them all. The poison works peculiarly, destroying the red corpuscles. Turns the blood to water. Death results in a few days, after horrible suffering. There is no antidote.

And the poison is . . . *undetectable.*

You pick the mushrooms and macerate them, decant the poison and place it in a Tom Collins.

Simple. Undetectable.

Rick smiled as he neared the bloated cluster against the edge of the bluff.

You pick the mushrooms . . .

Where do you macerate the mushrooms? Where do you decant the poison?

Not in the greenhouse laboratory. Anybody might walk in. You must choose a more deserted part of the house, take the chosen bottle of gin along, and make certain that it reaches your intended victim only. Rick had the latter move figured out. He'd hide the bottle, sneak out to the kitchen during the party on Saturday, and mix a special drink for Lippert. If Lippert was ill immediately, the crowd would blame it on over-indulgence.

But this business of macerating the mushrooms, now . . .

He thought about it all the way back to the house, while his bulging jacket-pockets brushed his thighs.

Then, as it always did, inspiration came suddenly as he remembered another phrase.

Lippert had told him he was putting two extra tanks in the cellar. If he had, there would be

laboratory apparatus down there, along with the chemicals. He could macerate the mushrooms, decant, fill his bottle and return undetected. It was unlikely that anyone would look for him in the basement.

Rick hastened into the house. The maid was in the kitchen. Sheila had just returned, left her gin on the hall table, and was upstairs taking a bath. Rick heard the water being drawn. A glance down the hall showed that Lippert was still in his lab.

Rick made for the cellar stairs. He groped along a hall, found a light. A large room to the left proved to be the improvised hydroponics laboratory. Rick stared through a glassed-in slit set high in the oak door and saw the empty tanks. There was another lab table with a stock of chemicals and utensils.

He entered hastily, turned on the light. He began to dump the mushrooms from his pockets and hunted around for the necessary apparatus.

Then—almost as if on cue—footsteps sounded on the stairs above. Rick heard the ponderous tread, recognized it.

There was no time to cram the mushrooms back into his jacket-pockets. He could only sweep them under the table. Rick kicked an unopened box of bottles into place, hiding the red-topped mushrooms, just as Lippert entered the chamber.

"So you're taking a look at my new lab after all," Lippert said. "Like it?"

"I don't know. After all, you haven't started to work here yet."

"Well, I ought to be able to show you something in a couple of days," Lippert answered. "I'm going to start experiments tonight. You'll notice this room is heavily insulated. I can control the heat better. Have a separate heating unit—want to get it up to a constant of eighty in here. Ought to work well with some new solutions I've got in mind. You see, I'm taking your advice. Going to dabble with hybrids a bit." Professor Lippert glanced at his watch. "Say, it's nearly dinner time. Let's get going."

He ushered Rick from the room. Rick bit his lip as the Professor stooped and inserted a key in the door. It locked with a sharp click.

But there was nothing to do but put a brave face on the matter and go upstairs with the man he meant to kill, eat dinner with his future widow, and chat merrily of other things.

Lippert didn't seem to notice. But Sheila was oddly silent during dinner. Did she suspect? How could she?

"Must leave you two," the Professor announced, pushing his coffee-cup away. "Going to get started tonight. I imagine you can find something to occupy your time."

The hidden leer in his eyes mad Rick wince.

But he had no time to muse. For Sheila held his arm and dragged him out on the porch.

"Rick," she said. "This afternoon—I did something."

"What do you mean?"

"Come here."

She pulled him to the edge of the porch, stooped down and brushed aside a pile of leaves in the shrubbery.

Rick stared down at a handful of red-topped mushrooms. Then he looked at Sheila. After that there was nothing more to say.

Any interruption in the act of creation is torment for the writer. Rick found the next few days to be nightmares. For the perfect plot was hung suspended in mid-air. His act of creation—act of destruction, rather—was incomplete.

Here it was, Friday evening, and he hadn't been able to get downstairs to the cellar. In the mornings the door was locked. Afternoons and evenings, Lippert worked down there in the new lab.

Rick was in an agony of suspense. Had Lippert found the mushrooms? Apparently not. And even if he had, he'd never reconstruct Rick's plans.

Luckily, he had thrown Sheila's mushrooms away. Lippert didn't suspect anything, and that was well.

But the other problem, the real problem, still remained to torture Rick. How to get into the downstairs lab, make the poison and mix it with the gin—

He tried everything. He talked to Sheila. Couldn't she fake an excuse to make Lippert go into town? Couldn't a call come from the University? Couldn't she become ill, force him to go for a doctor?

"It won't work, darling," she sighed. "He's arranged for complete freedom the rest of this week. He's working on this new project, and he'll work right through until the cocktail party tomorrow afternoon."

As Rick paced up and down on the sun porch Friday evening he felt as though he had reached the breaking point.

It had all gone so smoothly up to now. The perfect crime, the perfect setting, and now he was helpless to bring his plot to a logical conclusion. He must depend on that which all writers refuse to consider as a plot element—coincidence.

A wry smile twisted his lips as he remembered Lippert's description of science-fiction writers.

The world's most dangerous individuals, eh?

How smugly the fat Professor had pulled that one off! And here he was, balked by the man's plodding, persistent devotion to a

stolid study of hydroponics.

Rick muttered curses, then halted as Sheila joined him.

The girl was pale, shaken.

"Have you found a way?" she whispered. "Tell me, Rick—I can't stand the suspense much longer. You don't know what it means to me now just to see him, feel him near me. That fat, stupid face of his—the way he bumbles around—I'll kill him myself unless we—"

Rick held her close as the tears came.

"Hang on," he whispered.

"I know. But when I think of how an idiot like him can stand between us—not because he's clever, but because he's so stupid—I can't bear it."

"Hold it," Rick muttered. "Here he comes."

Lippert's heavy tread announced his approach. But tonight the tread was not so heavy. The bulky body moved rapidly across the parlor, reached the porch entry.

"There you are."

The professor yawned, then smiled.

"Excuse me. I've been at it too long, I guess."

"Through for the night?" Rick nudged Sheila sharply as he spoke. She caught her cue.

"You do look tired, darling. Why don't you run up and turn in? We've got the party to face tomorrow."

"I will, in a minute." Lippert lit a cigarette, extended the pack to Rick. "Wait until I calm down, though. Rick I've got to apologize to you."

"What for?"

"The way I've neglected you these past three days. A fine visit, I must say—you come up to see me and I bury myself down in the basement. But I think it's been worth it."

"Got something, eh?"

Lippert nodded. "Yes. I think I really have. I'm going to make an announcement tomorrow at the party, I believe. Some of the men from the University will be interested. My work has taken a remarkably productive turn."

"Just what is it you've been up to?"

Lippert shrugged. "It's a secret. Tell you tomorrow."

Rick had a flash of inspiration. "Now wait a minute, pal," he said. "After all, you just admitted you felt like a heel for neglecting me all week. The least you can do to make amends is to show me what you've done."

"You really want to see it?"

"Of course. In fact, I insist."

"All right, come on then."

Lippert turned and walked back into the parlor. Rick hesitated on the threshold until he could whisper into Sheila's ear as he passed.

"Now's our chance. We're going downstairs. When we get in, I'll pretend to be enthusiastic about his damned plants or whatever they are. You fake an ex-

cuse to make him go upstairs for a while. Tell him to celebrate—mix us all a drink for a toast. Then you sneak out, bring a bottle of gin down before he comes. Meanwhile I'll stay and macerate the mushrooms."

"What's keeping you?" Lippert called.

"Just finishing the cigarette," Rick answered. "We're coming now."

The stairway resounded to the thumping of their feet as they descended. Rick noticed that his heart thumped curiously in rhythm.

This was it. Now, in a litle while—

Lippert unlocked the door, ushered them in as he switched on the light.

"Take a look," he said.

Rick stared. The two tanks against the farther wall were empty no longer. The racks were in place, and both tanks held a greenish liquid that bubbled perceptibly.

But the center of attraction consisted of the objects towering from the tanks along the metal framework rising to the ceiling.

Great gossamer blobs waved slowly in midair; blobs of fantastic size.

"What are they?" Rick asked.

"Puffballs."

"But the size—"

"Mutation. And special stimulation. A new process I've devised. I'll explain it fully tomorrow. For the first time I pursued lines dear to your melodramatic heart, Rick. Used electric shock treatment and infra-red, the works. Plus a little grafting to produce a totally new variety."

Sheila twisted a damp coil from her forehead.

"It's awfully hot," she sighed.

"I know, dear. Temperature is 90 degrees or thereabouts. It makes for growth, ripens the puffballs. I wanted to do this in time for tomorrow's party."

Sheila interrupted quickly.

"Wait, darling. I don't know what you've done, of course, but I'm sure it's terrifically important and scientific. Don't you think we ought to have a drink to celebrate?"

"Certainly. Come on upstairs and we'll mix a round."

"No. You mix them, darling. Rick wants to look around for a moment, I'm sure. Bring our drinks back down."

"All right."

Lippert shuffled out wearily. As his footsteps receded down the hall, Rick galvanized into activity.

"Get that mortar and pestle out," he snapped. "I'll find the mushrooms. I hid them under the table, behind that box."

He bent down, scrabbled in the welter of boxes and racks.

He was still stooping when the lab door closed. As it banged shut he straightened up.

"Open it," he commanded.

"Then run up the back steps and get me the gin."

Sheila tugged at the handle.

"It's locked," she whispered.

Rick made a move towards the door, then halted.

The little glass slit set in the panel now framed a face.

Professor Lippert was peering into the chamber from the cellar outside.

"The door is locked!" Rick called.

Lippert's voice came faintly through the glass.

"I know."

"Open up."

"Not just yet."

"What's the big idea? I—"

"Just wanted to give you a little more time."

"Time for what?"

"Time to find the mushrooms. Though I don't think you will, even though they're right before your eyes."

"Mushrooms? What mushrooms?" Sheila's voice cut in shrilly.

"The mushrooms your lover picked to poison me with."

For once the gift of improvising dialogue failed Rick. He could only stare at the face in the glass, stare into Lippert's inscrutable eyes.

"I'll save you the trouble, Rick," said Lippert. "You see, I found the mushrooms the other day. They came in very handy for my experiments. Quite so. Matter of fact, I used them in the tanks. You're looking at them now."

Man and girl gazed at the gigantic puffballs that swayed forth from the frames.

"Mushrooms and puffballs are botanically allied," Lippert called. "Of course, there were difficulties in making a fusion, but I conquered them. I had to conquer them. Because I wanted to surprise you. And you are surprised, aren't you?"

"Let me out!" Sheila broke, ran to the door, and began to pound with her fists. Lippert waited patiently until she subsided.

"In a little while, darling," he answered. "But first there is another surprise waiting for you."

"I needn't explain about the mushrooms, Rick. You undoubtedly know the effects of *aminita muscaria* well enough and were prepared to demonstrate them on me. I believe you intended to distill a poison and then arrange for me to swallow it. Of course the result is death—hideous death. The blood dissolves in your veins, you know, and—"

"No! No—" Sheila shrieked until shrill echoes resounded through the locked chamber.

"I thought of another way. A simpler way. Suppose the mushrooms were to become puffballs? Suppose the puffballs were to burst? A single breath of the pollen, in heavily concentrated form, introduces the poison

throughout the system. This is the method I selected. And you two are the subjects I have selected."

"Lippert—stop this—let us out!" Rick shouted.

"In just a moment, now. According to my calculations the puffballs are about ready to burst. After they burst I will release you within five minutes. Yes, in less than five minutes. Because by that time you will have inhaled enough to make the results quite certain. There is no antidote."

"I'll go to the police," Sheila sobbed. "You'll be hung for this."

"I doubt it, my dear. In the first place, I could tell them about your little scheme of poisoning me. In the second place, the whole thing is a horrible accident. The door swung shut, I was upstairs. Don't you see? And I was experimenting, I didn't know my hybrids were poisonous.

"But why pretend? The toxic effects will be much stronger this way. By the time I open this door the two of you will be screaming in agony. Your motor reflexes will be affected. You couldn't grasp a telephone in your lovely little hand, Sheila, and if you did so you'd tear it in half."

"Lippert, listen to me—you must listen—" Rick gasped.

"I have listened to you. To your lies about you and Sheila. You think I didn't know? You tried to steal her from me. You plotted to kill me. But I won't die. A posturing, empty-headed writer of cheap fiction and a stupid, cheating woman will die. And I will live. Live to carry on my work, my experiments. I shall rule science with a weapon of life, a weapon of death!"

Lippert was silent.

A faint popping sound reverberated through the locked room. Rick and Sheila turned and stared at the huge puffballs. One of the blobs had burst. Reddish clouds of pollen poured forth with an acrid scent. Rick smelled the odor of death.

It was welling up now. In a moment it would reach their nostrils.

He turned for the last time to stare at Lippert's face in the glass.

With a curious shock he recognized the meaning of the intent eyes, the fixed grin. He should have known it from the first, but he hadn't, and that was his mistake.

Staring at Lippert's face he realized that he was looking at a typically mad scientist.

The End

Most of us if asked to name a planet in our solar system which is (1) covered mostly by vast stretches of desert and (2) irrigated, sparsely, by thin ribbon-like canals bringing water thousands of miles from the melting polar snow caps, would probably blurt out, "Why, Mars, of course." But as the author of "Old Faithful" reminds us—in the following indelible short—if that question were asked ten million years from now, all *of our descendants might answer, "Why, Earth, of course."*

ATOMIC FIRE

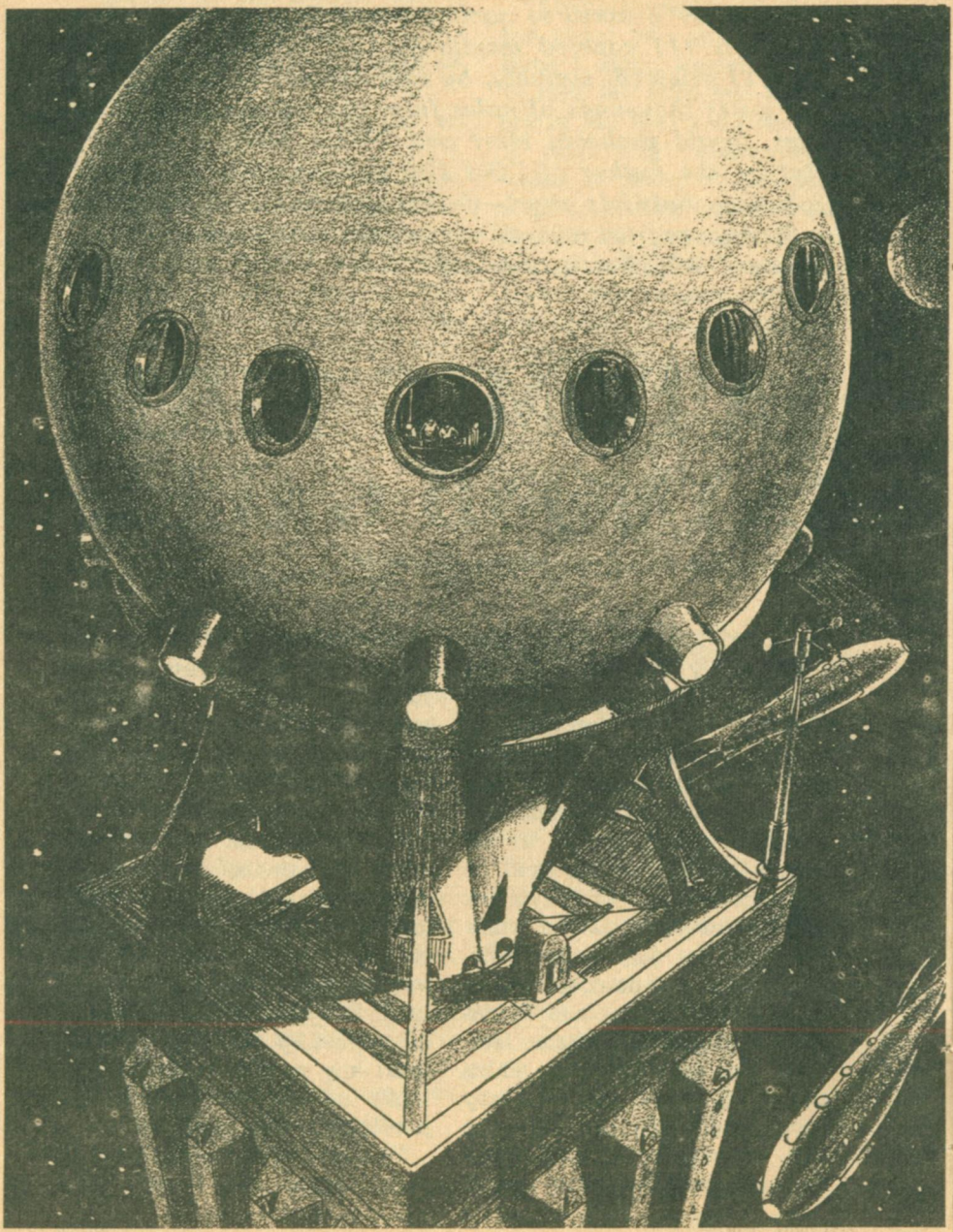
RAYMOND GALLUN

Illustrated by MOREY

AGGAR Ho was scrutinizing carefully the scene in the view-plate of the great reflecting telescope of the University of Itlantos in Panenbu, the capital city of Aerth. Every now and then he would glance aside, and taking a silvery stylus in his skinny, almost clawlike hand, he would draw queer little symbols and figures on a pad of white paper on the desk before him. There was a concerned look in his immense eyes, and in his furry, though oddly human face, there was an expression which one of his fellow creatures may have interpreted as denoting awe, or even dread. To Aggar Ho such emotions were almost impossibilities. For eons his ancestors had been toying with the forces of nature, curbing them according to their needs and desires, until now it would have taken a great danger indeed to awaken in any member of his race the remotest hint of fear.

But though the danger which Aggar Ho read among the stars may have been colossal enough to make him a little afraid, his keen intellect remained unhampered. If it was within the scope of possibility for him to help avert any coming calamity, certainly no silly emotions would prevent him from doing so.

To a man of the twentieth century, Aggar Ho would have



seemed to be a creature of a nightmare. He wore only a plain silver diadem to hold his bushy gray hair in place and a breech cloth of some gray knitted material about his hips. In consequence, his peculiar physique was well revealed. Except for his chest, which housed his huge lungs and was immense beyond all comparison with anything human, his body was singularly frail. His arms and legs were spindly and attenuated. His feet were flat and large. A thick polar fur covered him from head to foot. His ears were very large and bat like—adapted for hearing in a very rarefied atmosphere where all sounds are faint. His great green eyes had elongated pupils like those of cats. They stared out from either side of his beak-like nose and made him look for all the world like a crafty old owl. There was just a hint of fierce determination about them, a look which had survived Aggar Ho's youth. Plainly the old scientist belonged to an age far distant from the year 1931. The appointments of the room — its dials, switches, and its single radium lamp over the desk in front of the telescope, and its big crystal dome which transmitted the starlight all proved this.

Many strange things had happened to Aerth in the past ten million years. In 2089 A.D. the inhabitants of Mars, driven from their native planet by shortage of air, water and sunshine, had descended to Aerth. With their superior weapons and knowledge they quickly subdued the Aerthians. It was from these conquerors that Aggar Ho was descended. The Martians had not been cruel masters. They had ruled Aerth wisely and efficiently for ten million years, and had won the admiration and willing co-operation of the natives to whom they were almost gods. The two races always remained distinct from one another, for though inter-marriage was not uncommon, no offspring came from such unions.

As nature had worked on Mars, so it worked on Aerth. The planet's water supply slowly seeped into the rocks far beneath the surface crust, or as vapor, leaked away into space until now the oceans had vanished. The atmosphere was gradually dissipated in this latter fashion until at length it was so rare that a man of the year 2000 would have gasped and died in it in a few minutes. The sun, too, had grown old. Its deep red light shone down upon vast stretches of parched desert over which every now and then terrific dust storms raced. The sky was always a deep cloudless blue. In it a few stars twinkled even during the day. Except where the thin ribbon-like canals ran their ruler-edged courses over the face of the planet bringing water from

the melting polar snow-caps, everything was dry and devoid of vegetation. The summers were still quite warm but the winters were terrifically cold.

Presently Aggar Ho reached for a tiny lever at the side of his desk and swung it from a vertical to a horizontal position. The picture in the view-plate before him faded. Then he tapped a little brazen gong with his stylus. In a moment, in answer to the tinkling summons, another creature entered the room through a curtained door.

The new arrival was somewhat more human than Aggar Ho. He was heavier and much better muscled. His chest was large, but not so large as the Martian scientist's, and the white fur on his body was not so long and thick. His eyes were blue; there was a twinkle about them which told plainly that their possessor was brim full of clever good nature. The ancestors of this man had all been natives of Aerth.

"Well, Chief," he said, "what news from the stars? Has the Black Nebula come close enough so that we may pull its tail or has it suddenly vanished altogether?" Plainly the two men were on the most intimate of terms.

Aggar Ho looked up at his assistant. The grave expression on his face did not change. "We can no longer joke about the Black Nebula, Sark Ahar, my son," he said. "Unless something can be done, it will cause all the inhabitants of Aerth to be frozen to death in thirty-five days."

The glint in the young Aerthian's eyes grew hard. "You have finished your calculations? You know that all this is true?" he inquired.

"There is no chance for a mistake," returned Aggar Ho. "Here are my figures," and he tapped the pad of paper lying on his desk. "You may take them to your work room and check them if you like. Ever since we began to watch the Black Nebula six months ago I have been afraid. We thought that it would miss the solar system by several billion miles but tonight I have plotted its course. It is going to envelop the sun and blot out its light and warmth! Microscopic observations prove that it is a vast cloud of the heavy opaque gas number 106. When it reaches the sun, it will form a dense layer over its surface. Then there will be darkness."

"You have thought of a way out?" asked Sark Ahar.

"Yes. There is atomic energy. I have a theory which with a good deal of careful experimenting may result in its release. With the inexhaustible power contained in the atoms of all substances at our command there is no doubt that we could both heat and light our world very adequately. Great spheres of white-

hot disintegrating matter supported on towers all along the courses of the canals would free us forever from dependence on the sun. But can we control such a mighty force? Once started anywhere on Aerth the process of disintegration would probably continue until the planet had become a globe of incandescent gas."

"We will find a way, Chief," said Sark Ahar. "The space ship was delivered by the Fallef Company at noon today. It is on the landing stage now. Are we going to start the experiment tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Aggar Ho and Sark Ahar stepped out of the elevator which had carried them to the landing platform at the very pinnacle of the highest tower of the observatory. Presently they had left the little cupola-like structure at the top of the shaft. The platform was a flat, metallic square about two hundred feet each way. A light, icy breeze swept through the morning sky. It blew against the bodies of the two men rumpling their silky fur wrappings. There was an exhilarating tang in it. The altitude of the tower was fully two thousand feet, and the view from its summit was magnificent. Below them toward the west the men could see the great city of Panenbu, with its countless multicolored spires, gleaming under the morning sunshine. The streets were thronged with midgets going to work—still ignorant of the danger that threatened them. Toward the east beginning at the base of the great observatory building was a strip of cultivated land about eight miles wide. It was faintly green with the earliest growth of a grass-like cereal called telth, for the water coming down throughout the subterranean conduits from the melting north polar snows had just arrived three weeks before.

Beyond the band of telth, the Aerthian wilderness stretched off to the far horizon. Except for the countless dunes of yellow sand, it was almost as flat as a table top. It was the bottom of what had once been the Atlantic Ocean.

Everything in view was harshly clear cut, even in the great distance. Above arched the deep lapis-lazuli dome of the sky. Here and there in it a saucy star twinkled.

Occasionally a torpedo-shaped aircraft would glide noiselessly past the tower carrying a group of furry men to some distant city. The sun would glint on its silvery hull, and on the queer numerals mounted on its prow.

Aggar Ho and Sark Ahar walked over to the center of the landing stage. Here, supported by a funnel-shaped cradle was a big shiny sphere about seventy-five feet in diameter. There was a

row of circular windows running horizontally around its circumference. Four cylindrical objects, looking like some kind of searchlights, were set at equal intervals around its lower hemisphere. They pointed slantingly downward at an angle of forty-five degrees with the platform. The globe was a space-flier.

Aggar Ho opened an oval door in the side of the craft. The two men ascended a short flight of metal steps to the central chamber of the ship. The room, which was lighted by port holes set all around its walls, was packed with a bewildering outlay of scientific apparatus. At one side, before a large window, was the pilot seat, and in front of it, a number of levers and a board bearing many dials and instruments. It was by means of these that the flier was controlled. The remainder of the floor space was occupied by machinery and devices, and constituted a complete laboratory for exploring the inner secrets of atomic structure. In the center of the room, supported by a sort of tripod, was a black object which looked like a big pressure kettle. Many cables and wires led to it from a bank of cylindrical tanks which were filled with a fluid that supplied an electrical circuit of enormous voltage and amperage. There was a workbench running almost completely around the walls of the laboratory, and on it were ranged many devices for watching the electrons of atoms rotating in their orbits; there were several electric furnaces, lathes and other machinery for turning out new apparatus whenever it was needed. Besides there was a multitude of other things.

Aggar Ho seated himself in the pilot's chair while Sark Ahar stood beside him. The old Martian shifted a little lever on the control-board. A low musical hum started from somewhere in the hulk of the ship; in spite of its faintness, it was somehow suggestive of an enormous and mysterious power. Now the space flier was shooting upward. It swayed a little. The two men felt their weight apparently increase; just as though they were going upward on a fast elevator. The four repulsion-ray projectors, mounted on the bottom hemisphere of the craft, were sending powerful beams of energy downward and were raising the big globe from the ground.

Details on Aerth's surface were growing rapidly smaller and the field of view was broadening out. Panenbu, with its narrow encircling ring of vegetation spreading out like a vast disc on the desert, was rapidly becoming a toy city. It seemed to drift toward the west, for the fliers were hurtling eastward with terrific velocity. Limitless sandy plains were coming into view, all gleaming and desolate under the morning

sunshine. Panenbu disappeared beneath the horizon. Now and then thin ribbons of vegetation running from pole to pole would be seen, traced like tautly drawn strings across the wilderness. Now Aerth looked like a great relief map, and now it began to take on a slight outward curvature. The scientist and his subordinate were rapidly drawing away from their planet.

"That was a fine start, Chief," said Sark Ahar. "The ship is gaining altitude faster than I ever saw a space craft do before at the outset. But I suppose you have to expect such performance from any new invention of the Fallefs. Everything they produce is wonderful."

Aggar Ho turned toward his young assistant. His face was screwed up into a grimace which Sark Ahar recognized as a disdainful smile. "It was I who invented the new repulsion-ray concentrator that makes the rapid acceleration of this space ship possible. I sold Fallef the rights. Fallef's bungling assistants certainly would never have thought of the idea." Aggar Ho paused for a moment. Finally he said: "You may sleep now, Sark Ahar. In four hours I will call you to take charge of the craft."

The younger man climbed the spiraling metal stair to the upper compartment. Here was a little kitchen, a room full of supplies, and a chamber with four berths in it. Sark Ahar tumbled into one and was quickly asleep. Since he had assisted his chief in his work the night before he had, of course, not slept.

Aggar Ho, seated before the control-board watching dials, meters, diminishing Aerth, and the star-shot sable of empty space, mused softly: "He is a fine young Aerthian, Sark Ahar—a native, born of natives, and yet clever—very clever. Sometimes I almost think he will become a scientist. But that would be odd. There hasn't been a man of great wisdom among their race for millions of years. They were a great people before my ancestors came but our superior knowledge robbed them of all initiative. It is too bad."

The musical ringing of a little bell at his ear told Sark Ahar that his rest period was over. He climbed out of his berth and joined Aggar Ho. He glanced at a meter on the control board.

"Thirty thousand miles," he read aloud.

"Yes," returned the Martian. "By the time your four hours on duty is over, allowing for acceleration, we should be eighty thousand miles from Aerth. There we will stop. During our experiment on atomic energy we will travel in an orbit that distance from the planet. The World Council has decreed it. They fear that we may destroy Aerth if we work

on its surface, and well they may, for we are playing with a dangerous thing. Call me when it is time. Good night."

Aggar Ho retired and the young Aerthian took his place.

Sark Ahar stared at the star-strewn circle of blackness before him. There was little to do but think, for the controlling of the ship was, for him, almost automatic. Except when now and then a small meteorite struck the impenetrable force-shield of the craft and made it sway a little, there was no movement.

The death of the world!—within a month! Aggar Ho had predicted it and he, Sark Ahar, had checked his calculations. The Martian as usual was right. They were wonderful, those Martians — especially Aggar Ho. Wasn't it he who had engineered the building of the great Than Taxa canal running a distance of more than ten thousand miles over Aerth's surface? Wasn't it he who had extended man's natural span of life to more than a thousand years? Aggar Ho was great, but here at last was his defeat. What if he did release and control atomic energy? There wouldn't be time to build the towers and spheres he had talked about. Like every man of his race, Aggar Ho had pluck — he'd fight against reason. That was just what he was doing now. But it was useless. The inhabitants of Aerth would freeze to death unless someone thought of something else. He'd have to think. But no, that wasn't sense.

After an hour or so the moon came along and drifted into the flock of stars that had been shining at Sark Ahar through the observation window. It was only a little more than half illuminated. The sun was toward the left of it and wasn't visible from where the Aerthian sat. The satellite seemed a little larger than when viewed from the planet, and its empty plains gleamed with an almost blinding intensity. Sark Ahar studied it. His keen eyes could even make out a few big craters. It was a funny world—the moon—all jagged and cut up and deserted. Sark Ahar had been there twice with his chief. Clad in oxygen helmet and heavy armor, he had enjoyed wandering through its empty valleys and climbing into its lonely craters. Around Tycho there were the remains of an extensive irrigation system built by the last of the Lunarians to make use of the almost vanished water supply. Those Moon Men had become extince before there were human beings on Aerth. What good was the moon now? It was just a useless derelict of space, desolate and lifeless.

When Aggar Ho returned from his nap he ordered his subordinate to shut off the power. As he had predicted, the craft was eighty thousand miles from Aerth. Its momentum would, of

course, carry it a little beyond this point, but the gravitational pull of the planet would drag it back; and during the course of the experiment it would revolve as a little satellite of Aerth.

Immediately the two men set to work on their seemingly hopeless task. The cover was removed from the great caldron-like furnace and an odd set of metallic plates was placed inside, together with a small quantity of mercury. Then the cover was replaced and the air exhausted from the interior by means of a small electric pump. For a whole day a current with titanic voltage and strength crackled between the plates. Aggar Ho and Sark Ahar, wearing thick goggles and hiding behind lead shields, which alone saved their lives from the dangerous emanations, watched the white-hot inferno through a little quartz window set in the side of the furnace. The whole ship fairly reeked with heat, and the meters registered an enormous consumption of power. Finally Aggar Ho threw the great switches. The light slowly faded from the plates. The first attempt had been a failure. Mercury had refused to give up its atomic energy.

The plates were changed and another substance was placed in the furnace — this time silicon. Another trial was made — also without any hint of success.

Day after day the same soul-searing work went on — new elements, new compounds, new plates, new voltages — all to no avail. And always that big black cloud of fate that was going to blot out the sun crept nearer and nearer. The two experimenters watched its progress in the view-plate of their radio vision instrument. The pictures were radioed direct from the observatory at Panenbu. Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen, twelve days — slowly the time of darkness crept closer. It was only the pluck and self-control resulting from ages of scientific race training that kept all Aerth from going mad.

There were thousands of scientists working on the problem of saving Aerth, and almost all of them sought the means of doing so in atomic energy. None believed that there was any hope, even if the mighty power were discovered, but all kept doggedly on. Aggar Ho and Sark Ahar sighted several experimental ships like their own, and they talked to the occupants of over nine hundred of them by radio. Never was the slightest hint of success reported.

At last the day when darkness was to fall upon the solar system came. Sark Ahar and Aggar Ho watched the approach of the shadow through the windows of their ship. To a casual observer there would have been nothing very awful about the thing. The only evidence of its presence was

the apparent absence of stars in a small portion of the heavens. Gradually as the cloud crept on, other stars were blotted out and some of these which had been hidden reappeared. To all appearances the blackness was moving with utmost slowness, but in reality it was tearing along at a terrific rate. Always it crept closer to the sun. Presently it touched the edge of the glowing red disc, and then for thirty hours the light of the old luminary was slowly fading. For five hours after that a grayish, scarcely visible luminosity continued to come from it, but at last even that disappeared. On Aerth the lights of the scattered cities glowed as patches of dim radiance. Except for these, the planet was entirely invisible. Only the icy stars gleamed on unchanged.

Reports of the progress of things on Aerth came to the two experimenters by radio:

"Sun motors stopped. Stored power will last for several days," was the first report after the coming of darkness.

To all appearances there was little panic. The people had shut themselves in their homes and were waiting resignedly for their end.

Almost all the experimenters had given up the quest and had returned to their native cities. Aggar Ho and Sark Ahar were among the few who remained out in space. They were working like two demons just as they had been working for a month. They would have to give up soon for their supply of power was low.

Two days after the coming of the cloud the report reached the space-ship: "The atmosphere of the planet is freezing. It is falling like snow. In many places whole communities have been frozen to death. The stored solar energy may keep a few people alive for a short time, but the end cannot be far off."

Aggar Ho was fruitlessly examining the instruments over the roaring ray furnace. There was a mixture never before tried, between the plates. Presently he turned toward the younger man who was standing beside him. The old Martian was slowly shaking his head. Sark Ahar scrutinized his chief carefully. He could see that his big eyes were watery and blood-shot and that his rumpled fur looked unusually shabby. Lack of sleep and continuous labor had certainly done him no good.

"You had better rest," said Sark Ahar. "I will watch the furnace. Perhaps when you awaken, the problem will be solved."

Aggar Ho smiled sadly. "Perhaps," he said, and then, after a pause, "Thank you, my boy." He tramped wearily up the spiral stairs, his magnetic boots which served to hold him to the steel floor in the absence of gravity making a clattering noise.

When he was gone Sark Ahar took a single perfunctory look at

the instruments, satisfying himself that they registered nothing of importance. Then he went over to the pilot seat at the side of the chamber and sat down onit. He turned it around on its swivel so that he could look toward the experimental apparatus.

Sark Ahar was extremely tired, but still he musn't sleep. He must watch for results—results that never appeared.

Gradually the monotonous crackling of the furnace and the steady drone of the electrical machinery worked on him. He grew drowsy. Nothing mattered to his brain any more. The world was doomed. He didn't have to watch those dials. He slumped far over one arm of the pilot seat. His outflung hand bumped lightly against a tiny lever that gleamed brightly on the ship's control board under the cold light of a little glass illuminating globe set in the ceiling. The catch of the lever was released and the spring that was attached to it made it snap into a new position. A low musical droning almost smothered by the noise of the furnance set in. The ship gave a slight lurch. Its propelling machinery was running at full capacity, sending it hurtling across space. But Sark Ahar did not notice. He was fast asleep.

For hours he slept. Odd dreams flitted through his brain. Devils and imps and what not danced and grimaced before his mind's eye. He saw the moon and then he saw lurid flames suddenly leap out of it. Finally he dreamed that he, a noted scientist, had invented a mechanical man— a great metal giant with fanged jaws, taloned hands and flaming eyes. He dreamed that the giant had turned upon him — was going to kill him. He felt its hot claws around his throat and its fiery breath against his cheek.

Sark Ahar awoke with a start. His dream had been part reality. The chamber was glowing like a white hot inferno, and flickering black shadows of fantastic pieces of apparatus were dancing on the walls. The light in the illuminating globes had somehow died out. The young Aerthian could hear a thunderous roar quite distinct from the noise the furnace had once produced. It was louder and more terrible. The air all about was terrifically hot. It scalded Sark Ahar's lungs. There was a vapor in it—a strange fiery gas. He could see long, slender pencilings of it reaching over and under the thick lead shields around the furnace like the tentacles of a luminous octopus. Luckily for him he was behind one of those lead shields; if he had not been, the deadly emanations would have killed him.

What had happened? Atomic energy! Atomic energy at last! The words fairly shrieked through his brain. But what of it? It was too late to do anything. Besides, that terrific power couldn't be controlled. He'd almost forgotten

that. It couldn't be controlled!

He grabbed a long buckler-like sheet of lead which had a hand-grip on one side of it. It was convex and was as tall as a man, and resembled the shields which archers of a forgotten antiquity had used. It would protect him from the dangerous rays.

He held it out in front of him and peered through the glazed peep-hole which was on a level with his eyes. The bottom of the furnace must have melted away. There was a dazzling mass of bluish incandescence visible beneath the lead shields around the caldron-like piece of apparatus. It was hissing and spitting like a violently active chemical. The steel floor was burning! And the atomic fire was spreading—consuming everything in its path! In a few minutes the whole ship would be a fiery mass of incandescence!

Sark Ahar stared wildly about. What should he do? Try to save himself, try to save Aggar Ho? It was better to freeze than to burn to death.

His eyes fell on the dials of the control board. Though Aerth's satellite was now, of course, invisible, he could tell by the delicate instruments that the ship was hurtling along at a terrific rate only five thousand miles from the moon! Its course was parallel to the lunar surface.

A crazy idea, that marked him forever as a genius, came to Sark Ahar. How it was born no man may tell. Quick as a flash he gripped the steering lever and swung it around a full quarter turn. The space flier lurched, then it swung inward and headed straight toward the moon, falling more and more rapidly every instant!

"Aggar Ho!" shrieked Sark Ahar. "Come down! Quick! You do not wish to burn!" Carefully maniuplating his big protecting shield so that it was always between him and the rapidly spreading conflagration at the center of the room, Sark Ahar made his way to the spiral stairway. He saw the old scientist descending.

"Get a lead shield in the upper store-room, Aggar Ho," he cried. "Else you will be killed by the rays. Come quickly."

In a moment the Martian was with him.

They followed another downward leading spiral and found themselves in a cylindrical room that housed a tiny torpedo-shaped space-flier. Sark Ahar opened a circular door in the side of the craft and thrust the old scientist unceremoniously inside. He followed closely, slamming the door behind him. He dropped into the pilot seat. A turn of a knob, and a door at one end of the tubular chamber that housed the space-boat opened. In a moment the little craft glided gracefully out into the open, free from the blazing sphere.

Sark Ahar allowed the globe to get fully a hundred miles ahead

of him in its headlong rush moonward. Then at a safe distance he followed it.

He turned toward Aggar Ho, who was in the passenger seat behind him, "I think I have saved Aerth, Chief," he said. There was a broad smile on his face.

"Saved Aerth?" returned Aggar Ho. "What do you mean? I see that we have released the power which we sought, but that will do us no good now."

"Watch for a little while, Chief," said Sark Ahar.

In the next minute and a half the sphere became a globe of blue-white fire, and presently, after the two Aerthians had followed it in its fall for about three thousand miles, it exploded, sending out its flaming fragments cone-wise toward the moon. The lunar surface two thousand miles below was dimly visible by their light. The pieces of the spaceship glowed brighter and continued their headlong descent. Still Sark Ahar dove after them. In a few minutes the fragments crashed into the satellite, scattering themselves over mountain, crater and dead sea bottom. Nor did their fire die out! It increased in intensity fed by the fine sand which covered most of the moon. It was spreading rapidly, enveloping everything in its path.

Sark Ahar was smiling. "Do you understand, Chief?" he asked.

Aggar Ho had completely forgotten his habitual calm. "I do!" he cried. "You meant to kindle an atomic fire on the moon and make it take the place of our sun! And you have succeeded!"

The two men returned to Aerth. Within three days the moon's surface had become entirely incandescent. A week later Aerth was much the same as it had been for thousands of years except that the spring crops had been destroyed and almost half of the population had perished. But nature quickly mends and forgets such calamities. In the long course of cosmic history they are common.

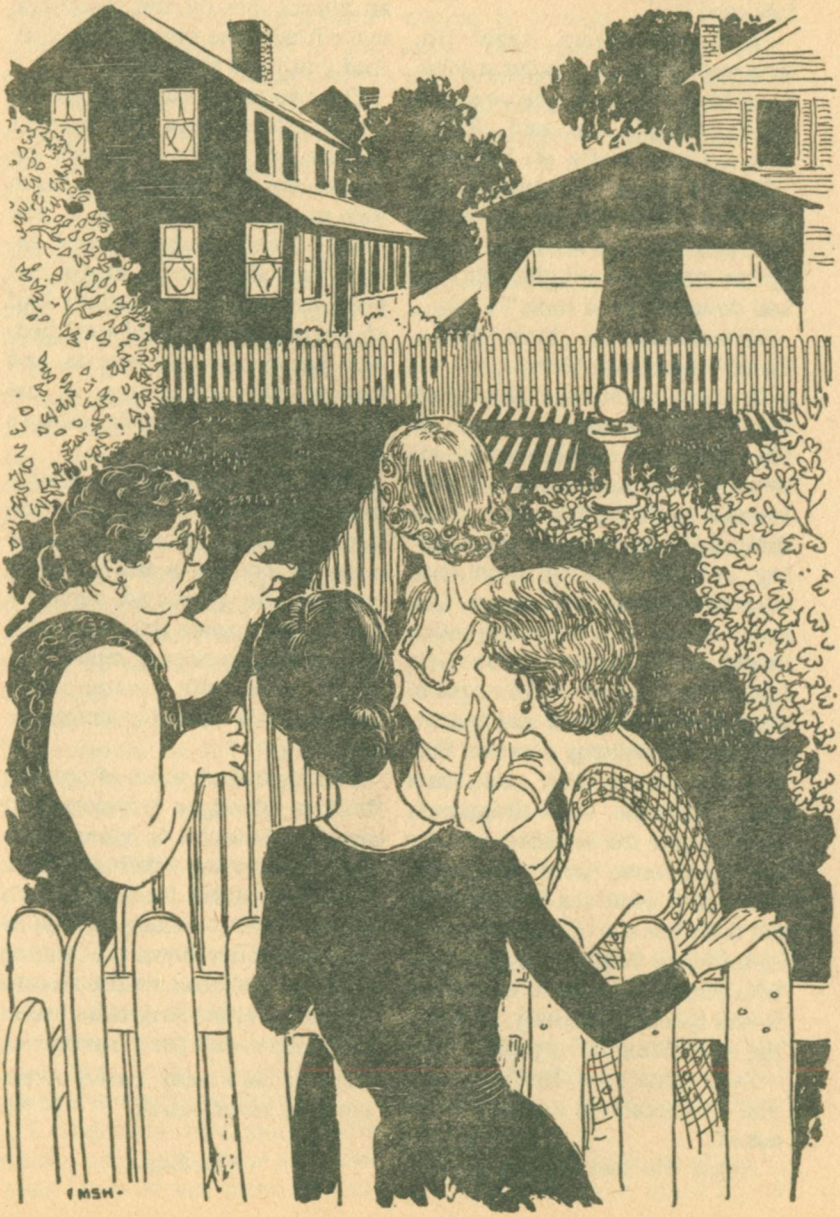
Since the moon travels slowly in its orbit in the same direction that Aerth revolves, the days were, of course, a trifle longer.

Aggar Ho predicted correctly that in fifty years the sun would absorb its enveloping cloud, and would shine with greater intensity than it had for countless ages.

Ten thousand years afterward, throngs of eager travelers still came to Panenbu to view a majestic work of art which awoke in them admiration for a great man of the past. At the pinnacle of what had once been the landing tower of the observatory stood a colossal statue. Across its breast was ingraved the inscription: "This is Sark Ahar, native Aerthian who saved Aerth."

The End

Illustrator: Emsh



THE BUILDER

By PHILIP K. DICK

In one of the final issues of the excellent but now defunct British science-fiction magazine New Worlds, *Englishman John Brunner called Philip K. Dick—the Hugo-winning author of* Solar Lottery *(1955) and* The Man in the High Castle *(1962)—"the most consistently brilliant sf writer in the world." A critical opinion we've also long held, one lent additional support by the following premonitory glimpse of Apocalypse in the suburbs—which none can see coming except a moody character named Elwood, who can't stop building a boat too big to get out of his yard!*

E. J. ELWOOD!" Liz said anxiously. "You aren't listening to anything we're saying. And you're not eating a bite. What in the world is the matter with you? Sometimes I just can't understand you."

For a long time there was no response. Ernest Elwood continued to stare past them, staring out the window at the semi-darkness beyond, as if hearing something they did not hear. At last he sighed, drawing himself up in his chair, almost as if he were going to say something. But then his elbow knocked against his coffee cup and he turned instead to steady the cup, wiping spilled brown coffee from its side.

"Sorry," he murmured. "What were you saying?"

"Eat, dear," his wife said. She glanced at the two boys as she spoke to see if they had stopped eating, also. "You know, I go to a great deal of trouble to fix your food." Bob, the older boy, was going right ahead, cutting his liver and bacon carefully into bits. But sure enough, little Toddy had put down his knife and fork as soon as E. J. had, and now he, too, was sitting silently, staring down at his plate.

"See?" Liz said. "You're not setting a very good example for the boys. Eat up your food. It's getting cold. You don't want to eat cold liver, do you? There's nothing worse than liver when it gets cold and the fat all over the bacon hardens. It's harder to digest cold fat than anything else in the world. Especially lamb fat. They say a lot of people can't eat lamb fat at all. Dear, please eat."

Elwood nodded. He lifted his fork and spooned up some peas and potatoes, carrying them to his mouth. Little Toddy did the same, gravely and seriously, a small edition of his father.

"Say," Bob said. "We had an atomic bomb drill at school today. We lay under the desks."

"Is that right?" Liz said.

"But Mr. Pearson our science teacher says that if they drop a bomb on us the whole town'll be demolished, so I can't see what good getting under the desk will do. I think they ought to realize what advances science has made. There are bombs now that'll destroy miles, leaving nothing standing."

"You sure know a lot," Toddy muttered.

"Oh, shut up."

"Boys," Liz said.

"It's true," Bob said earnestly. "A fellow I know is in the Marine Corp Reserve and he says they have new weapons that will destroy wheat crops and poison water supplies. It's some kind of crystals."

"Heavens," Liz said.

"They didn't have things like that in the last war. Atomic development came almost at the end without there really being an opportunity to make use of it on a full scale." Bob turned to his father. "Dad, isn't that true? I'll bet when you were in the Army you didn't have any of the fully atomic —"

Elwood threw down his fork. He pushed his chair back and stood up. Liz stared up in astonishment at him, her cup half raised. Bob's mouth hung open, his sentence unfinished. Little Toddy said nothing.

"Dear, what's the matter?" Liz said.

"I'll see you later."

They gazed after him in amazement as he walked away from the

table, out of the dining room. They heard him go into the kitchen and pull open the back door. A moment later the back door slammed behind him.

"He went out in the back yard," Bob said. "Mom, was he always like this? Why does he act so funny? It isn't some kind of war psychosis he got in the Philippines, is it? In the First World War they called it shell shock, but now they know it's a form of war psychosis. Is it something like that?"

"Eat your food," Liz said, red spots of anger burning in her cheeks. She shook her head. "Darn that man. I just can't imagine —"

The boys ate their food.

It was dark out in the back yard. The sun had set and the air was cool and thin, filled with dancing specks of night insects. In the next yard Joe Hunt was working, raking leaves from under his cherry tree. He nodded to Elwood.

Elwood walked slowly down the path, across the yard toward the garage. He stopped, his hands in his pockets. By the garage something immense and white loomed up, a vast pale shape in the evening gloom. As he stood gazing at it a kind of warmth began to glow inside him. It was a strange warmth, something like pride, a little pleasure mixed in, and — And excitement. Looking at the boat always made him excited. Even when he was first starting on it he had felt the sudden race of his heart, the shaking of his hands, sweat on his face.

His boat. He grinned, walking closer. He reached up and thumped the solid side. What a fine boat it was, and coming along damn well. Almost done. A lot of work had gone into that, a lot of work and time. Afternoons off from work, Sundays, and even sometimes early in the morning before work.

That was best, early in the morning, with the bright sun shining down and the air good-smelling and fresh, and everything wet and sparkling. He liked that time best of all, and there was no one else up to bother him and ask him questions. He thumped the solid side again. A lot of work and material, all right. Lumber and nails, sawing and hammering and bending. Of course, Toddy had helped him. He certainly couldn't have done it alone; no doubt of that. If Toddy hadn't drawn the lines on the boards and —

"Hey," Joe Hunt said.

Elwood started, turning. Joe was leaning on the fence, looking at him. "Sorry," Elwood said. "What did you say?"

"Your mind was a million miles away," Hunt said. He took a puff on his cigar. "Nice night."

"Yes."

"That's some boat you got there, Elwood."

"Thanks," Elwood murmured. He walked away from it, back toward the house. "Goodnight, Joe."

"How long is it you been working on that boat?" Hunt reflected. "Seems like about a year in all, doesn't it? About twelve months. You sure put a lot of time and effort into it. Seems like every time I see you you're carting lumber back here and sawing and hammering away."

Elwood nodded, moving toward the back door.

"You even got your kids working. At least, the little tyke. Yes, it's quite a boat." Hunt paused. "You sure must be going to go quite a way with it, by the size of it. Now just exactly where was it you told me you're going? I forget."

There was silence.

"I can't hear you, Elwood," Hunt said. "Speak up. A boat that big, you must be —"

"Lay off."

Hunt laughed easily. "What's the matter, Elwood? I'm just having a little harmless fun, pulling your leg. But seriously, where are you going with that? You going to drag it down to the beach and float it? I know a guy has a little sailboat he fits onto a trailer cart, hooks it up to his car. He drives down to the yacht harbor every week or so. But my God, you can't get that big thing onto a trailer. You know, I heard about a guy built a boat in his cellar. Well, he got done and you know what he discovered? He discovered that the boat was so big when he tried to get it out the door —"

Liz Elwood came to the back door, snapping on the kitchen light and pushing the door open. She stepped out onto the grass, her arms folded.

"Good evening, Mrs. Elwood," Hunt said, touching his hat. "Sure a nice night."

"Good evening." Liz turned to E. J. "For heaven's sake, are you going to come in?" Her voice was low and hard.

"Sure." Elwood reached out listlessly for the door. "I'm coming in. Goodnight, Joe."

"Goodnight," Hunt said. He watched the two of them go inside. The door closed, the light went off. Hunt shook his head. "Funny guy," he murmured. "Getting funnier all the time. Like he's in a different world. Him and his boat!"

He went indoors.

"She was just eighteen," Jack Fredericks said, "but she sure knew what it was all about."

"Those southern girls are that way," Charlie said. "It's the climate. They ripen faster. It's like fruit, nice soft, ripe, slightly damp fruit."

"There's a passage in Hemingway like that," Ann Pike said. "I can't remember what it's from. He compares a —"

"But the way they talk," Charlie said. "Who can stand the way those southern girls talk?"

"What's the matter with the way they talk?" Jack demanded. "They talk different, but you get used to it."

"Why can't they talk right?"

"What do you mean?"

"They talk like — colored people."

"It's because they all come from the same region," Ann said.

"Are you saying this girl was colored?" Jack said.

"No, of course not. Finish your pie." Charlie looked at his wrist watch. "Almost one. We have to be getting on back to the office."

"I'm not finished eating," Jack said. "Hold on!"

"You know, there's a lot of colored people moving into my area," Ann said. "There's a real estate sign up on a house about a block from me. 'All races welcomed'. I almost fell over dead when I saw it."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. What can you do?"

"You know, if you work for the Government they can put a colored man or a Chinese next to you," Jack said, "and you can't do anything about it."

"Except quit."

"It interferes with your right to work," Charlie said. "How can you work like that? Answer me."

"There's too many pinks in the Government," Jack said. "That's how they got that, about hiring people for Government jobs without looking to see what race they belong to. During WPA days, when Harry Hopkins was in."

"You know where Harry Hopkins was born?" Ann said. "He was born in Russia."

"That was Sidney Hillman," Jack said.

"It's all the same," Charlie said. "They all ought to be sent back there."

Ann looked curiously at Ernest Elwood. He was sitting quietly, reading his newspaper, not saying anything. The cafeteria was alive with movement and noise. Everyone was eating and talking, coming and going, back and forth.

"E. J., are you all right?" Ann said.

"Yes."

"He's reading about the White Sox," Charlie said. "He has that intent look. Say, you know, I took my kids to the game the other night, and —"

"Come on," Jack said, standing up. "We have to get back."

They all rose. Elwood folded his newspaper up silently, putting it into his pocket.

"Say, you're not talking much," Charlie said to him as they went

up the aisle. Elwood glanced up.

"Sorry."

"I've been meaning to ask you something. Do you want to come over Saturday night for a little game? You haven't played with us for a hell of a long time."

"Don't ask him," Jack said, paying for his meal at the cash register. "He always wants to play queer games like deuces wild, baseball, spit in the ocean —"

"Straight poker for me," Charlie said. "Come on, Elwood. The more the better. Have a couple of beers, chew the fat, get away from the wife, eh?" He grinned.

"One of these days we're going to have a good old stag party," Jack said, pocketing his change. He winked at Elwood. "You know the kind I mean? We get some gals together, have a little show —" He made a motion with his hand.

Elwood moved off. "Maybe. I'll think it over." He paid for his lunch. Then he went outside, out onto the bright sidewalk. The others were still inside, waiting for Ann. She had gone into the powder room.

Suddenly Elwood turned and walked hurriedly down the sidewalk, away from the cafeteria. He turned the corner quickly and found himself on Cedar Street, in front of a television store. Shoppers and clerks out on their lunch hour pushed and crowded past him, laughing and talking, bits of their conversations rising and falling around him like waves of the sea. He stepped into the doorway of the television shop and stood, his hands in his pockets, like a man hiding from the rain.

What was the matter with him? Maybe he should go see a doctor. The sounds, the people, everything bothered him. Noise and motion everywhere. He wasn't sleeping enough at night. Maybe it was something in his diet. And he was working so damn hard out in the yard. By the time he went to bed at night he was exhausted. Elwood rubbed his forehead. People and sounds, talking, streaming past him, endless shapes moving in the streets and stores.

In the window of the television shop a big television set blinked and winked a soundless program, the images leaping merrily. Elwood watched passively. A woman in tights was doing acrobatics, first a series of splits, then cartwheels and spins. She walked on her hands for a moment, her legs waving above her, smiling at the audience. Then she disappeared and a brightly dressed man came on, leading a dog.

Elwood looked at his watch. Five minutes to one. He had five minutes to get back to the office. He went back onto the sidewalk and looked around the corner. Ann and Charlie and Jack were no place to be seen. They had

gone on. Elwood walked slowly along, past the stores, his hands in his pockets. He stopped for a moment in front of the ten cent store, watching the milling women pushing and shoving around the imitation jewelry counters, touching things, picking them up, examining them. In the window of a drugstore he stared at an ad for athlete's foot, some kind of a powder being sprinkled between two cracked and blistered toes. He crossed the street.

On the other side he paused to look at a display of women's clothing, skirts and blouses and wool sweaters. In a color photograph a handsomely dressed girl was removing her blouse to show the world her elegant bra. Elwood passed on. The next window was suitcases, luggage and trunks.

Luggage. He stopped, frowning. Something wandered through his mind, some loose vague thought, too nebulous to catch. He felt, suddenly, a deep inner urgency. He examined his watch. Ten past one. He was late. He hurried to the corner and stood waiting impatiently for the light to change. A handful of men and women pressed past him, moving out to the curb to catch an oncoming bus. Elwood watched the bus. It halted, its doors opening. The people pushed onto it. Suddenly Elwood joined them, stepping up the steps of the bus. The doors closed behind him as he fished out change from his pocket.

A moment later he took his seat, next to an immense old woman with a child on her lap. Elwood sat quietly, his hands folded, staring ahead and waiting, as the bus moved off down the street, moving toward the residential district.

When he got home there was no one there. The house was dark and cool. He went to the bedroom and got his old clothes from the closet. He was just going out into the back yard when Liz appeared in the driveway, her arms loaded with groceries.

"E. J.!" she said. "What's the matter? Why are you home?"

"I don't know. I took some leave. It's all right."

Liz put her packages down on the fence. "For heaven's sake," she said irritably. "You frightened me." She stared at him intently. "You took *leave?*"

"Yes."

"How much does that make, this year? How much leave have you taken in all?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? Well, is there any left?"

"Left for what?"

Liz stared at him. Then she picked up her packages and went inside the house, the back door banging after her. Elwood frowned. What was the matter? He went on into the garage and

began to drag lumber and tools out onto the lawn, beside the boat.

He gazed up at it. It was square, big and square, like some enormous solid packing crate. Lord, but it was solid. He had put endless beams into it. There was a covered cabin with a big window, the roof tarred over. Quite a boat.

He began to work. Presently Liz came out of the house. She crossed the yard silently, so that he did not notice her until he came to get some large nails.

"Well?" Liz said.

Elwood stopped for a moment. "What is it?"

Liz folded her arms.

Elwood became impatient. "What is it? Why are you looking at me?"

"Did you really take more leave? I can't believe it. You really came home again to work on — on that."

Elwood turned away.

"Wait." She came up beside him. "Don't walk off from me. Stand still."

"Be quiet. Don't shout."

"I'm not shouting. I want to talk to you. I want to ask you something. May I? May I ask you something? You don't mind talking to me?"

Elwood nodded.

"*Why?*" Liz said, her voice low and intense. "Why? Will you tell me that? Why?"

"Why what?"

"That. That — that thing. What is it for? Why are you here in the yard in the middle of the day? For a whole year it's been like this. At the table last night, all of a sudden you got up and walked out. Why? What's it all for?"

"It's almost done," Elwood murmured. "A few more licks here and there and it'll be —"

"And then what?" Liz came around in front of him, standing in his path. "And then what? What are you going to do with it? Sell it? Float it? All the neighbors are laughing at you. Everybody in the block knows —" Her voice broke suddenly. "— Knows about you, and this. The kids at school make fun of Bob and Toddy. They tell them their father is — That he's —"

"That he's crazy?"

"Please, E. J. Tell me what it's for. Will you do that? Maybe I can understand. You never told me. Wouldn't it help? Can't you even do that?"

"I can't," Elwood said.

"You can't! Why not?"

"Because I don't know," Elwood said. "I don't know what it's for. Maybe it isn't for anything."

"But if it isn't for anything why do you work on it?"

"I don't know. I like to work on it. Maybe it's like whittling." He waved his hand impatiently.

"I've always had a workshop of some kind. When I was a kid I used to build model airplanes. I have tools. I've always had tools."

"But why do you come home in the middle of the day?"

"I get restless."

"Why?"

"I — I hear people talking, and it makes me uneasy. I want to get away from them. There's something about it all, about them. Their ways. Maybe I have claustrophobia."

"Shall I call Doctor Evans and make an appointment?"

"No. No, I'm all right. Please, Liz, get out of the way so I can work. I want to finish."

"And you don't even know what it's for." She shook her head. "So all this time you've been working without knowing why. Like some animal that goes out at night and fights, like a cat on the back fence. You leave your work and us to —"

"Get out of the way."

"Listen to me. You put down that hammer and come inside. You're putting your suit on and going right back to the office. Do you hear? If you don't I'm never going to let you inside the house again. You can break down the door if you want, with your hammer. But it'll be locked for you from now on, if you don't forget that boat and go back to work."

There was silence.

"Get out of the way," Elwood said. "I have to finish."

Liz stared at him "You're going on?" The man pushed past her. "You're going to go ahead? There's something wrong with you. Something wrong with your mind. You're —"

"Stop," Elwood said, looking past her. Liz turned.

Toddy was standing silently in the driveway, his lunch pail under his arm. His small face was grave and solemn. He did not say anything to them.

"Tod!" Liz said. "Is it that late already?"

Toddy came across the grass to his father. "Hello, boy," Elwood said. "How was school?"

"Fine."

"I'm going in the house," Liz said. "I meant it, E. J. Remember that I meant it."

She went up the walk. The back door slammed behind her.

Elwood sighed. He sat down on the ladder leading up the side of the boat and put his hammer down. He lit a cigarette and smoked silently. Toddy waiting without speaking.

"Well, boy?" Elwood said at last. "What do you say?"

"What do you want done, dad?"

"Done?" Elwood smiled. "Well, there's not too much left. A few things here and there. We'll be through, soon. You might look around for boards we didn't

nail down on the deck." He rubbed his jaw. "Almost done. We've been working a long time. You could paint, if you want. I want to get the cabin painted. Red, I think. How would red be?"

"Green."

"Green? All right. There's some green porch paint in the garage. Do you want to start stirring it up?"

"Sure," Toddy said. He headed toward the garage.

Elwood watched him go. "Toddy —"

The boy turned. "Yes?"

"Toddy, wait." Elwood went slowly toward him. "I want to ask you something."

"What is it, dad?"

"You — you don't mind helping me, do you? You don't mind working on the boat?"

Toddy looked up gravely into his father's face. He said nothing. For a long time the two of them gazed at each other.

"Okay!" Elwood said suddenly. "You run along and get the paint started."

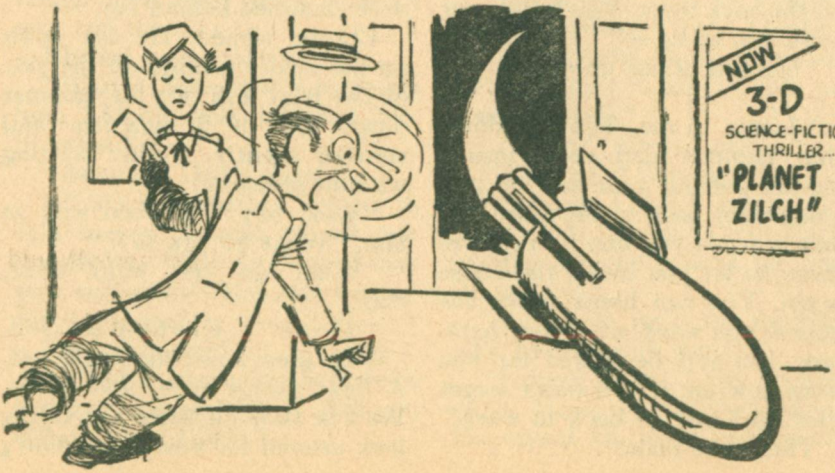
Bob came swinging along the driveway with two of the kids from the junior high school. "Hi, dad," Bob called, grinning. "Say, how's it coming?"

"Fine," Elwood said.

"Look," Bob said to his pals, pointing to the boat. "You see that? You know what that is?"

"What is it?" one of them said.

Bob opened the kitchen door. "That's an atomic powered sub." He grinned, and the two boys grinned. "It's full of Uranium 235. Dad's going all the way to Russia with it. When he gets through, there won't be a thing left of Moscow."



The boys went inside, the door slamming behind them.

Elwood stood looking up at the boat. In the next yard Mrs. Hunt stopped for a moment with taking down her washing, looking at him and the big square hull rising above him.

"Is it really atomic powered, Mr. Elwood?" she said.

"No."

"What makes it run, then? I don't see any sails. What kind of motor is in it? Steam?"

Elwood bit his lip. Strangely, he had never thought of that part. There was no motor in it, no motor at all. There were no sails, no boiler. He had put no engine into it, no turbines, no fuel. Nothing. It was a wood hull, an immense box, and that was all. He had never thought of what would make it go, never in all the time he and Toddy had worked on it.

Suddenly a torrent of despair descended over him. There was no engine, nothing. It was not a boat, it was only a great mass of wood and tar and nails. It would never go, never leave the yard. Liz was right: he was like some animal going out into the yard at night, to fight and kill in the darkness, to struggle dimly, without sight or understanding, equally blind, equally pathetic.

What had he built it for? He did not know. Where was it going? He did not know that either. What would make it run? How would he get it out of the yard? What was it all for, to build without understanding, darkly, like a creature in the night?

Toddy came from the garage, stirring a quart can of paint. He nodded to his father and set the can down by the ladder. Then he went back to get the brush.

Toddy had worked along side him, the whole time. Why had *he* worked? Did he know? Did the boy know what the boat was for, why they were building? Toddy had never asked. The boy had never asked because he trusted his father to know.

But he did not know. He, the father, he did not know either, and soon it would be done, finished, ready. And then what? Soon Toddy would lay down his paint brush, cover the last can of paint, put away the nails, the scraps of wood, hang the saw and hammer up in the garage again. And *then* he would ask, ask the question he had never asked before but which must come finally.

And he could not answer him.

Elwood stood, staring up at it, the great hulk they had built, struggling to understand. Why had he worked? What was it all for? When would he know? Would he *ever* know? For an endless time he stood there, staring up.

It was not until the first great black drops of rain began to splash about him that he understood.

Illustrator: William Ashman

PROJECT NIGHTMARE

by ROBERT HEINLEIN

If you're still a little bit skeptical about odd-ball characters like Two-Gun Andrews (who can roll all the naturals you want just by thinking about it) or the January Twins (those two beautiful redheads who can draw any picture you can draw, even if you sit on the other side of the room), then maybe you'd better reread the following Heinlein classic— in which the Hugo-winning author of Universe *and* Starship Troopers *shows that such extrasensory powers just might mean the difference between survival and disaster if one day we learned that enemy-planted hydrogen bombs were set to go off in each of our major cities!*

Four's your point. Roll 'em!"

"Anybody want a side bet on double deuces?"

No one answered; the old soldier rattled dice in a glass, pitched them against the washroom wall. One turned up a deuce; the other spun. Somebody yelled, "It's going to five! Come, Phoebe!"

It stopped — a two. The old soldier said, "I told you not to play with me. Anybody want cigarette money?"

"Pick it up, Pop. We don't — oh, oh! 'Ten*shun!*"

In the door stood a civilian, a colonel, and a captain. The

civilian said, "Give the money back, Two-Gun."

"Okay, Prof." The old soldier extracted two singles. "That much is mine."

"Stop!" objected the captain. "I'll impound that for evidence. Now, you men —"

The colonel stopped him. "Mick. Forget that you're adjutant. Private Andrews, come along." He went out; the others followed. They hurried through the enlisted men's club, out into desert sunshine and across the quadrangle.

The civilian said, "Two-Gun, what the deuce!"

"Shucks, Prof, I was just practicing."

"Why don't you practice against Grandma Wilkins?"

The soldier snorted. "Do I look silly?"

The colonel put in, "You're keeping a crowd of generals and V.I.P.s waiting. That isn't bright."

"Colonel Hammond, I was told to wait in the club."

"But not in its washroom. Step it up!"

They went inside headquarters to a hall where guards checked their passes before letting them in. A civilian was speaking: "— and that's the story of the history-making experiments at Duke University. Doctor Reynolds is back; he will conduct the demonstrations."

The officers sat down in the rear; Dr. Reynolds went to the speaker's table. Private Andrews sat down with a group set apart from the high brass and distinguished civilians of the audience. A character who looked like a professional gambler — and was — sat next to two beautiful redheads, identical twins. A fourteen-year-old Negro boy slumped in the next chair; he seemed asleep. Beyond him a most wide-awake person, Mrs. Anna Wilkins, tatted and looked around. In the second row were college students and a drab middle-aged man.

The table held a chuck-a-luck cage, packs of cards, scratch pads, a Geiger counter, a lead carrying case. Reynolds leaned on it and said, "Extra-Sensory Perception, or E.S.P., is a tag for little-known phenomena — telepathy, clairvoyance, clairaudience, precognition, telekinesis. They exist; we can measure them; we know that some people are thus gifted. But we don't know how they work. The British, in India during World War One, found that secrets were being stolen by telepathy." Seeing doubt in their faces Reynolds added, "It is conceivable that a spy five hundred miles away is now 'listening in' — and picking your brains of top-secret data."

Doubt was more evident. A four-star Air Force general said,

"One moment, Doctor — if true, what can we do to stop it?"

"Nothing."

"That's no answer. A lead-lined room?"

"We've tried that, General. No effect."

"Jamming with high frequencies? Or whatever 'brain waves' are?"

"Possibly, though I doubt it. If E.S.P. becomes militarily important you may have to operate with all facts known. Back to our program: These ladies and gentlemen are powerfully gifted in telekinesis, the ability to control matter at a distance. Tomorrow's experiment may not succeed, but we hope to convince the doubting Thomases" — he smiled at a man in the rear — "that it is worth trying."

The man he looked at stood up. "General Hanby!"

An Army major general looked around. "Yes, Doctor Withers?"

"I ask to be excused. My desk is loaded with urgent work — and these games have nothing to do with me."

The commanding general started to assert himself; the four-star visitor put a hand on his sleeve. "Doctor Withers, my desk in Washington is piled high, but I am here because the President sent me. Will you please stay? I want a skeptical check on my judgment."

Withers sat down, still angry. Reynolds continued: "We will start with E.S.P. rather than telekinesis — which is a bit different, anyhow." He turned to one of the redheads. "Jane, will you come here?"

The girl answered, "I'm Joan. Sure."

"All right — Joan. General LaMott, will you draw something on this scratch pad?"

The four-star flyer cocked an eyebrow. "Anything?"

"Not too complicated."

"Right, Doctor." He thought, then began a cartoon of a girl, grinned and added a pop-eyed wolf. Shortly he looked up. "Okay?"

Joan had kept busy with another pad; Reynolds took hers to the general. The sketches were alike — except that Joan had added four stars to the wolf's shoulders. The general looked at her; she looked demure. "I'm convinced," he said drily. "What next?"

"That could be clairvoyance or telepathy," Reynolds lectured. "We will now show direct telepathy." He called the second twin to him, then said, "Doctor Withers, will you help us?"

Withers still looked surly. "With what?"

"The same thing — but Jane will watch over your shoulder while Joan tries to reproduce what you draw. Make it something harder."

"Well . . . okay." He took the pad, began sketching a radio circuit while Jane watched. He signed it with a "Clem", the radioman's cartoon of the little fellow peering over a fence.

"That's fine!" said Reynolds. "Finished, Joan?"

"Yes, Doctor." He fetched her pad; the diagram was correct — but Joan had added to "Clem" a wink.

Reynolds interrupted awed comment with, "I will skip card demonstrations and turn to telekinesis. "Has anyone a pair of dice?" No one volunteered; he went on, "We have some supplied by your physics department. This chuck-a-luck cage is signed and sealed by them and so is this package." He broke it open, spilled out a dozen dice. "Two-Gun, how about some naturals?"

"I'll try, Prof."

"General LaMott, please select a pair and put them in this cup."

The general complied and handed the cup to Andrews. "What are you going to roll, soldier?"

"Would a sixty-five suit the General?"

"If you can."

"Would the General care to put up a five spot, to make it interesting?" He waited, wide-eyed and innocent.

La Mott grinned. "You're faded, soldier." He peeled out a five; Andrews covered it, rattled the cup and rolled. One die stopped on the bills — a five. The other bounced against a chair — a six.

"Let it ride, sir?"

"I'm not a sucker twice. Show us some naturals."

"As you say, sir." Two-Gun picked up the money, then rolled 6–1, 5–2, 4–3, and back again. He rolled several 6–1s, then got snake eyes. He tried again, got acey-deucey. He faced the little old lady. "Ma'am," he said, "if you want to roll, why don't you get down here and do the work?"

"Why, Mr. Andrews!"

Reynolds said hastily, "You'll get your turn, Mrs. Wilkins."

"I don't know what you gentlemen are talking about." She resumed tatting.

Colonel Hammond sat down by the redheads. "You're the January Twins — aren't you?"

"Our public!" one answered delightedly.

"The name is 'Brown'," said the other.

"'Brown'," he agreed, "but how about a show for the boys?"

"Dr. Reynolds wouldn't like it," the first said dutifully.

"I'll handle him. We don't get USO; security regulations are too strict. How about it, Joan?"

"I'm Jane. Okay, if you fix it with Prof."

"Good girls!" He went back to where Grandma Wilkins was dem-

onstrating selection — showers of sixes in the chuck-a-luck cage. She was still tatting. Dr. Withers watched glumly. Hammond said, "Well, Doc?"

"These things are disturbing," Withers admitted, "but it's on the molar level — nothing affecting the elementary particles."

"How about those sketches?"

"I'm a physicist, not a psychologist. But the basic particles — electrons, neutrons, protons — can't be affected except with apparatus designed in accordance with the laws of radioactivity!"

Dr. Reynolds was in earshot; at Withers' remark he said, "Thank you, Mrs. Wilkins. Now, ladies and gentlemen, another experiment. Norman!"

The colored boy opened his eyes. "Yeah, Prof?"

"Up here. And the team from your physics laboratory, please. Has anyone a radium-dial watch?"

Staff technicians hooked the Geiger counter through an amplifier so that normal background radioactivity was heard as occasional clicks, then placed a radium-dial watch close to the counter tube; the clicks changed to hail-storm volume. "Lights out, please," directed Reynolds.

The boy said, "Now, Prof?"

"Wait, Norman. Can everyone see the watch?" The silence was broken only by the rattle of the amplifier, counting radioactivity of the glowing figures. "Now, Norman!"

The shining figures quenched out; the noise died to sparse clicks.

The same group was in a blockhouse miles out in the desert; more miles beyond was the bomb proving site; facing it was a periscope window set in concrete and glazed with solid feet of laminated filter glass. Dr. Reynolds was talking with Major General Hanby. A naval captain took reports via earphones and speaker horn; he turned to the C.O. "Planes on station, sir."

"Thanks, Dick."

The horn growled, "Station Charlie to Control; we fixed it."

The navy man said to Hanby, "All stations ready, range clear."

"Pick up the count."

"All stations, stand by to resume count at minus seventeen minutes. Time station, pick up the count. This is a live run. Repeat, this is a live run."

Hanby said to Reynolds, "Distance makes no difference?"

"We could work from Salt Lake City once my colleagues knew the setup." He glanced down. "My watch must have stopped."

"Always feels that way. Remember the metronome on the first Bikini test? It nearly drove me nuts."

"I can imagine. Um, General, some of my people are high-strung. Suppose I *ad lib?*"

Hanby smiled grimly. "We al-

ways have a pacifier for visitors. Doctor Withers, ready with your curtain raiser?"

The chief physicist was bending over a group at instruments; he looked tired. "Not today," he answered in a flat voice. "Satterlee will make it."

Satterlee came forward and grinned at the brass and V.I.P.s and at Reynolds' operators. "I've been saving a joke for an audience that can't walk out. But first —" He picked up a polished metal sphere and looked at the E.S.P. adepts. "You saw a ball like this on your tour this morning. That one was plutonium; it's still out there waiting to go *bang!* in about . . . eleven minutes. This is merely steel — unless someone has made a mistake. That would be a joke — we'd laugh ourselves to bits!"

He got no laugh, went on: "But it doesn't weigh enough; we're safe. This dummy has been prepared so that Dr. Reynolds' people will have an image to help them concentrate. It looks no more like an atom bomb than I look like Stalin, but it represents — if it were plutonium — what we atom tinkerers call a 'subcritical mass'. Since the spy trials everybody knows how an atom bomb works. Plutonium gives off neutrons at a constant rate. If the mass is small, most of them escape to the outside. But if it is large enough, or a critical mass, enough are absorbed by other nuclei to start a chain reaction. The trick is to assemble a critical mass quickly — then run for your life! This happens in microseconds; I can't be specific without upsetting the security officer.

"Today we will find out if the mind can change the rate of neutron emission in plutonium. By theories sound enough to have destroyed two Japanese cities, the emission of any particular neutron is pure chance, but the total emission is as invariable as the stars in their courses. Otherwise it would be impossible to make atom bombs.

"By standard theory, theory that works, that subcritical mass out there is no more likely to explode than a pumpkin. Our test group will try to change that. They will concentrate, try to increase the probability of neutrons' escaping, and thus set off that sphere as an atom bomb."

"Doctor Satterlee?" asked a vice admiral with wings. "Do you think it can be done?"

"*Absolutely not!*" Satterlee turned to the adepts. "No offense intended, folks."

"Five minutes!" announced the navy captain.

Satterlee nodded to Reynolds. "Take over. And good luck."

Mrs. Wilkins spoke up. "Just a moment, young man. These 'neuter' things. I —"

"Neutrons, madam."

"That's what I said. I don't quite understand. I suppose that sort of thing comes in high school, but I only finished eighth grade. I'm sorry."

Satterlee looked sorry, too, but he tried. "— and each of these nuclei is potentially able to spit out one of these little neutrons. In that sphere out there" — he held up the dummy — "there are, say, five thousand billion trillion nuclei, each one —"

"My, that's quite a lot, isn't it?"

"Madam, it certainly is. Now —"

"*Two minutes!*"

Reynolds interrupted. "Mrs. Wilkins, don't worry. Concentrate on that metal ball out there and think about those neutrons, each one ready to come out. When I give the word, I want you all — you especially, Norman — to think about that ball, spitting sparks like a watch dial. Try for more sparks. Simply try. If you fail, no one will blame you. Don't get tense."

Mrs. Wilkins nodded. "I'll try." She put her tatting down and got a faraway look.

At once they were blinded by unbelievable radiance bursting through the massive filter. It beat on them, then died away.

The naval captain said, "What the hell!" Someone screamed, "It's gone, it's gone!"

The speaker brayed: "Fission at minus one minute thirty-seven seconds. Control, what went wrong. It looks like a hydrogen —"

The concussion wave hit and all sounds were smothered. Lights went out, emergency lighting clicked on. The blockhouse heaved like a boat in a heavy sea. Their eyes were still dazzled, their ears assaulted by cannonading afternoise, and physicists were elbowing flag officers at the port, when an anguished soprano cut through the din. "Oh, *dear!*"

Reynolds snapped, "What's the matter, Grandma? You all right?"

"Me? Oh, yes, yes — but I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do it."

"Do what?"

"I was just feeling it out, thinking about all those little bitty neuters, ready to spit. But I didn't mean to make it go off — not till you told us to."

"Oh." Reynolds turned to the rest. "Anyone else jump the gun?"

No one admitted it. Mrs. Wilkins said timidly, "I'm sorry, Doctor. Have they got another one? I'll be more careful."

Reynolds and Withers were seated in the officers' mess with coffee in front of them; the physicist paid no attention to his. His eyes glittered and his face twitched. "No limits! Calculations show over *ninety per cent* conversion of mass to energy.

You know what that *means?* If we assume — no, never mind. Just say that we could make every bomb the size of a pea. No tamper. No control circuits. Nothing but . . ." He paused. "Delivery would be fast, small jets — just a pilot, a weaponeer, and one of your 'operators'. No limit to the number of bombs. No nation on earth could —"

"Take it easy," said Reynolds. "We've got only a few telekinesis operators. You wouldn't risk them in a plane."

"But —"

"You don't need to. Show them the bombs, give them photos of the targets, hook them by radio to the weaponeer. That spreads them thin. And we'll test for more sensitive people. My figures show about one in eighteen hundred."

"'Spread them thin'," repeated Withers. "Mrs. Wilkins could handle dozens of bombs, one after another — couldn't she?"

"I suppose so. We'll test."

"We will indeed!" Withers noticed his coffee, gulped it. "Forgive me, Doctor; I'm punchy. I've had to revise too many opinions."

"I know. I was a behaviorist."

Captain Mikeler came in, looked around and came over. "The General wants you both," he said softly. "Hurry."

They were ushered into a guarded office. Major General Hanby was with General LaMott and Vice Admiral Keithley; they looked grim. Hanby handed them message flimsies. Reynolds saw the stamp TOP SECRET and handed his back. "General, I'm not cleared for this."

"Shut up and read it."

Reynolds skipped the number groups: " — (PARAPHRASED) RUSSIAN EMBASSY TODAY HANDED STATE ULTIMATUM: DEMANDS USA CONVERT TO 'PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC' UNDER POLITICAL COMMISSARS TO BE ASSIGNED BY USSR. MILITARY ASSURANCES DEMANDED. NOTE CLAIMS MAJOR US CITIES (LIST SEPARATE) ARE MINED WITH ATOMIC BOMBS WHICH THEY THREATEN TO SET OFF BY RADIO IF TERMS ARE NOT MET BY SIXTEEN HUNDRED FRIDAY EST."

Reynolds reread it — "SIXTEEN HUNDRED FRIDAY" — two o'clock tomorrow afternoon, local time. Our cities booby-trapped with A-bombs? Could they do that? He realized that LaMott was speaking. "We must assume that the threat is real. Our free organization makes it an obvious line of attack."

The admiral said, "They may be bluffing."

The air general shook his head. "They know the President won't surrender. We can't assume that Ivan is stupid."

Reynolds wondered why he was being allowed to hear this. LaMott looked at him. "Admiral Keithley and I leave for Washington at once. I have delayed to ask you this: your people set off an atom bomb. *Can they keep bombs from going off?*"

Reynolds felt his time sense stretch as if he had all year to think about Grandma Wilkins, Norman, his other paranormals. "Yes," he answered.

LaMott stood up. "Your job, Hanby. Coming, Admiral?"

"Wait!" protested Reynolds. "Give me one bomb and Mrs. Wilkins — and I'll sit on it. But how many cities? Twenty? Thirty?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Thirty-eight bombs — or more. Where are they? What do they look like? How long will this go on? It's impossible."

"Of course — but do it anyhow. Or try. Hanby, tell them we're on our way, will you?"

"Certainly, General."

"Good-by, Doctor. Or so long, rather."

Reynolds suddenly realized that these two were going back to "sit" on one of the bombs, to continue their duties until it killed them. He said quickly, "We'll try. We'll certainly try."

Thirty-eight cities . . . forty-three hours . . . and seventeen adepts. Others were listed in years of research, but they were scattered through forty-one states. In a dictatorship secret police would locate them at once, deliver them at supersonic speeds. But this was America.

Find them! Get them here! *Fast!* Hanby assigned Colonel Hammond to turn Reynolds' wishes into orders and directed his security officer to delegate his duties, get on the phone and use his acquaintance with the F.B.I., with other security officers, and through them with local police, to cut red tape and *find those paranormals*. Find them, convince them, bring pressure, start them winging toward the proving ground. By sundown, twenty-three had been found, eleven had been convinced or coerced, two had arrived. Hanby phoned Reynolds, caught him eating a sandwich standing up. "Hanby speaking. The President just phoned."

"The President?"

"LaMott got in to see him. He's dubious, but he's authorized an all-out try, short of slowing down conventional defense. One of his assistants left National Airport by jet plane half an hour ago to come here and help. Things will move faster."

But it did not speed things up, as the Russian broadcast was even then being beamed, making the crisis public; the President went on the air thirty minutes later. Reynolds did not hear him;

he was busy. Twenty people to save twenty cities — and a world. But how? He was sure that Mrs. Wilkins could smother any A-bomb she had seen; he hoped the others could. But a hidden bomb in a far-off city — find it mentally, think about it, quench it, not for the microsecond it took to set one off, but for the billions of micro-seconds it might take to uncover it — was it possible?

What would help? Certain drugs — caffeine, benzedrine. They must have quiet, too. He turned to Hammond. "I want a room and bath for each one."

"You've got that."

"No, we're doubled up, with semi-private baths."

Hammond shrugged. "Can do. It means booting out some brass."

"Keep the kitchen manned. They must not sleep, but they'll have to eat. Fresh coffee all the time and cokes and tea — anything they want. Can you put the room phones through a private switchboard?"

"Okay. What else?"

"I don't know. We'll talk to them."

They all knew of the Russian broadcast, but not what was being planned; they met his words with uneasy silence. Reynolds turned to Andrews. "Well, Two-Gun?"

"Big bite to chew, Prof."

"Yes. Can you chew it?"

"Have to, I reckon."

"Norman?"

"Gee, Boss! How can I when I can't see 'em?"

"Mrs. Wilkins couldn't see that bomb this morning. You can't see radioactivity on a watch dial; it's too small. You just see the dial and think about it. Well?"

The Negro lad scowled. "Think of a shiny ball in a city somewhere?"

"Yes. No, wait — Colonel Hammond, they need a visual image and it won't be that. There are atom bombs here — they must *see* one."

Hammond frowned. "An American bomb meant for dropping or firing won't look like a Russian bomb rigged for placement and radio triggering."

"What will they look like?"

"G-2 ought to know. I hope. We'll get some sort of picture. A three-dimensional mock-up, too. I'd better find Withers and the General." He left.

Mrs. Wilkins said briskly, "Doctor, I'll watch Washington, D. C."

"Yes, Mrs. Wilkins. You're the only one who has been tested, even in reverse. So you guard Washington; it's of prime importance."

"No, no, that's not why. It's the city I can *see* best."

Andrews said, "She's got something, Prof. I pick Seattle."

By midnight Reynolds had his charges, twenty-six by now,

tucked away in the officers' club. Hammond and he took turns at a switchboard rigged in the upper hall. The watch would not start until shortly before deadline. Fatigue reduced paranormal powers, sometimes to zero; Reynolds hoped that they were getting one last night of sleep.

A microphone had been installed in each room; a selector switch let them listen in. Reynolds disliked this but Hammond argued, "Sure, it's an invasion of privacy. So is being blown up by an A-bomb." He dialed the switch. "Hear that? Our boy Norman is sawing wood." He moved it again. "Private 'Two-Gun' is still stirring. We can't let them sleep, once it starts, so we have to spy on them."

"I suppose so."

Withers came upstairs. "Anything more you need?"

"I guess not," answered Reynolds. "How about the bomb mock-up?"

"Before morning."

"How authentic is it?"

"Hard to say. Their agents probably rigged firing circuits from radio parts bought right here; the circuits could vary a lot. But the business part — well, we're using real plutonium."

"Good. We'll show it to them after breakfast."

Two-Gun's door opened. "Howdy, Colonel. Prof — it's there."

"What is?"

"The bomb. Under Seattle. I can feel it."

"*Where is it?*"

"It's down — it *feels* down. And it feels wet, somehow. Would they put it in the Sound?"

Hammond jumped up. "In the harbor — and shower the city with radioactive water!" He was ringing as he spoke. "Get me General Hanby!"

"Morrison here," a voice answered. "What is it, Hammond?"

"The Seattle bomb — have them dredge for it. It's in the Sound, or somewhere under water."

"Eh? How do you know?"

"One of Reynolds' magicians. Do it!" He cut off.

Andrews said worriedly, "Prof, I can't *see* it — I'm not a 'seeing-eye.' Why don't you get one? Say that little Mrs. Brentano?"

"Oh, my God! Clairvoyants — we need them, too."

Withers said, "Eh, Doctor? Do you think —"

"No, I don't, or I would have thought of it. How do they search for bombs? What instruments?"

"Instruments? A bomb in its shielding doesn't even affect a Geiger counter. You have to open things and look."

"How long will that take? Say for New York!"

Hammond said, "Shut up! Reynolds, where are these clairvoyants?"

Reynolds chewed his lip. "They're scarce."

"Scarcer than us dice rollers," added Two-Gun. "But get that Brentano kid. She found keys I had lost digging a ditch. Buried three feet deep — and me searching my quarters."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Brentano." Reynolds pulled out a notebook.

Hammond reached for the switchboard. "Morrison? Stand by for more names — and even more urgent than the others."

More urgent but harder to find; the Panic was on. The President urged everyone to keep cool and stay home, whereupon thirty million people stampeded. The ticker in the P.I.O. office typed the story: "NEW YORK NY — TO CLEAR JAM CAUSED BY WRECKS IN OUTBOUND TUBE THE INBOUND TUBE OF HOLLAND TUNNEL HAS BEEN REVERSED. POLICE HAVE STOPPED TRYING TO PREVENT EVACUATION. BULLDOZERS WORKING TO REOPEN TRIBOROUGH BRIDGE, BLADES SHOVING WRECKED CARS AND HUMAN HAMBURGER. WEEHAWKEN FERRY DISASTER CONFIRMED: NO PASSENGER LIST YET — FLASH — GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE GAVE WAY AT 0353 EST, WHETHER FROM OVERLOAD OR SABOTAGE

NOT KNOWN. MORE MORE MORE — FLASH —"

It was repeated everywhere. The Denver-Colorado Springs highway had one hundred thirty-five deaths by midnight, then reports stopped. A DC-6 at Burbank ploughed into a mob which had broken through the barrier. The Baltimore-Washington highway was clogged both ways; Memorial Bridge was out of service. The five outlets from Los Angeles were solid with creeping cars. At four a.m. EST the President declared martial law; the order had no immediate effect.

By morning Reynolds had thirty-one adepts assigned to twenty-four cities. He had a stomach-churning ordeal before deciding to let them work only cities known to them. The gambler, Even-Money Karsch, had settled it: "Doc, I know when I'm hot. Minneapolis *has* to be mine." Reynolds gave in, even though one of his students had just arrived from there; he put them both on it and prayed that at least one would be "hot". Two clairvoyants arrived; one, a blind newsdealer from Chicago, was put to searching there; the other, a carnie mentalist, was given the list and told to find bombs wherever she could. Mrs. Brentano had remarried and moved; Norfolk was being combed for her.

At one fifteen p.m., forty-five minutes before deadline, they were in their rooms, each with maps and aerial views of his city, each with photos of the mocked-up bomb. The club was clear of residents; the few normals needed to coddle the paranormals kept careful quiet. Roads nearby were blocked; air traffic was warned away. Everything was turned toward providing an atmosphere in which forty-two people could sit still and *think*.

At the switchboard were Hammond, Reynolds, and Gordon McClintock, the President's assistant. Reynolds glanced up. "What time is it?"

"One thirty-seven," rasped Hammond. "Twenty-three minutes."

"One thirty-eight," disagreed McClintock. "Reynolds, how about Detroit? You *can't* leave it unguarded."

"Whom can I use? Each is guarding the city he knows best."

"Those twin girls — I heard them mention Detroit."

"They've played everywhere. But Pittsburgh is their home."

"Switch one of them to Detroit."

Reynolds thought of telling him to go to Detroit himself. "They work together. You want to get them upset and lose both cities?"

Instead of answering McClintock said, "And who's watching Cleveland?"

"Norman Johnson. He lives there and he's our second strongest operator."

They were interrupted by voices downstairs. A man came up, carrying a bag, and spotted Reynolds. "Oh, hello, Doctor. What is this? I'm on top priority work — tank production — when the F.B.I. grabs me. You are responsible?"

"Yes. Come with me." McClintock started to speak, but Reynolds led the man away. "Mr. Nelson, did you bring your family?"

"No, they're still in Detroit. Had I known —"

"Please! Listen carefully." He explained, pointed out a map of Detroit in the room to which they went, showed him pictures of the simulated bomb. "You understand?"

Nelson's jaw muscles were jumping. "It seems impossible."

"It *is* possible. You've got to think about that bomb — or bombs. Get in touch, squeeze them, keep them from going off. You'll have to stay awake."

Nelson breathed gustily. "I'll stay awake."

"That phone will get you anything you want. Good luck."

He passed the room occupied by the blind clairvoyant; the door was open. "Harry, it's Prof. Getting anything?"

The man turned to the voice. "It's in the Loop. I could walk to it if I were there. A six-story building."

"That's the best you can do?"

"Tell them to try the attic. I get warm when I go up."

"Right away!" He rushed back, saw that Hanby had arrived. Swiftly he keyed the communications office. "Reynolds speaking. The Chicago bomb is in a six-story building in the Loop area, probably in the attic. No — that's all. G'by!"

Hanby started to speak; Reynolds shook his head and looked at his watch. Silently the General picked up the phone. "This is the commanding officer. Have any flash sent here." He put the phone down and stared at his watch.

For fifteen endless minutes they stood silent. The general broke it by taking the phone and saying, "Hanby. Anything?"

"No, General. Washington is on the wire."

"Eh? You say Washington?"

"Yes, sir. Here's the General, Mr. Secretary."

Hanby sighed. "Hanby speaking, Mr. Secretary. You're all right? Washington . . . is all right?"

They could hear the relayed voice. "Certainly, certainly. We're past the deadline. But I wanted to tell you: Radio Moscow is telling the world that our cities are in flames."

Hanby hesitated. "None of them are?"

"Certainly not. I've a talker hooked in to GHQ, which has an open line to every city listed. All safe. I don't know whether your freak people did any good but, one way or another, it was a false —" The line went dead.

Hanby's face went dead with it. He jiggled the phone. "I've been cut off!"

"Not here, General — at the other end. Just a moment."

They waited. Presently the operator said, "Sorry, sir. I can't get them to answer."

"Keep trying!"

It was slightly over a minute — it merely seemed longer — when the operator said, "Here's your party, sir."

"That you, Hanby?" came the voice. "I suppose we'll have phone troubles just as we had last time. Now, about these ESP people: while we are grateful and all that, nevertheless I suggest that nothing be released to the papers. Might be misinterpreted."

"Oh. Is that an order, Mr. Secretary?"

"Oh, no, no! But have such things routed through my office."

"Yes, sir." He cradled the phone.

McClintock said, "You shouldn't have rung off, General. I'd like to know whether the Chief wants this business continued."

"Suppose we talk about it on the way back to my office." The General urged him away, turned and gave Reynolds a solemn wink.

Trays were placed outside the doors at six o'clock; most of them sent for coffee during the evening. Mrs. Wilkins ordered tea; she kept her door open and chatted with anyone who passed. Harry the newsboy was searching Milwaukee; no answer had been received from his tip about Chicago. Mrs. Ekstein, or "Princess Cathay" as she was billed, had reported a "feeling" about a house trailer in Denver and was now poring over a map of New Orleans. With the passing of the deadline panic abated; communications were improving. The American people were telling each other that they had known that those damned commies were bluffing.

Hammond and Reynolds sent for more coffee at three a.m.; Reynolds' hand trembled as he poured. Hammond said, "You haven't slept for two nights. Get over on that divan."

"Neither have you."

"I'll sleep when you wake up."

"I *can't* sleep. I'm worrying about what'll happen when *they* get sleepy." He gestured at the line of doors.

"So am I."

At seven a.m. Two-Gun came out. "Prof, they got it. The bomb. It's gone. Like closing your hand on nothing."

Hammond grabbed the phone. "Get me Seattle — the F.B.I. office."

While they waited, Two-Gun said, "What now, Prof?"

Reynolds tried to think. "Maybe you should rest."

"Not until this is over. Who's got Toledo? I know that burg."

"Uh . . . young Barnes."

Hammond was connected; he identified himself, asked the question. He put the phone down gently. "They *did* get it," he whispered. "It was in the lake."

"I told you it was wet," agreed Two-Gun. "Now, about Toledo —"

"Well . . . tell me when you've got it and we'll let Barnes rest."

McClintock rushed in at seven thirty-five, followed by Hanby. "Doctor Reynolds! Colonel Hammond!"

"*Sh!* Quiet! You'll disturb them."

McClintock said in a lower voice, "Yes, surely — I was excited. This is important. They located a bomb in Seattle and —"

"Yes. Private Andrews told us."

"Huh? How did *he* know?"

"Never mind," Hanby intervened. "The point is, they found the bomb already triggered. Now we *know* that your people are protecting the cities."

"Was there any doubt?"

"Well . . . yes."

"But there isn't now," McClintock added. "I must take over." He bent over the board. "Communications? Put that White House line through here."

"Just what," Reynolds said slowly, "do you mean by 'take over'?"

"Eh? Why, take charge on behalf of the President. Make sure these people don't let down an instant!"

"But what do you propose to *do?*"

Hanby said hastily, "Nothing, Doctor. We'll just keep in touch with Washington from here."

They continued the vigil together; Reynolds spent the time hating McClintock's guts. He started to take coffee, then decided on another benzedrine tablet instead. He hoped his people were taking enough of it — and not too much. They all had it, except Grandma Wilkins, who wouldn't touch it. He wanted to check with them but knew that he could not — each bomb was bound only by a thread of thought; a split-split second of diversion might be enough.

The outside light flashed; Hanby took the call. "Congress has recessed," he announced, "and the President is handing the Soviet Union a counter ultimatum; locate and disarm any bombs or be bombed in return." The light flashed again; Hanby answered. His face lit up. "Two more

found," he told them. "One in Chicago, right where your man said; the other in Camden."

"Camden? How?"

"They rounded up the known Communists, of course. This laddie was brought back there for questioning. He didn't like that; he knew that he was being held less than a mile from the bomb. Who is on Camden?"

"Mr. Dimwiddy."

"The elderly man with the bunions?"

"That's right — retired postman. General, do we assume that there is only one bomb per city?"

McClintock answered, "Of course not! These people must —"

Hanby cut in, "Central Intelligence is assuming so, except for New York and Washington. If they had more bombs here, they would have added more cities."

Reynolds left to take Dimwiddy off watch. McClintock, he fumed, did not realize that people were flesh and blood.

Dimwiddy was unsurprised. "A while ago the pressure let up, then — well, I'm afraid I dozed. I had a terrible feeling that I had let it go off, then I knew it hadn't." Reynolds told him to rest, then be ready to help out elsewhere. They settled on Philadelphia; Dimwiddy had once lived there.

The watch continued. Mrs. Ekstein came up with three hits, but no answers came back; Reynolds still had to keep those cities covered. She then complained that her "sight" had gone; Reynolds went to her room and told her to nap, not wishing to consult McClintock.

Luncheon trays came and went. Reynolds continued worrying over how to arrange his operators to let them rest. Forty-three people and thirty-five cities — if only he had two for every city! Maybe any of them could watch any city? No, he could not chance it.

Barnes woke up and took back Toledo; that left Two-Gun free. Should he let him take Cleveland? Norman had had no relief and Two-Gun had once been through it, on a train. The colored boy was amazing but rather hysterical, whereas Two-Gun — well, Reynolds felt that Two-Gun would last, even through a week of no sleep.

No! He couldn't trust Cleveland to a man who had merely passed through it. But with Dimwiddy on Philadelphia, when Mary Gifford woke he could put her on Houston and that would let Hank sleep before shifting him to Indianapolis and that would let him —

A chess game, with all pawns queens and no mistakes allowed.

McClintock was twiddling the selector switch, listening in. Suddenly he snapped, "Someone is asleep!"

Reynolds checked the number.

"Of course, that's the twins' room; they take turns. You may hear snores in 21 and 30 and 8 and 19. It's okay; they're off watch."

"Well, all right." McClintock seemed annoyed.

Reynolds bent back to his list. Shortly McClintock snorted, "Who's in room 12?"

"Uh? Wait — that's Norman Johnson, Cleveland."

"*You mean he's on watch?*"

"Yes." Reynolds could hear the boy's asthmatic breathing, felt relieved.

"He's asleep!"

"No, he's not."

But McClintock was rushing down the corridor. Reynolds took after him; Hammond and Hanby followed. Reynolds caught up as McClintock burst into room 12. Norman was sprawled in a chair, eyes closed in his habitual attitude. McClintock rushed up, slapped him. "Wake up!"

Reynolds grabbed McClintock. "You bloody fool!"

Norman opened his eyes, then burst into tears. "It's *gone!*"

"Steady, Norman. It's all right."

"No, no! It's gone — and my mammy's gone with it!"

McClintock snapped, "Concentrate, boy! Get back on it!"

Reynolds turned on him. "Get out. Get out before I punch you."

Hanby and Hammond were in the door; the General cut in with a hoarse whisper. "Pipe down Doctor, bring the boy."

Back at the board the outside light was flashing. Hanby took the call while Reynolds tried to quiet the boy. Hanby listened gravely, then said, "He's right. Cleveland just got it."

McClintock snapped, "He went to sleep. He ought to be shot."

"Shut up," said Hanby.

"But —!"

Reynolds said, "Any others, General?"

"Why would there be?"

"All this racket. It may have disturbed a dozen of them."

"Oh, we'll see." He called Washington again. Presently he sighed. "No, just Cleveland. We were . . . lucky."

"General," McClintock insisted, "he was asleep."

Hanby looked at him. "Sir, you may be the President's deputy, but you yourself have no military authority. Off my post."

"But I am directed by the President to —"

"Off my post, sir! Go back to Washington. *Or to Cleveland.*"

McClintock looked dumbfounded. Hanby added, "You're worse than bad — you're a fool."

"The President will hear of this."

"Blunder again and the President won't live that long. Get out."

By nightfall the situation was rapidly getting worse. Twenty-seven cities were still threatened

and Reynolds was losing operators faster than bombs were being found. Even-Money Karsch would not relieve when awakened. "See that?" he said, rolling dice. "Cold as a well-digger's feet. I'm through." After that Reynolds tested each one who was about to relieve, found that some were tired beyond the power of short sleep to restore them — they were "cold".

By midnight there were eighteen operators for nineteen cities. The twins he had fearfully split up; it had worked. Mrs. Wilkins was holding both Washington and Baltimore; she had taken Baltimore when he had no one to relieve there.

But now he had no one for relief anywhere and three operators — Nelson, Two-Gun and Grandma Wilkins — had had no rest. He was too fagged to worry; he simply knew that whenever one of them reached his limit, the United States would lose a city. The panic had resumed after the bombing of Cleveland; roads again were choked. The disorder made harder the search for bombs. But there was nothing he could do.

Mrs. Ekstein still complained about her sight but kept at it. Harry the newsboy had had no luck with Milwaukee, but there was no use shifting him; other cities were "dark" to him. During the night Mrs. Ekstein pointed to the bomb in Houston. It was, she said, in a box underground. A coffin? Yes, there was a headstone; she was unable to read the name.

Thus, many recent dead in Houston were disturbed. But it was nine Sunday morning before Reynolds went to tell Mary Gifford that she could rest — or relieve for Wilmington, if she felt up to it. He found her collapsed and lifted her onto the bed, wondering if she had known the Houston bomb was found.

Eleven cities now and eight people. Grandma Wilkins held four cities. No one else had been able to double up. Reynolds thought dully that it was a miracle that they had been able to last at all; it surpassed enormously the best test performance.

Hammond looked up as he returned. "Make any changes?"

"No. The Gifford kid is through. We'll lose half a dozen cities before this is over."

"Some of them must be damn near empty by now."

"I hope so. Any more bombs found?"

"Not yet. How do you feel, Doc?"

"Three weeks dead." Reynolds sat down wearily. He was wondering if he should wake some of those sleeping and test them again when he heard a noise below; he went to the stairwell.

Up came an M.P. captain. "They said to bring her here."

Reynolds looked at the woman with him. "Dorothy Brentano!"

"Dorothy Smith now."

He controlled his trembling and explained what was required. She nodded. "I figured that out on the plane. Got a pencil? Take this: St. Louis — a river warehouse with a sign reading 'Bartlett & Sons, Jobbers'. Look in the loft. And Houston — no, they got that one. Baltimore — it's in a ship at the docks, the S. S. *Gold Coast*. What other cities? I've wasted time feeling around where there was nothing to find."

Reynolds was already shouting for Washington to answer.

Grandma Wilkins was last to be relieved; Dorothy located one in the Potomac — and Mrs. Wilkins told her sharply to keep trying. There were four bombs in Washington, which Mrs. Wilkins had known all along. Dorothy found them in eleven minutes.

Three hours later Reynolds showed up in the club messroom, not having been able to sleep. Several of his people were eating and listening to the radio blast about our raid on Russia. He gave it a wide berth; they could blast Omsk and Tomsk and Minsk and Pinsk; today he didn't care. He was sipping milk and thinking that he would never drink coffee again when Captain Mikeler bent over his table. "The General wants you. Hurry!"

"Why?"

"I said, 'Hurry!' Where's Grandma Wilkins — oh — see her. Who is Mrs. Dorothy Smith?"

Reynolds looked around. "She's with Mrs. Wilkins."

Mikeler rushed them to Hanby's office. Hanby merely said, "Sit over there. And you ladies, too. Stay in focus."

Reynolds found himself looking into a television screen at the President of the United States. He looked as weary as Reynolds felt, but he turned on his smile. "You are Doctor Reynolds?"

"Yes, Mr. President!"

"These ladies are Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Smith?"

"Yes, sir."

The President said quietly, "You three and your colleagues will be thanked by the Republic. And by me, for myself. But that must wait. Mrs. Smith, there are more bombs — in Russia. Could your strange gift find them there?"

"Why, I don't — I can try!"

"Mrs. Wilkins, could you set off those Russian bombs while they are still far away?"

Incredibly, she was still bright-eyed and chipper. "Why, Mr. President!"

"Can you?"

She got a far-away look. "Dorothy and I had better have a quiet room somewhere. And I'd like a pot of tea. A large pot."

The End

It takes more than good writing alone or a brand-new idea to win a Hugo in a field as competitive as this one. As a matter of fact, ever since the days of H.G. Wells, we've seen enough of both to keep science fiction that special stimulus so many of us crave. No, what the potential Hugo-winner needs—besides writing skill and originality—is power, insight, profundity. The very qualities found in Frank Herbert's brilliant novel Dune*—a Hugo-winner of course. The same qualities also found in "Heaven Makers"—which here concludes with the intriguing question of how an immortal can prove he is unafraid of death.*

The Heaven Makers

FRANK HERBERT

Illustrated by MORROW

(Second of Two Parts)

Synopsis of Part One

Hidden deep beneath one of Earth's oceans is the alien "story-ship" from which FRAFFIN the Director—an immortal Chem from the stars—has been composing the "stories" that have thrilled his kind since before the dawn of human history. But for a long while now, his superiors have suspected something wrong. For besides manipulating Earth's primitives for the amusement of

the Chem, could Fraffin also be sowing dangerous seeds of awareness which one day might threaten Chem supremacy in the universe?

Already four Chem investigators have returned from Earth, each reporting nothing suspicious and each—most disquieting of all—resigning from the servis to start his own storyship elsewhere. Now a fifth investigator, KELEXEL, has arrived. Posing as a wealthy visitor, he is determined not to be taken in like his predecessors.

However, Kelexel's disguise is easily penetrated by YNVIC the shipsurgeon (a wizened female Chem), who warns Fraffin of the consequences if they are exposed. (They have been illegally interbreeding with Earth primitives, a pastime which could lead to the emergence of dangerous "immunes.")

Fraffin ensnares the new investigator by subjecting him to the full dramatic influence of his latest pantovive production (a three-dimensional representation of Chem-directed tragedy involving Earth natives), this one devoted to the savage slaying of a female native (ADELE MURPHEY), whose Chem-maddened mate (JOE MURPHEY) cuts her down with seven vicious strokes of a souvenir sword. Watching, Kelexel becomes so absorbed in the violence of the story that he can't stop thinking about RUTH HUDSON, the murdered woman's daughter. All this, of course is according to Fraffin's plan. He instructs LUTT—his Master-of-Craft—to bring the girl to the ship immediately.

Meanwhile, up on the surface, Fraffin's latest story begins. In the little town of Moreno, California, psychologist ANDROCLES (ANDY) THURLOW is awakened by deputy sheriff CLINT MOSSMAN, who informs Andy that his old girl friend's father has just brutally murdered his wife. Holed up in his own office building, Murphey refuses to surrender to anyone except Thurlow. When the psychologist arrives, the wife-killer agrees to come down—but only in seven minutes. While waiting, Thurlow suddenly notices a strange cylindrical object hovering outside an upper window, on a projecting platform two spindly creatures (Fraffin's "shooting crew") aiming a small stand-mounted tube at the scene. Since no one else can see the "object," Thurlow remains silent about it, attributing the "vision" to the special polarized glasses he is wearing. (Several months earlier he injured his eyes in a radiation lab accident.) Finally, when Murphey is taken away, the "object" disappears.

Two days later Thurlow agrees to meet Ruth Hudson at their old trysting place just outside of town. While waiting for her, he

broods over Joe Murphey's fate. Even though Thurlow himself had predicted the man's breakdown months ago, that probably wouldn't help much in court. And District Attorney PARET would undoubtedly call in Thurlow's boss—DR. LEROI WHEYLE, a "hanging psychiatrist" if there ever was one—to attest to Murphey's sanity at the time of the slaying.

Then Ruth arrives. Distraught over the murder, she admits that her marriage to Nev Hudson had been a mistake, that she still loves Thurlow. The psychologist, also caught up in a whirl of emotions, is still very much in love with Ruth, but he can't quite see how they will straighten out such tangled affairs. But his doubts are soon swept away in a rush of passion for her. Gradually, however, he becomes aware that both Ruth and he are being influenced by something irresistible *outside* them. Then he sees it—though Ruth can't, even though she desperately wants to believe him. Another of the strange craft shimmering into view, this one spherical, with grotesque little men (Lutt and his assistants) pointing instruments at them, trying to manipulate their emotions. Somehow Thurlow manages to fight off their power. Staggering, he half-carries, half-drags a bewildered Ruth away toward his car. The frustrated aliens depart.

Thurlow then drives Ruth to her home and waits outside until she can pack a few things. She has decided to leave her husband for good. Inside the house, however, a furious quarrel is in progress. Ruth's outraged husband doesn't intend to give up without a fight. They are interrupted by three Chem (Lutt and his assistants again), who point short tubes of silvery metal at the terrified couple. Ruth suddenly finds herself powerless to move, and when Nev tries to object, he is sent crashing through a French window. He dies within moments. Horrified, Ruth loses consciousness.

When Thurlow finally learns what happened—Nev Hudson dead, Ruth gone—he refuses to believe that Ruth could have had anything to do with her husband's death. Besides, he hasn't forgotten the fantastic creatures in the grove outside of town.

Who were they? What did they want?

Could *they* have taken Ruth?

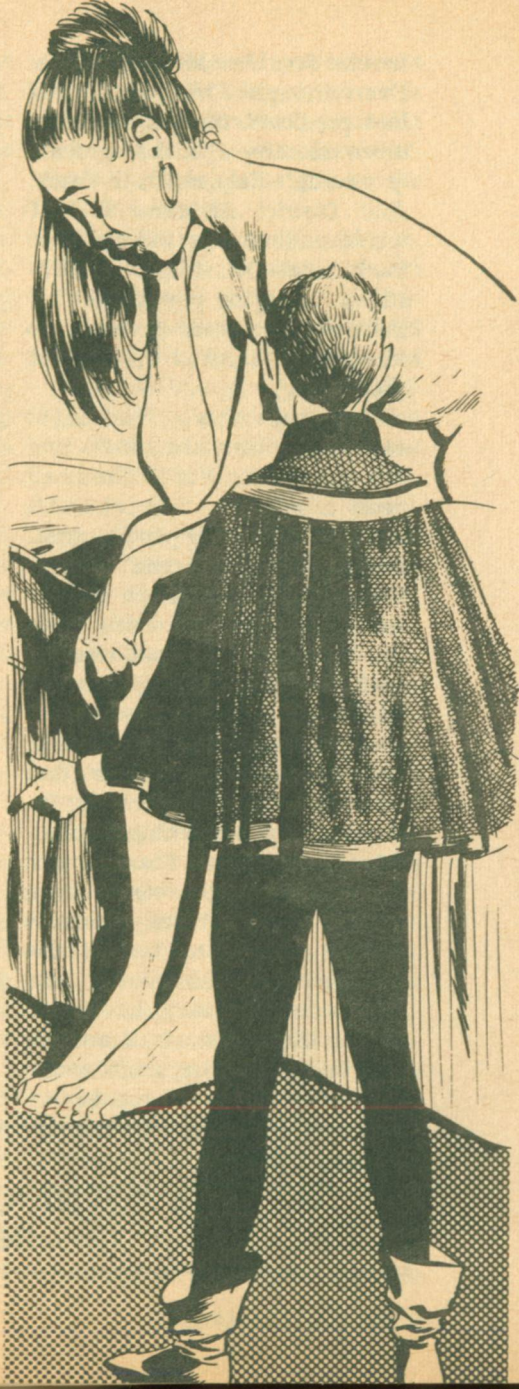
Ruth awoke on something soft—soothing blue-grey light. She felt around her: a bed, silky warm covers. Above her there was an oval shape full of glittering crystal facets. They changed colors as she watched—green, silver, yellow, blue . . . They were soothing.

Somewhere she knew there was something urgently demanding her attention, but it was a paradox. Her whole being told her the urgent thing could wait.

She turned her head to the right. There was light from somewhere, but she couldn't determine its source—a light suddenly full of yellows like remembered sunlight. It illuminated an odd room—a wall lined with what appeared to be books, a low oval table cluttered with strange golden shapes: cubes, rectangular containers, a domed half-egg. There was a window with night's blue blackness pushing against it. As she watched, the window became metallic white and a face appeared there to look in at her. It was a big face, odd silvery skin, with harsh angles and planes, the eyes sunken, penetrating.

Ruth felt she should be frightened by that face, but she couldn't find the emotional response.

The face disappeared and the window became a view looking down onto the seashore, surf-



battered cliffs, dripping rocks, sunlight. Again, there was night's darkness in the scene, and she realized that the framed shape could not be a window.

In front of it stood a wheeled stand holding an unevenly stacked, multi-banked shape like a surrealistic typewriter.

A draft touched the left side of her body. It was the first cold thing she had experienced since awakening. She turned toward it, saw an oval door. It stood open, but iris leaves were sinking inward to seal it. Just inside the door stood a squat figure in green leotards—the face that had peered in at her. Somewhere within her there was a reaction which said: *'This is a loathesome, bow-legged little man!'* The reaction refused to surface.

The creature's wide, thick-lipped mouth opened. He said: "I am Kelexel." The voice was smooth. It went through her with a tingling sensation.

His eyes traversed her body and she recognized the intense maleness of the look, was surprised to find herself not repelled by it. This room was so warmly soothing, the crystal facets above her moved with such gentle beauty.

"I find you very attractive," Kelexel said. "I do not remember ever being attracted thus, with such magnetism."

He walked around the place where she lay.

Ruth followed him with her eyes, watched him manipulate keys on the machine atop the wheeled stand, felt a delicious tremor run through her.

Kelexel came to stand over her.

"I am of the Chem," he said. "Does this mean anything to you?"

She shook her head. "No." Her voice was faint.

"You have not seen a person such as myself before?" Kelexel asked.

"The . . ." She remembered her last few minutes with Nev, the creatures in the doorway. And Andy. She knew there was something she should feel about Andy Thurlow, a deep and abiding emotion, but there was only a sisterly affection. *Dear Andy... such a sweet, dear person.*

"You must answer me," Kelexel said. There was a deep feeling of power in his voice.

"I saw . . . three . . . at my house . . . three who . . . ."

"Ah, the three who brought you here," Kelexel said. "But before that, had you seen any of us before that?"

She thought then of the grove, Andy's description (kind, pleasant Andy), but she hadn't really seen such creatures there.

"No," she said.

Kelexel hesitated, glanced at the telltales of the manipulator which controlled the native female's emotions. She was telling

the truth. Still, it paid to be cautious.

"Then it means nothing to you that I am of the Chem?" he asked.

"What . . . are the Chem?" she asked. A part of her was aroused now to intense curiosity. The curiosity struggled up through muddy waves of distraction to sit in her awareness and stare at Kelexel. What a gnome of a creature! What a sweet little gnome.

"It shall mean something," Kelexel said. "You are very attractive to me. We Chem are kind to those who please us. You cannot go back to your friends, of course, not ever. There are compensations, however, It's considered an honor to serve the Chem."

Where is Andy? Ruth wondered. *Dear, sweet Andy.*

"Very attractive," Kelexel murmured. "Your eyes are green. We Chem are very fond of green."

Ruth swallowed. Kelexel's face dominated her vision. She reached up, touched his hand. How hard and virile the hand felt. She met the penetrating stare of his brown eyes.

The manipulator's instruments told Kelexel that the female was now completely subjugated to his will. The realization stirred him. He smiled, exposing square silvery teeth. "I will have many questions for you," he said. "Later."

Ruth was to look back at the first few Chem days with a profound astonishment at herself. She grew aware (slowly) that Kelexel was twisting her responses with his outlandish devices, but by that time she was addicted to the manipulation. It was only important that Kelexel return to touch her and speak to her and twist her to his desires.

He grew handsome in her sight. It gave her pleasure just to look at his ridged, tubular body. His square face was easy to read in his devotion to her.

He really loves me, she thought. *He had Nev killed to get me.*

There was even pleasure in the realization of how utterly helpless she was, how completely subject to Kelexel's slightest whim. She had come to understand by then that the most powerful force on earth was as an ant hill when compared to the Chem. By this time she'd been through an educational imprinter, spoke both Chem and shiptongue.

The major irritant in her existance at this moment was remembrance of Andy Thurlow. Kelexel had begun to ease back on the strength of the manipulator (her reactions were now sufficiently conditioned), and she could remember Andy with grow-

ing clarity. But the fact of her helplessness eased her guilt feelings, and Andy came less and less into her thoughts until Kelexel brought her a pantovive.

Kelexel had learned his lesson with the Subi creature. *Activity slows the aging process of a mortal,* he reminded himself, and he had Ynvic fit Ruth to a pantovive with access to the storyship's Archive Storage system.

The machine was introduced into a corner of her prison-room, a room that already had taken on touches of her personality as Kelexel fitted it to her wishes. A complete bathroom-dressing room had been installed adjoining it. Clothing? She had but to ask. Kelexel filled a closet to overflowing. Jewelry, perfumes, choice foods: all came at her bidding.

Kelexel bent to every request, knowing himself to be besotted with her and enjoying every moment of it. When he caught the crewmen exchanging sly looks, he smiled to himself. They must all have their pleasure creatures from this planet. He presumed that the native males must be just as exciting to Chem females; it was one of the attractions of the place, one of the reasons Fraffin had been so successful here.

Thoughts of his purpose, his duty, slipped temporarily into the background. He knew the Primacy would understand when he explained and displayed his pleasure creature. After all, what was Time to a Chem? The Investigation would continue, merely meant that Kelexel had come from whatever mysterious duties took him away, and he would now spend a relaxation and rest period with her. Ruth sat in the fitted contours of the control chair. The room's lights were tuned to muted yellow, and the pantovive filled her attention.

The thing somewhat fitted her ideas of a machine. The chair nestled part way into it. There were control rings in the chair arms, banks of knobs and keys to left and right, rows of them in coded colors—yellows, reds, greys, blacks, greens, blues, a series of orange and white ones looking like a crazy piano. Directly in front and slightly below her extended an oval platform with shimmering lines extending to it from behind the banks of keys.

Kelexel stood behind her, a hand on her shoulder. He felt a rather distant pride showing the wonders of Chem civilization to his new pet . . . his lovely new pet.

"Use voice or key command to select the period and title you wish," he said. "Just as you heard me do. This unit is keyed to your tongue or Chem and will accept and translate in that mode. This is an editing pantovive and looks complicated, but you may ignore most of the controls.

They're not connected. Remember, you first open the channel to Archives by depressing this key." He demonstrated, pushing an orange key on her right. "Once you've selected your story, lock it in thusly." Again, he demonstrated. "Now, you can begin the action." He depressed a white key at far left.

A mob, its figures reduced to quarter size, formed on the oval stage in front of her. A sense of mad excitement radiated from them through the sensi-mesh circuits. She sat bolt upright as the emotion swept over her.

"You're feeling the emotion of the creatures on the stage," Kelexel said. "If it's too strong, reduce it by turning this control to your left." He moved a dial on the chair arm. The excitement ebbed.

"Is it real?" she asked.

The mob was a wash of colors in antique styles—blues, flutters of red, dirty rags on arms and feet, rare glitters of buttons or emblems, tri-corner hats on some of the men, red cockades. There was an odd familiarity about the scene that inflicted Ruth with an abrupt feeling of fear. Her body came alive to tom-tom pulsebeats from some fire-flickering past. She sensed driving rhythms of drums within herself.

"Is it real?" she demanded, raising her voice this time.

The mob was running now, feet thudding. Brown feet winked under the long dresses of the women.

"Real?" Kelexel asked. "What an odd question. It's . . . perhaps real in a sense. It happened to natives such as yourself. Real—how strange. That idea has never concerned me."

The mob ran through a park now. Kelexel bent over Ruth's shoulder, sharing the aura of the sensi-mesh web. There came a wet smell of grass, evergreens with their resin pungency, the sweaty stink of the natives in their exertions. Stage center focused down onto the running legs. They rushed past with a scissoring urgency, across brown paths, grass, disturbing yellow petals in a flower border. Wet wind, busy feet, crushed petals—there was fascination in the movement.

Viewpoint drew back, back, back. A cobbled street, high stone walls. Steel flashed in their midst now.

"They appear to be storming the citadel," Kelexel said.

"The Bastille," Ruth whispered. "It's the Bastille."

The recognition held her hypnotized. Here was the actual storming of the Bastille. No matter the present date, here in front of her senses it was July 14, 1789, with an organized movement of soldiery sweeping in from the right of the mob. There was the clatter of hooves on stone, gun carriages rumbling, hoarse

shouts, curses. The pantovive's translator rendered them faithfully into English because she had asked for it in English.

Ruth gripped the arms of her chair.

Abruptly, Kelexel reached forward, depressed a grey key at her left. The scene faded.

"I remember that one well," he said. "One of Fraffin's more successful productions." He touched Ruth's hair. "You understand how it works now? Focusing here." His hand came forward, demonstrating. "Intensity here. It's quite simple to operate and should provide you many hours of enjoyment."

Enjoyment? Ruth thought.

Slowly, she turned, looked up at Kelexel. There was a lost sense of horror in her eyes. *The storming of the Bastille: a Fraffin production!*

Fraffin's name was known to her. Kelexel had explained the workings of the storyship.

Storyship!

Until this moment, she hadn't begun to plumb the implications behind that label.

Storyship.

"Duties call me elsewhere at the moment," Kelexel said. "I'll leave you to the enjoyment of your pantovive."

"I . . . thought you were going to . . . stay," she said. Suddenly, she didn't want to be alone with this machine. She recognized it as an attractive horror, a thing of creative reality that might open a hoard of locked things which she couldn't face. She felt that the reality of the pantovive might turn into flames and scorch her. It was wild, potent, dangerous. She could never control it, nor chain her own desires to use it.

Ruth took Kelexel's hand, forced a smile onto her face. "Please stay."

Kelexel hesitated. The invitation in his pet's face was obvious and attractive, but Ynvic, fitting Ruth to the pantovive, had sent a new train of ideas coursing through his mind. He felt the stirrings of responsibility, his duty to the Investigation. Ynvic, the oddly stolid and laconic shipsurgeon, yes—she might just be the weak spot in Fraffin's organization. Kelexel felt the need to test this new avenue.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I must leave. I'll return as soon as possible."

She saw she couldn't move him. She dropped back, faced the raw temptation which was this machine. There came the sounds of Kelexel leaving. She was alone with the pantovive.

Presently, she said: "Current story in progress, latest production." She depressed the proper keys.

The oval stage grew almost dark with little star glimmers of yellow along its edges. A dot of blue light appeared at the cen-

ter of focus, flickered, washed white and suddenly there was a man standing at a mirror shaving with a straight-edge razor. She gasped with recognition. It was Anthony Bondelli, her father's attorney. She held her breath, trying to still a terrifying sense of eavesdropping.

Bondelli stood with his back to her, his face visible as a reflection in the mirror. It was a deeply tanned face with two wings of smooth black hair sweeping back from a high, thin forehead. His nostrils flared above a pencil-line mustache and small mouth. The chin was broad, out of proportion with the narrow features, a fact she had noted before. He radiated a feeling of sleepy complacency.

An indistinct shouting sound began to fill the scene. Bondelli paused in his shaving, cocked he head to one side. He turned, called through an open doorway on his right. "That sounds like a newsboy. Have Junior run out and get a copy." He resumed shaving, muttered: "Calling an Extra in this burg—that must be something big." He raised his voice: "Marge! Turn on the radio. See if you can catch the news."

Ruth grew conscious of an odor in the scene—there was the wet smell of soap, of course, but over that now came the smell of frying bacon. The realism held her rigid in her chair. She felt that she should breathe quietly lest Bondelli turn and find her spying on him.

Presently, a woman in a Chinese-patterned dressing grown appeared in the bathroom doorway. She held a newspaper in her hands, reading it.

Ruth had a sudden premonition, wanted to turn off the pantovive, but couldn't find the strength to move. Marge Bondelli was a pleasantly familiar figure with her braided blonde hair pinned over her round face, but the face was contorted with shock.

"Tony!" she said.

Bondelli pulled the razor slowly beneath his jaw, taking care at the pattern of deep creases which ran from the sides of his jaw down along his neck. "Whuzzit?"

His wife looked up from the paper. There was a glazed look in her blue eyes. She said: "Joe Murphey killed Adele last night!"

"Ouch!" A thin line of red appeared on Bondelli's neck. He ignored it, splashed the razor down into the washbasin, grabbed the newspaper.

Ruth felt herself trembling uncontrollably. *It's just like a movie,* she told herself. *This isn't really happening right now.* Then: *My mother's murder a Fraffin production!* A pain in her chest made it difficult to breathe.

"That terrible sword," Bondelli's wife whispered.

Ruth felt herself being drawn

into the scene, a participant, sharing the horror and shock radiating from the Bondellis as these amplified her own emotions. She could see photographs in the newspaper—her mother's face, her father's . . . diagrams with white X's and arrows. She willed herself to turn away, couldn't move.

Bondelli folded the newspaper, thrust it into the pocket of a coat hanging behind the bathroom door. "Never mind my breakfast," he said. "I'm going down to the office."

"You're bleeding," his wife said. She took a styptic pencil from the medicine cabinet, dabbed at the cut on his neck. "Hold still. It'll get all over your collar." She pushed up his chin. "Tony . . . you stay out of this thing. You're not a criminal lawyer."

"But I've handled Joe's law ever since he . . . . Ouch! Damn it, Marge, that stings!"

"Well, you can't go out bleeding like that." She finished, put the pencil beside the washbasin. "Tony, I've a funny feeling . . . don't get involved."

"I'm Joe's lawyer. I'm already involved."

Abruptly, Ruth found control of her muscles. She slapped the pantovive shut-off, leaped to her feet, pushing herself away from the machine.

My mother's murder something to amuse the Chem!

She whirled away, strode toward the bed. The bed repelled her. She turned her back on it. The casual way Kelexel had left her to discover this filled her with terrified anger. Surely he must've know she'd find out. He didn't care! No, it was worse than that: he hadn't even thought about it. The whole thing was of no concern to him. It was beneath his attention. It was less than not caring. It was disdain, repllent . . . hateful . . . .

Ruth looked down, found she was wringing her hands. She glanced around the room. There must be some weapon here, anything with which to attack that hideous . . . .

I'll kill him!

But Kelexel had said the Chem were immune to personal violence. They were immortal. They couldn't be killed. They never died.

The thought made her feel like an infinitesimal mote, a dust speck, lost, alone, doomed. She threw herself onto the bed, turned onto her back and stared up at the crystal glittering of the machine which she knew Kelexel used to control her. There was a link to it under his cloak now. She'd seen him working it.

Thought of the machine filled her with an agony of prescience: she knew what she would do when Kelexel returned. She would succumb to him once more. The golden ecstasy would

overcome her senses. She would end by fawning on him, begging for his attentions.

"Oh, God!" she whispered.

She turned, stared at the pantovive. That machine would contain the entire record of her mother's death—she knew it. The actual scene was there. She wondered then if she would have the strength to resist asking for that scene.

Something hissed behind her and she whirled on the bed, stared at the door.

Ynvic stood just inside, her bald head glistening in the yellow light. Ruth glared at the gnome figure, the bulge of breasts, the stocky legs in green leotards.

"You are troubled," Ynvic said. Her voice was professionally smooth, soothing. It sounded like the voices of so many doctors she had heard that Ruth wanted to cry out.

"What're you doing here?" Ruth asked.

"I am shipsurgeon," Ynvic said. "Most of my job is just being available. You have need of me."

They look like caricatures of human beings, Ruth thought.

"Go away," she said.

"You have problems and I can help you," Ynvic said.

Ruth sat up. "Problems? Why would I have problems?" She knew her voice sounded hysterical.

"That fool Kelexel left you with an unrestricted pantovive," Ynvic said.

Ruth studied the Chem female. Did they have emotions? Was there any way to touch them, hurt them? Even to cause them a pinprick of pain seemed the most desirable thing in the universe.

"How do you ugly creatures breed?" Ruth asked.

"You hate us, eh?" Ynvic asked.

"Are you afraid to answer?" Ruth demanded.

Ynvic shrugged. "Essentially, it's the same as with your kind . . . except that females are deprived of the reproductive organs at an early stage in their development. We must go to breeding centers, get permission—it's a very tiresome, boring procedure. We manage to enjoy ourselves quite well without the organs." She advanced to stand a pace from the bed.

"But your men prefer my kind," Ruth said.

Again, Ynvic shrugged. "Tastes differ. I've had lovers from your planet. Some of them were good, some weren't. The trouble is, you fade so quickly."

"But you enjoy us! We amuse you!"

"Up to a point," Ynvic said. "Interest waxes and wanes."

"Then why do you stay here?"

"It's profitable," Ynvic said. And she noted that the native

female already was coming out of the emotional spiral that had trapper her. Resistance, an object to hate—that's all it took. The creatures were so easy to maneuver.

"So the Chem like us," Ruth said. "They like stories about us."

"You're an endless pot of self-generating stories," Ynvic said. "All by yourselves you can produce natural sequences of true artistic merit. This is, of course, at once a profound source of frustration and requires very delicate handling to capture and reproduce for our audiences. Fraffin's art rests in eliciting those subtle nuances which prick our risibilities, capture our fascinated attention."

"You disgust me," Ruth hissed. "You're not human."

"We're not mortal," Ynvic said. And she thought: *I wonder if the creature's already with child? What'll she do when she learns she'll bear a Chem?*

"But you hide from us," Ruth said. She pointed at the ceiling. "Up there."

"When it suits our purpose," Ynvic said. "We are required to stay concealed now, of course. But it wasn't always that way. I've lived openly with your kind."

Ruth found herself caught by the casual aloofness in Ynvic's tone. She knew she couldn't hurt this creature, but had to try.

"You're lying," Ruth said.

"Perhaps. But I'll tell you that I once was the God Ea striking terror into captive Jews . . . in Sumeria a while back. It was harmless fun setting up religious patterns among you."

"You posed as a god?" Ruth shuddered. She knew the words were true. They were spoken with too little effort. They meant so little to the speaker.

"I've also been a circus freak," Ynvic said. "I've worked in many epics. Sometimes I enjoy the illusion of antiquity."

Ruth shook her head, unable to speak.

"You don't understand," Ynvic said. "How could you? It's *our* problem, you see? When the future's infinite, you have no antiquities. You're always caught up in the Forever-Now. When you think you've come to terms with the fact that your past is unimportant, then the future becomes unimportant. That can be fatal. The storyships protect us from this fatality."

"You . . . spy on us for . . . ."

"Infinite past, infinite future, infinite present," Ynvic said. She bent her head, liking the sound of the words. "Yes, we have these. Your lives are but brief bursts and your entire past little more—yet we Chem gain from you the explicit feeling of something ancient . . . an important past. You give us this, do you understand?"

Again, Ruth shook her head. The words seemed to have meaning, but she felt she was getting only part of their sense.

"It's something we can't get from Tiggywaugh's web," Ynvic said. "Perhaps it's something our immortality denies us. The web makes the Chem into one organism—I can feel the life of each of the others, billions upon billions of Chem. This is . . . old, but it's not ancient."

Ruth swallowed. The creature was rambling. But the conversation was providing a time to recover, and Ruth felt forming within her a place of resistance, a core place where she could retreat and in which she was safe from the Chem . . . no matter what they did to her. She knew she'd succumb to Kelexel still, that this Ynvic creature even now was doing something to shade the Chem captive's emotional responses. But the core place was there, growing, imparting purpose.

"No matter," Ynvic said. "I've come to examine you." She advanced to the edge of the bed.

Ruth inhaled a deep, trembling breath. "You were watching me," she said. "At the machine. Does Kelexel know?"

Ynvic became very still. How did the stupid native know to ask such a penetrating question?

Ruth sensed the opening in Ynvic's guard, said: "You speak of infinity, of epics, but you use your . . . whatever . . ."—she made a sweeping gesture to take in the storyship— ". . . to . . . record a . . . killing of . . . ."

"Indeed!" Ynvic said. "You will tell me now why Kelexel is asking for me out in the ship."

The crystal facets above the bed began emitting a blue glow. Ruth felt her will melting. She shook her head. "I . . . don't . . . ."

"You will tell me!" The Chem female's face was a round mask of fury, the bald head glistening wetly silver.

"I . . . don't . . . know," Ruth whispered.

"He was a fool to give you an unrestricted pantovive, and we were fools to go along with it," Ynvic said. She passed a hand across her thick lips. "What do you understand of such things?"

Ruth felt the pressure relaxing, took a deep breath. The core place of retreat was still there. "It was my mother, my mother you killed," she muttered.

"We killed?"

"You make people do what you want them to do," Ruth said.

"People!" Ynvic sneered. Ruth's answers betrayed only the shallowest knowledge of Chem affairs. There was danger in the creature, though. She might yet excite Kelexel's interests into the wrong paths too soon.

Ynvic put a hand on Ruth's abdomen, glanced at the manipulator over the bed. The pattern of the lambent blue glow shifted in

a way that made her smile. This poor creature already was impregnated. What a strange way to bear offspring! But how lovely and subtle a way to trap a snooper from the Primacy.

The fact of Ruth's pregnancy imparted an odd feeling of disquiet to Ynvic. She withdrew her hand, grew aware of the characteristic musky scent of the native female. What gross mammary glands the creature had! Yet, her cheeks were indrawn as though from undernourishment. She wore a loose, flowing gown that reminded Ynvic of Grecian garments. There had been an interesting culture, but so brief. So brief.

I should be delighted with this discovery, Ynvic thought. *Why does it bother me? What have I overlooked?*

For no reason she could explain, four lines from a Chem drinking song poured through Ynvic's mind then—

"In the long-long-long ago
When each of us was young.
We heard the music of the flesh
And the singing of a sun...."

Ynvic shook her head sharply. The song was meaningless. It was good only for its rhythms, a plaything series of noises, another toy.

But what had it meant . . . once?

Over the bed, the manipulator's lenses sank back through green and stopped in a soft pastel red.

"Rest, little innocent," Ynvic said. She placed a strangely gentle hand on Ruth's bare arm. "Rest and be attractive for Kelexel's return."

"The simple truth of the matter is that things got too much for her and she ran away," Bondelli said. He stared across at Andy Thurlow, wondering at the odd, haggard look of the man.

The sat in Bondelli's law office, a place of polished wood and leather-bound books aligned precisely behind the glass covers, a place of framed diplomas and autographed photos of important people. It was early afternoon, a sunny day.

Thurlow was bent over, elbows on knees, hand clasped tightly together. *I don't dare tell him my real suspicions,* he thought. *I don't dare . . . I don't dare.*

"Who'd want to harm her or take her away?" Bondelli asked. "She's gone to friends, perhaps up in 'Frisco. It's something simple as that. We'll hear from her when she's gotton over her funk."

"That's what the police think," Thurlow said. "They've completely cleared her of any complicity in Nev's death . . . the physical evidence . . . ."

"Then the best thing we can do is get down to the necessities of Joe's case. Ruth'll come home when she's ready."

Will she? Thurlow asked himself. He couldn't shake off the feeling that he was living in a nightmare. Had he really been with Ruth at the grove? Was Nev really dead in that weird accident? Did Ruth run off somewhere? But where?

"We're going to have to dive directly into the legal definition of insanity," Bondelli said. "Nature and consequences. Justice requires . . . ."

"Justice?" Thurlow stared at the man. Bondelli had turned in his chair, revealing his profile, the mouth thinned to a shadow-line beneath the mustache.

"Justice," Bondelli repeated. He swiveled to look at Thurlow. Bondelli prided himself upon his judgment of men, and he studied Thurlow now. The psychologist appeared to be coming out of his blue funk. No question why the man was so shaken, of course. Still in love with Ruth Murphy . . . Hudson. Terrible mess, but it'd shake down. Always did. That was the one thing you learned from the law: It all came out in court.

Thurlow took a deep breath, reminded himself that Bondelli wasn't a criminal lawyer. "We ought to be more interested in realism," he said. There was an undertone of wry cynicism in his voice. *Justice!* "This legal definition of insanity business is a lot of crap. The important thing is that the community wants the man executed—and our benighted D.A., Mr. Paret, is running for re-election."

Bondelli was shocked. "The law's above that!" He shook his head. "And the whole community isn't against Joe. Why should they be?"

Thurlow spoke as though to an unruly child: "Because they're afraid of him, naturally."

Bondelli permitted himself a glance out the window beside his desk--familiar rooftops, distant greenery, a bit of foggy smoke beginning to cloud the air above the adjoining building. The smoke curled and swirled, creating an interesting pattern against the view. He returned his attention to Thurlow, said: "The question is, how can an insane man know the nature and consequences of his act? What I want from you is to explode that nature and consequences thing."

Thurlow removed his glasses, glanced at them, returned them to his nose. They made the shadows stand out sharply in the room. "An insane man doesn't think about consequences," he said. And he wondered if he was really going to let himself take part in Bondelli's mad plans for defense of Joe Murphy.

"I'm taking the position," Bondelli said, "that the original views of Lord Cottenham support our defense." Bondelli turned, pulled a thick book out of a cabinet behind him, put the book on the desk and opened it to a marker.

He can't be serious, Thurlow thought.

"Here's Lord Cottenham," Bondelli said. "'It is wrong to listen to any doctrine which proposes the punishment of persons laboring under insane delusions. It is inconceivable that the man who was incapable of judging between right and wrong, of knowing whether an act were good or bad, ought to be made accountable for his actions; such a man has not that within him which forms the foundation of accountability, either from a moral or a legal point of view. I consider it strange that any person should labor under a delusion and yet be aware that it was a delusion; in fact, if he were aware of his state, there could be no delusion.'"

Bondelli closed the book with a snap, stared at Thurlow as though to say: *"There! It's all solved!"*

Thurlow cleared his throat. It was increasingly obvious that Bondelli lived in a cloud world. "That's all very true, of course," Thurlow said. "But isn't it possible that even if our esteemed district attorney suspects—or even *believes*—Joe Murphey to be insane, he'll think it better to execute such a man than to put him in an institution?"

"Good heavens! Why?"

"The doors of mental hospitals sometimes open," Thurlow said. "Paret was elected to protect this community—even from itself."

"But Murphey's obviously insane!"

"You aren't listening to me," Thurlow said. "Certainly he's insane. That's what people are afraid of."

"But shouldn't psychology. . ."

"Psychology!" Thurlow snapped.

Bondelli stared at Thurlow in shocked silence.

"Psychology's just the modern supersitition," Thurlow said. "It can't do a damned thing for people like Joe. I'm sorry but that's the truth, and it'll hurt less to have that out right now."

"If this is what you told Ruth Murphey, no wonder she ran away," Bondelli said.

"I told Ruth I'd help any way I can."

"You have a strange way of showing it."

"Look," Thurlow said. "We've a community up in arms, fearful, excited. Murphey's the focus for their hidden guilt feelings. They want him dead. They want this psychological pressure taken off them. You can't psychoanalyze a whole community."

Bondelli began tapping a finger impatiently on the desk. "Will you or will you not help me prove Joe's insane?"

"I'll do everything I can, but you know Joe's going to resist that form of defense, don't you?"

"Know it!" Bondelli leaned forward, arms on his desk. "The damn' fool blows his top at the

slightest hint I want him to plead insanity. He keeps harping on the unwritten law!"

"Those stupid accusations against Adele," Thurlow said. "Joe can't in any way entertain the idea that he's insane. To admit that—even as a possibility—or as a necessary pretense, he'd have to face the fact that his violent act could've been a useless, senseless thing. The enormity of such an admission would be far worse than insanity. Insanity's much more preferable."

"Can you get that across to a jury?" Bondelli asked. He spoke in a hushed tone.

"That Murphey considers it safer to play sane?"

"Yes."

Thurlow shrugged. "Who knows what a jury will believe? Joe may be a hollow shell, but that's one helluva strong shell. Nothing contradictory can be permitted to enter it. Every fiber of him is concentrated on the necessity to appear normal, to maintain the illusion of sanity—for himself as well as for others. Death is far preferable to that other admission . . . Oscar Wilde concurring."

"Each man kills the thing he loves," Bondelli whispered. Again, he turned, looked out the window. The smokey pattern was still there. He wondered idly if workmen were tarring a roof somewhere below him.

Thurlow looked down at Bondelli's tapping finger. "The trouble with you, Tony," he said, "is you're one of G.K. Chesterton's terrible children. You're innocent and love justice. Most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy."

As though he hadn't heard, Bondelli said: "We need something simple and elegant to show the jury. They have to be dumbfounded with the realization that . . . ." He broke off, stared at Thurlow. "And your prediction of Joe's trouble fits the bill precisely."

"Too technical," Thurlow said. "A jury won't sit still for it, won't understand it. Juries don't hear what they don't understand. Their minds wander. They think about dress patterns, bugs in the rose garden, what's for lunch, where to spend a vacation."

"You did predict it, didn't you? Ruth did report your words correctly?"

"The psychotic break? Yes, I predicted it." The words were almost a sign. "Tony, haven't you focused on what I've been telling you? This was a sex crime—the sword, the violence . . . ."

"Is he insane?"

"Of course he's insane!"

"In the legal sense?"

"In every sense."

"Well, then there's legal precedent for . . . ."

"Psychological precedent's more important."

"What?"

"Tony, if there's one thing I've learned since becoming court psychologist here, it's that juries spend far more energy trying to discover the judge's opinion than they do following what the opposing lawyers are presenting. Juries have a purely disgusting respect for the wisdom of judges. Any judge we get is going to be a member of this community. The community wants Joe put away permanently—dead. We can prove him insane until we're blue in the face. None of these good people will face our proof consciously, even while they're accepting it *un*consciously. In fact, as we prove Joe insane, we're condemning him."

"Are you trying to tell me you can't get up on that stand and say you predicted Joe's insanity but the authorities refused to act because the man was too important a member of the community?"

"Of course I can't."

"You think they won't believe you?"

"It doesn't make any difference whether they believe me!"

"But if they believe . . . ."

"I'll tell you what they'll believe, Tony, and I'm surprised that you, an attorney, don't realize this. They'll believe that Paret had proof of Adele's unfaithfulness, but that some legal technicality, legal trickery on your part, prohibits introduction of the dirty details. They'll believe this because it's the easiest thing to believe. No grandstand play on my part will change that."

"You're saying we don't stand a chance?"

Thurlow shrugged. "Not if it goes to trial right away. If you can delay the trial or get a change of venue . . . ."

Bonelli swiveled his chair, stared through the smoke pattern outside his window. "I find it very hard to believe that reasonable, logical human beings . . . ."

"What's reasonable or logical about a jury?" Thurlow asked.

A flush of anger began at Bondelli's collar, spread upward across his cheeks, into his hair. He turned, glared at Thurlow. "Do you know what I think, Andy? I think the fact that Ruth ran out on you has colored your attitude toward her father. You say you'll help, but every word you . . . ."

"That'll be enough of that," Thurlow interrupted, his voice low, flat. He took two deep breaths. "Tell me something, Tony. Why're you taking this case? You're not a criminal lawyer."

Bondelli passed a hand across his eyes. Slowly, the flush left his skin. He glanced at Thurlow. "Sorry, Andy."

"That's all right. Can you answer the question? Do you know why you're taking this case?"

Bondelli sighed, shrugged.

"When the story broke that I was representing him, two of my most important clients called and said they'd take their business elsewhere if I didn't pull out."

"That's why you're defending Joe?"

"He has to have the best defense possible."

"You're the best?"

"I wanted to go up to San Francisco, get Belli or someone of that stature, but Joe refuses. He thinks it's going to be easy—the goddamn' unwritten law."

"And that leaves you."

"In this city, yes." Bondelli extended his arms onto the desk, clasped his hands into fists. "You know, I don't see the problem the same way you do, not at all. I think our biggest job's to prove he isn't faking insanity."

Thurlow took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes. They were beginning to ache. He' been reading too much today, he thought. He said: "Well, you have a point there, Tony. If a person with delusions learns to keep quiet about them, you can have one helluva time getting him to act on those delusions where people will see him and understand. Exposing faked insanity is easy compared with the problems of detecting a concealed psychosis, but the public generally doesn't understand this."

"I see a four-pronged attack," Bondelli said. "There're four common essentials with insane killers."

Thurlow started to say something, thought better of it as Bondelli raised a hand, four fingers extended.

"First," Bondelli said, "did the victim's death profit the killer? Psychopaths usually kill strangers or persons close to them. You see, I've been doing my homework in your field, too."

"I see that," Thurlow said.

"And Adele had no insurance," Bondelli said. He lowered one finger. "Next, was the murder carefully planned?" Another finger came down. "Psychopaths don't plan their crimes. Either they leave escape to chance, or they make it ridiculously easy for the police to catch them. Joe practically advertised his presence in that office."

Thurlow nodded, and he began to wonder if Bondelli could be right. *Am I unconsciously attacking Ruth through her father? Where the hell did she go?*

"Third," Bondelli said, "was a great deal more violence than necessary used in the crime? Deranged people continue an attack beyond all reason. There's no doubt that the first thrust of that sword would've killed Adele." A third finger came down.

Thurlow returned his glasses to his nose, stared at Bondelli. The attorney was so intent, so sure of himself. Was it possible?

"Fourth," Bondelli said, "was

the killing accomplished with an improvised weapon? Persons who plan set themselves up with a lethal weapon beforehand. A psychopath grabs anything at hand—a cleaver, a club, a rock, a piece of furniture." The fourth finger came donw, and Bondelli lowered a fist to the desk. "That damned sword hung on Joe's study wall for as long as I can remember."

"It all sounds so easy," Thurlow said. "But what's the prosecution going to be doing all this time?"

"Oh, they'll have their experts, naturally."

"Whelye among them," Thurlow said.

"Your boss at the hospital?"

"The same."

"Does . . . that put you . . . on a spot?"

"That doesn't bother me, Tony. He's just another part of the community syndrome. It's . . . it's the whole mad mess." Thurlow looked down at his hands. "People are going to say Joe's better off dead—even if he is insane. And the prosecution experts you kiss off with a wave of the hand, they're going to be saying things the community *wants* to hear. Everything the judge says is likely to be interpreted . . . ."

"I'm sure we can get an impartial judge."

"Yes . . . no doubt. But judges invariably say the question to be determined is whether at the time of the crime the accused had not the use of that part of his understanding which allowed him to know he was doing a wrong and wicked act. That *part*, Tony; as though the mind could be divided into compartments, part of it sane, part insane. Impossible! The mind's a unified thing. A person can't be mentally and emotionally diseased in some fictitious part without infecting the total personality. A knowledge of right and wrong—the ability to choose between God and the devil—is profoundly different from the knowledge that two plus two equals four. To make the judgment of good and evil requires an intact personality."

Thurlow looked up, studied Bondelli.

The attorney was staring out the window, lips pursed in thought.

Thurlow turned toward the window. He felt sick with frustration and despair. Ruth *had* run away. That was the only logical, sane, reasonable explanation. Her father was doomed, no matter . . . . Thurlow's muscles locked into an attitude of frozen, glaring suspense. He stared out the window.

Some ten feet out, poised in the air, hovering, was an object . . . a dome-shaped object with a neat round opening that faced Bondelli's window. Behind the opening, figures moved.

Thurlow opened his mouth to

speak, found he had no voice. He lurched out of his chair, groped his way around the desk away from the window.

"Andy, is something wrong?" Bondelli asked. The attorney swiveled back, stared up at Thurlow.

Thurlow leaned on the desk facing the window. He looked right into the round opening in the hovering object. There were eyes inside, glowing eyes. A slender tube protruded from the opening. Painful, constricting force pressed in on Thurlow's chest. He had to fight for each breath.

My God! They're trying to kill me! he thought.

Waves of unconsciousness surged over his mind, receded, returned. His chest was a great gasping region of fire. Dimly, he saw the edge of the desk surge upward past his eyes. Something hit a carpeted floor, and he realized with fading consciousness that it was his head. He tried to push himself up, collapsed.

"Andy! Andy! What's wrong? Andy!" It was Bondelli's voice. The voice bounced and receded in a wavering, ringing echo box. "Andy . . . Andy . . . And . . . . "

Bondelli stood up from a quick examination of Thurlow, shouted for his secretary: "Mrs. Wilson! Call an ambulance! I think Dr. Thurlow's had a heart attack."

I must not grow to like this life, Kelexel told himself. *I have a new pet, yes, but I also have duty. A moment will come when I must leave, taking my pet, abandoning all the other pleasures of this place.*

He sat in Ruth's private quarters, a bowl of native liquor on a low table between them. Ruth appeared oddly pensive, quiet. The manipulator had required quite heavy pressure to bring her to a responsive mood. This bothered Kelexel. She had been coming along so nicely, taking the training with an ease which delighted him. Now—relapse . . . and just after he had given her such a pleasant toy, the pantovive.

There were fresh flowers on the table beside the liquor. Roses they were called. Red roses. The liquor had been sent along by Ynvic. Its aroma, a touch on the palate, surprised and delighted Kelexel. Subtle esthers danced on his tongue. The heady central substance required constant readjustment of his metabolism. He wondered how Ruth adapted to the stuff. She was taking an inordinate amount of it.

In spite of the distracting effort at keeping his metabolism in balance, Kelexel found the total experience pleasant. The senses came alert; boredom retreated.

Ynvic had said the liquor was a wine from a sunny valley "up there east of us." It was a native product, lovely stuff.

Kelexel looked up at the silvery

grey curve of ceiling, noted the gravity anomaly lines like golden chords above the manipulator. The room was taking on a pleasant air of familiarity with its little touches denoting occupancy by his delightful new pet.

"Have you noticed how many of the ship people wear native clothing?" Kelexel asked.

"How could I?" Ruth asked. (How fuzzy her voice sounded.) "When do I ever get out of here?"

"Yes, of course," Kelexel agreed. "I was thinking I might try some of your clothing myself. Ynvic tells me that the garments of some of your larger children often fit the Chem with very slight alteration. Ynvic calls that a fringe benefit."

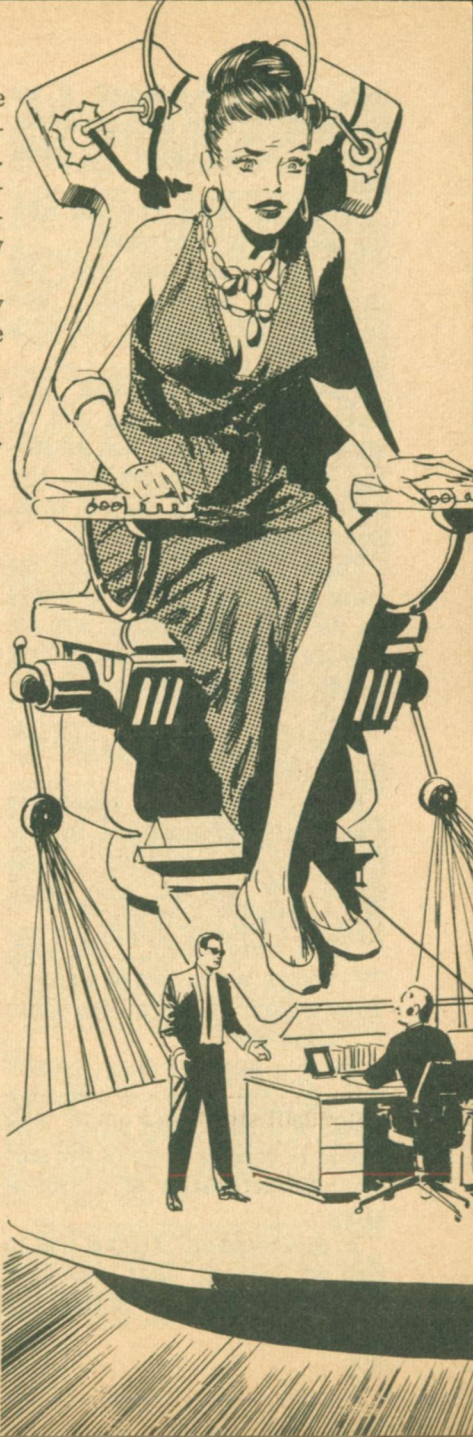
Ruth refilled her glass from the wine bowl, drank deeply. Her skin appeared flushed, eyes bright and glistening.

The little pig of a gnome! she thought. *The dirty little troll!*

Kelexel had been drinking from a flagon. He dipped it into the bowl, raised it dripping amber. "Good drink, delightful foods, comfortable clothing—all this and great enjoyment, amusement. Who could grow bored here?"

"Yes, indeed," Ruth muttered. "Who'd grow bored?" Again, she drank deeply of the wine.

Kelexel took another sip from his flagon, adjusted his metabolism. Ruth's voice sounded so strange. He noted the manipula-



tor's setting, wondered if he should apply a bit more pressure. Could it be the liquor? he asked himself.

"Did you enjoy yourself with the pantovive?" he asked.

The dirty, evil little troll! she thought. "'Sgreat fun," she sneered. "Why'ntcha go play with it y'rself f'r awhile?"

"Lords of Preservation!" Kelexel muttered. He had just realized that the liquor was inhibiting Ruth's higher centers. Her head rolled crazily on her neck. She spilled part of her drink.

Kelexel reached over, took the glass from her, placed it gently on the table. She either was incapable or had never learned how to adjust her metabolism, he realized.

"Don'tcha like th' stories?" Ruth asked.

Kelexel began to remember from Fraffin productions, the native problems involving various liquors. It was all true, then. *Real,* as Ruth would say.

"'S a dirty world," she said. "Y' s'pose we're part of a story? They shootin' us with their damn . . . cameras?"

What a hideous idea, Kelexel thought. But there was a strange sense of verity in her words. The dialogue carried some of the surface characteristics of a Fraffin story.

In this moment, Kelexel had to remind himself that creatures such as Ruth had lived long (by their standards) in dreams that Fraffin wove. Not exactly dreams, though, because Chem spectators could enter the story world, too. In a sudden burst of insight, Kelexel realized he had entered the world of violence and emotion which Fraffin had created. Entering that world he had been corrupted. To share the native delusions if only for a moment was to be enslaved by the need for more such corruption.

Kelexel wanted to tear himself away from this room, renounce his new pet, return only to his duty. But he knew he couldn't do that. Knowing this, he wondered what particular thing had searching awareness.

He stared at Ruth.

These natives are a dangerous flame, he thought. *We don't own them! We're their slaves!*

Now, his suspicions were fully aroused. He stared around the room. What was it? What was wrong here?

There seemed nothing of this moment and this place upon which he could focus his educated suspicions. This of itself touched a deep chord of anger and fear in him. He felt that he was being played with, led about. Was Fraffin playing with him? This ship's people had suborned six previous Investigators of the Bureau. How? What plans had they for his own person? Surely they knew by now he was no ordinary visi-

tor. But what could they possibly do?

Not violence, certainly.

Ruth began to cry, the sobs shaking her shoulders. "All alone," she muttered. "All alone."

Was it the native female? Kelexel wondered. Was she the bait in the trap?

There could be no certainty in a secret battle of this kind. You contended, one against the other, but every struggle occurred beneath a deceptively calm surface, hidden behind polite words and civilities and ritual behavior. The struggle went on and on within an intimate arena where no violence could be permitted.

How can they hope to win? Kelexel asked himself.

Even if they bested him, they must know there'd be other Kelexels. It would never end.

Never.

Never.

Awareness of an endless future broke like waves across the reef of his mind. On this path lay the Chem madness, Kelexel knew. He drew back from such thoughts.

Ruth got up, stood looking down at him unsteadily.

Savagely, Kelexel adjusted the manipulator. Ruth stiffened. The skin rippled on her cheeks and forearms. Her eyes glazed over. Abruptly, she turned, ran for the water basin in the corner. She leaned on it, retching.

Presently, she returned to her chair, moving as though pulled by strings. Distantly in her mind, a tiny kernel of awareness cried out: *'This is not you doing these things! These things are being done to you.'*

Kelexel held up his flagon, said: "With such things as this your world fascinates and attracts us. Tell me, with what does your world repel?"

"It isn't a world," she said, her voice shaky. "It's a cage. This is your own private zoo."

"Ahhh, hmmm," Kelexel said. He sipped at his drink, but it had lost its savor. He put the flagon on the table. There were wet circles there where he had put the flagon before. He looked at them. The female was becoming resistant, obstinate. How could that be? Only the Chem and an occasional mutant were immune to such pressures. Even the Chem wouldn't be completely immune without Tiggywaugh's web and the special treatment they received at birth.

Again, he studied Ruth.

She returned his stare defiantly.

"Your lives are so short," Kelexel said. "Your past is so short—yet one gains the definite feeling of something ancient from you. How can that be?"

"Score one for our side," Ruth said. She could feel her emotions being adjusted, soothed. It happened with an uncanny rapidity.

Insane sobriety invaded her mind.

"Please stop changing me," she whispered.

And she wondered: *Was that the right thing to say then?* But she felt she had to disagree with the creature now, even chance making him angry. She had to oppose him—subtly, definitely. It was either that or lose her sanity in this wasteland of unreason. She could no longer remain passive, fencing in a world where the Chem could not come.

Stop changing her? Kelexel wondered.

There lay a kernel of opposition in that whispered cry, and he recognized it. Thus the barbarian always spoke to the civilizer. He became at once the true cynic of the Federation, the loyal servant of the Primacy. The native female should not be *able* to oppose him.

"How do I change you?" he asked.

"I wish I knew," she said. "All I know is you think I'm stupid and don't realize what you're doing."

Has Fraffin trained this creature? Kelexel wondered. *Was she prepared for me?* He remembered his first interview with Fraffin, the sense of menace.

"What has Fraffin told you to do?" he demanded.

"Fraffin?" Her face showed blank puzzlement. What had the storyship's director to do with her?

"I won't betray you," Kelexel said.

She wet her lips with her tongue. Nothing the Chem did or said made any sense. The only thing she really understood was their power.

"If Fraffin's done anything illegal with you creatures, I must know about it," Kelexel said. "I will not be denied. I *will* know about it."

She shook her head.

"As much as can be known of Fraffin, that I know," Kelexel said. "You were little more than the rawest sort of animals here when he came. Chem walked among you as gods then without the slightest concern."

"Illegal?" she asked. "What do you mean illegal?"

"You've rudimentary laws among your kind," Kelexel sneered. "You know about legality and illegality."

"I've never even seen Fraffin." she said. "Except on the room screen."

"The letter of the law, eh? His minions, then—what have they told you to do?"

Again, she shook her head. There was a weapon here she could use; she sensed this, but couldn't quite understand enough to grasp it.

Kelexel whirled away from her, strode to the pantovive and back. He stopped ten paces from Ruth, glared up at her. "He bred you and shaped you and nudged

you—*changed* you—into the finest story property in the universe. Some of the offers he's had—and turned down—would . . . well, you wouldn't understand."

"Turned down . . . why?" she asked.

"Ahh, that is the question."

"Why . . . why're we so valuable?"

He gestured, a handsweep that pointed from her feet to her hair. "You're gross and overgrown, but quite a bit similar to us. We can identify with you. There's entertainment in your strivings, a surcease from boredom."

"But you said—illegal?"

"When a race such as yours reaches a certain stage, there are . . . liberties we do not permit. We've had to exterminate certain races, severely punish a few Chem."

"But what . . . liberties?"

"Never mind." Kelexel turned his back on her. It seemed obvious she spoke from actual ignorance. Under such manipulator pressure she could hardly lie or dissemble.

Ruth stared at Kelexel's back. For long days now, a question had been creeping upward in her mind. The answer felt deeply important now. "How old are you?" she asked.

Slowly, Kelexel rotated on one heel, studied her. It took a moment to overcome the distaste aroused by such a gauch question. Then: "How could that possibly bear on anything that concerned you?"

"It . . . I want to know."

"The actual duration—that's not important. But a hundred such worlds as yours, perhaps many more, could've come into being and dissolved to dust since my conception. Now, tell me why you wanted to know.

"I . . . just wanted to know." She tried to swallow in a dry throat. "How . . . how do you . . . preserve . . . ."

"Rejuvenation!" He shook his head. What a distasteful subject. The native female was truly a barbarian.

"The woman, Ynvic," Ruth said, sensing his emotional disturbance and enjoying it. "She's called the shipsurgeon. Does she supervise the . . . ."

"It's routine! Purely routine. We've elaborate protective mechanisms and devices that prevent anything but minor damage. A shipsurgeon takes care of the minor damage. Very rare, that. We can take care of our own regenerative and rejuvenating treatments. Now, you will tell me why you ask."

"Could I . . . we . . . ."

"Oh, ho!" Kelexel threw his head back in a bark of laughter. Then: "You must be a Chem and conditioned for the process from birth, or it cannot be done."

"But . . . you're like us. You . . . breed."

"Not with you, my dear pet.

We're pleasurably similar, that I admit. But with you it's dalliance, insulation from boredom, no more. We Chem cannot breed with any other . . . ." He broke off, stared at her, remembering a conversation with Ynvic. They'd been discussing the native violence, wars.

"It's a built-in valving system to keep down the immunes," Ynvic had said.

"The conflicts?"

"Of course. A person immune to our manipulations tends to become generally dissatisfied, frustrated. Such creatures welcome violence and disregard personal safety. The attrition rate among them is very high."

Remembering Ynvic's words, Kelexel wondered: *Is it possible? No! It couldn't be! Gene samples from these natives were on record long ago. I've seen them myself. But what if . . . . No! There's no way. But it would be so simple: falsify the gene sample. Shipsurgeon Ynvic! But if she did, why?* Kelexel shook his head. The whole idea was preposterous. *Evev Fraffin wouldn't dare breed a planet full of half-Chem. The immune ratio would give him away before . . . . But there's always the 'valving system.'*

"I will see Fraffin now," Kelexel muttered.

And he remembered: *Ynvic was referring to native immunes, but she said 'person.'*

Fraffin sat waiting behind his desk as Kelexel entered the director's salon. The room's silver light had been tuned to a high pitch. Almost glaring. The surface of the desk glittered. Fraffin wore native dress, a black suit with white linen. Golden buttons at the cuffs reflected shards of brillaince into Kelexel's eyes.

Behind a mask of brooding superiority, Fraffin felt himself poised for a pouncing elation. This poor fool of an Investigator! The man had been aimed at his present moment like an arrow. It only remained for him to find the sort of traget in which he'd been embedded.

And I aimed him! Fraffin thought. *I put him here as surely as I put any native into its predicament.*

"You asked to see me?" Fraffin asked. He remained seated, emphasizing his displeasure with the visitor.

Kelexel noted the gesture, ignored it. Fraffin's posture was almost boorish. Perhaps it reflected confidence, and that would bear watching. But the Primacy did not send complete fools to do its investigating, and the Director must discover this soon.

"I wish to discuss my pet with you," Kelexel said, seating himself across from Fraffin without invitation. The desk was an enormous empty expanse separating them. A faint glistening reflec-

tion of Fraffin could be seen in its surface.

"There's something wrong with your pet?" Fraffin asked. He smiled to himself, thinking of the latest report on Kelexel's antics with the native female. The Investigator was suspicious now; no doubt of that. But too late—far too late.

"Perhaps there's nothing wrong with my pet," Kelexel said. "Certainly she delights me. But it has occurred to me that I know so little really about the natives, her sources, so to speak."

"And you came to *me* to fill out this information?"

"I felt certain you'd see me," Kelexel said. He waited, wondering if that barb would sink home. Surely, it was time they brought the battle more into the open.

Fraffin sat back, eyelids drooping, silver-blue shadows in the sockets. He nodded to himself. Ahh, it was going to be good sport playing out this fool's downfall. Fraffin savored the anticipatory moment, the instant of revelation.

Kelexel put his hands on the arms of his chair, felt clean edges of construction, a gentle warmth. There was a distant musky aroma in the room, an exotic tantalizing thing full of alien strangeness . . . a floral essence perhaps.

"But you enjoy your pet?" Fraffin asked.

"A delight," Kelexel said. "Better even than the Subi. I wonder that you don't export them. Why is that?"

"So you've had a Subi," Fraffin said, parrying the question.

"I still wonder that you don't export these females," Kelexel said. "I find it very odd."

Oh, you find it odd, Fraffin thought. He experienced an abrupt sour feeling about Kelexel. The man was so obviously besotted with the native female—his first experience with them.

"There are many collectors who'd leap at the chance to have one of these natives," Kelexel said, probing. "Of all the delights you've gathered here . . . ."

"And you think I've nothing better to do than collect my natives for the delight of my fellows," Fraffin said. His voice sounded snappish and he wondered at the emotion in it. *Am I jealous of Kelexel?* he asked himself.

"Then what is your task here if not to make profit?" Kelexel asked. He could feel himself growing angry with Fraffin. Certainly, the Director knew he faced an Investigator. But none of Fraffin's actions betrayed fear.

"I'm a collector of gossip," Fraffin said. "That I create some of this gossip myself, that is of no moment."

Gossip? Kelexel wondered.

And Fraffin thought: *A collector of ancient gossip—yes.*

He knew then that he was jeal-

ous of Kelexel, envious of the mans' first encounter with a native female. Fraffin remembered the old days then when the Chem had moved more openly on this world, creating the machinery of long maturation which they could exploit—devising leprous diplomats full of pride's blind ignorance, nurturing death wishes to ride each back like a demon. Ahhh, those had been the days.

Fraffin felt himself stretched for a moment on the rack of his own vision, remembering days when he'd lived among the natives—manipulating, maneuvering, eavesdropping, learning, listening to sniggering Roman boys talk of things their elders had forgotten even to whisper. In his mind, Fraffin saw his own villa with sunglow on a brick walk, grass, a tree, a planting of petulant forsythia. That's what *she'd* called them—"petulant forsythia." How clearly he could see in his mind the young pear tree beside the walk.

"They die so easily," he whispered.

Kelexel put a finger to his cheek, said: "I think you're just a touch morbid—all this emphasis on violence and death."

It wasn't in the plan, but Fraffin couldn't help himself. He glared at Kelexel, said: "You think you hate such things, eh? No, you don't! You say you're attracted by such things as this pretty native of yours. I hear you fancy the native clothing." He touched a sleeve of his jacket, a curious caressing gesture. "How little you know yourself, Kelexel."

Kelexel's face went dark with anger. This was too much! Fraffin exceeded all bounds of propriety!

"We Chem have locked the door on death and violence," he muttered. "Viewing it's a dalliance, no more."

"Morbid, you say?" Fraffin asked. "We've locked the door on death? No longer for us, is it?" He chuckled. "Yet, there it stands, our eternal temptation. What do I do here that attracts you so—attracts you so much that in the very voice of admission you inquire about that which repels? I'll tell you what I do here: I play with temptation that my fellow Chem may watch."

Fraffin's hands moved as he talked—chopping, cutting gestures that exposed the ever-young flesh, active, vibrant—small hairs curling on the backs of the fingers, nails blunt, flat.

Kelexel stared at the man, caught in the spell of Fraffin's words. *Death—temptation? Surely not!* Yet, there was a cold certainty in the idea.

Watching Fraffin's hands, Kelexel thought: *The hand must not overthrow the mind.*

"You laugh," Kelexel said. "You think me amusing."

"Not *just* you," Fraffin said.

"All is amusement—the poor creatures of my caged world and every last blessed one of us who cannot hear the warnings of our own eternal lives. All warnings have one exception, eh? Yourself! That's what I see, and that's what amuses me. You laugh at *them* in my productions, but you don't know why you laugh. Ahh, Kelexel, here's where we hide the awareness of our own mortality."

Kelexel spoke in shocked outrage: "We're *not* mortal!"

"Kelexel, Kelexel—we're mortal. Any of us can end it, cease the rejuvenation, and that's mortal. That's mortal."

Kelexel sat silently staring. The Director was insane!

For Fraffin, the everlasting awareness which his own words had aroused foamed across his mind and, receding, exposed his rage.

I'm angry and remorseful, he thought. *I've accepted a morality no other Chem would entertain for a moment. I'm sorry for Kelexel and for all the creatures I've moved and removed without their knowing. They sprout fifty heads within me for every one I cut off. Gossip? A Collector of gossip? I'm a person of sensitive ears who can still hear a knife scraping bread in a villa that no longer exists.*

He remembered the woman then—the dark, exotic chatelaine of his Roman home. She'd been no taller than himself, stunted by native standards, but lovely in his sight—the best of them all. She'd borne him eight mortal children, their mixed blood concealed in the genetic meld. She'd grown old and dull of face and he remembered that, too. Remembering her blunted look, he saw the black throng, the mixed up disasters of their mingled genes. She'd given him something no other could: a share in mortality that he could accept for his own.

What the Primacy wouldn't give to know about that little interlude, he thought.

"You talk like a mad man," Kelexel whispered.

We contend openly now, eh? Fraffin thought. *Perhaps I move too slowly with this dolt. Perhaps I should tell him now how he's caught in our trap.* But Fraffin felt himself caught up in the flow of his own anger. He couldn't help himself.

"A mad man?" he asked, his voice sneering. "You say we're immortal, we Chem. How're we immortal? We rejuvenate and rejuvenate. We've achieved a balance point, frozen short of final destruction. At what stage in our development, Chem Kelexel, are we frozen?"

"Stage?" Kelexel stared at him. Fraffin's words were firebrands.

"Yes, stage! Are we frozen in maturity? I think not. To mature one must flower. We don't flower, Kelexel."

"I don't . . . ."

"We don't produce something of beauty and loveliness, something which is the essence of ourselves! We don't flower."

"I've had offspring!"

Fraffin couldn't contain his laughter. When it subsided, he faced a now openly angry Kelexel, said: "The unflowering seed, the perpetual immaturity producing the perpetual immaturity—and you brag about it! How mean and empty and frightened you are, Kelexel."

"What've I to fear?" Kelexel demanded. "Death can't touch me. *You* can't touch me!"

"Except from within," Fraffin said. "Death can't touch a Chem except from within. We're sovereign individuals, immortal citadels of selfdom that no force can storm . . . except from within. In each of us there's that seed out of our past, the seed which whispers: 'Remember? Remember when *we* could die?'"

Kelexel pushed himself upright, stood glaring down at Fraffin. "You're insane!"

"Sit down, *visitor,*" Fraffin said. And he wondered at himself. *Why do I goad him? To justify myself in what I must do? If that's so, then I should give him something he can use against me. I should make this a more equal contest.*

Kelexel sank back into his seat. He reminded himself that the Chem were mostly immune to the more bizarre forms of madness, but one never knew what stresses might be imposed by outpost living, by contact with an alien race. The boredom psychosis threatened all of them—perhaps Fraffin had succumbed to something in that syndrome.

"Let us see if you have a conscience," Fraffin said.

It was such an unexpected statement that Kelexel could only goggle at him. There came a sense of furtive emptying within himself, though, and Kelexel recognized peril in Fraffin's words.

"What harm could there be in that?" Fraffin asked. He turned. One of the crew had brought a vase of roses and put them on the cabinet behind his desk. Fraffin looked at the roses. They were full blown, dripping blood-colored petals like the garlands on Diana's altar. *There's no more joking in Sumeria,* he thought. *No more do we jest, inserting foolishness into Minerva's wisdom.*

"What are you talking about?" Kelexel asked.

For answer, Fraffin moved a control stud beneath his desk. His pantovive reproducer whirred into action, slid across the room like a giant beast and positioned itself at Fraffin's right where they could share the view of its focusing stage.

Kelexel stared at it, suddenly dry-mouthed. The frivolous entertainment machine was a sud-

den monster that he felt was capable of striking him unaware.

"It was thoughtful of you to provide one of these for your pet," Fraffin said. "Shall we see what she's watching?"

"How can that concern us?" Kelexel demanded. He heard anger and uncertainty in his own voice, knew Fraffin was aware of this reaction.

"Let us see," Fraffin said. He swung the bank of control studs within easy reach, moved them loving. The stage became a native room on the planet surface—a long, narrow room with beige plaster walls, a washed brown ceiling. The view was directly along a burn-scarred plank table that jutted from a steam radiator which hissed beneath the red and white curtains of a barred window.

Two men sat facing each other across the table.

"Ahh," Fraffin said. "On the left we have your pet's father, and on the right we have the man she'd have mated with had we not stepped in and given her to you."

"Stupid, useless natives," Kelexel sneered.

"But she's watching them right now," Fraffin said. "This what's going into her pantovive . . . which you so kindly provided."

"She's quite happy here; I'm sure of it," Kelexel said.

"Then why don't you release her from the manipulator?" Fraffin asked.

"When she's fully conditioned," Kelexel said. "She'll be more than content to serve a Chem when she understands what we can provide her."

"Of course," Fraffin said. He studied Andy Thurlow's profile. The lips moved, but Fraffin kept the sound bar turned off. "That's why she watches this scene from my current production."

"What's so important about this scene?" Kelexel demanded. "Perhaps she's caught by your artistry."

"Indeed," Fraffin said.

Kelexel studied the native on the left. His pet's father? He noted how the native's eyelids drooped. This was a heavy-featured creature with an air of secretiveness about it. The native might almost have been a gross Chem. How could that thing have fathered the slender grace of his pet?

"The one she'd have mated with is a native witch doctor," Fraffin said.

"Witch doctor?"

"They prefer to be called psychologists. Shall we listen to them?"

"As you said: What harm could there be in that?"

Fraffin moved the sound bar. "Yes, indeed."

"Perhaps, it'll be amusing," Kelexel said, but there was no amusement in his voice. Why was

his pet watching these creatures out of her past? This could only torment her.

"Shhh," Fraffin said.

"What?"

"Listen!"

Thurlow bent to arrange a stack of papers on the table. The sound was a faint hissing. There came the smell of dusty air, stale and full of strange essences, as the sensi-mesh web encompassed Kelexel and Fraffin.

Joe Murphey's guttural voice rumbled from the stage: "I'm surprised to see you, Andy. Heard you had some sort of attack."

"It must've been the one-day flu," Thurlow said. "Everybody's been having it."

(Fraffin chuckled.)

"Any word from Ruthey?" Murphey asked.

"No."

"You've lost her again, that's what. Thought I told you to take care of her. But maybe women're all alike."

Thurlow adjusted his glasses, looked up and straight into the eyes of the watching Chem.

Kelexel gasped.

"What do you make of that?" Fraffin whispered.

"An immune!" Kelexel hissed. And he thought: *I have Fraffin now! Allowing an immune to watch his shooting crew!* He asked: "Is the creature still alive?"

"We recently gave him a little taste of our power," Fraffin said, "but I find him too amusing to destroy."

Murphey cleared his throat and Kelexel sat back, watching, listening. *Destroy yourself, then, Fraffin,* he thought.

"You wouldn't get sick if you were in here," Murphey said. "I've gained weight on this jailhouse diet. What surprises me is how well I've adjusted to the routine here."

Thurlow returned his attention to the papers in front of him.

Kelexel felt himself caught by the creatures' actions, sensed himself sinking out of sight into these other beings, becoming a bundle of watchful senses. One irritant remained to gnaw at him, though: *Why does she watch these creatures from her past?*

"Things are going along all right, eh?" Thurlow asked. He stacked ink blot cards in front of Murphey.

"Well it does drag," Murphey said. "Things're slow here." He tried not to look at the cards.

"But you think jail agrees with you?"

Fraffin manipulated the pantovive controls. Point of view moved in abruptly. The two natives became enlarged profiles. (Kelexel had the eerie feeling that his own person had been moved, pushed inward to stare down on the two natives.)

"We're going to run these cards a little differently this time," Thurlow said. "You've been hav-

ing these tests so frequently, I want to change the pace."

An abrupt crouching look came into Murphey's hunched shoulders, but his voice emerged open and bland: "Anything you say, Doc."

"I'll sit here facing you," Thurlow said. "That's a bit unorthodox, but this situation's full of irregularities."

"You mean you knowing me and all?"

"Yes." Thurlow placed a stopwatch beside him on the table. "And I've changed the usual order of the cards."

The stopwatch exerted a sudden attraction for Murphey. He stared at it. A faint tremor moved up his thick forearms. With a visible effort, he arranged his features into the look of eager brightness, a willingness to cooperate.

"You sat behind me last time," he said. "So did Doctor Whelye."

"I know," Thurlow said. He busied himself checking the order of the cards.

Kelexel jumped as Fraffin touched his arm, looked up to see the director leaning across the desk. "This Thurlow's good," Fraffin whispered. "Watch him carefully. Notice how he changes the test. There's a learning element involved in having the same test several times in a short period. It's like being put in jeopardy enough times until you learn how to avoid the danger."

Kelexel heard the double meaning in Fraffin's words, watched as the director sank back, smiling. A sense of unease came over Kelexel then. He returned his attention to the pantovive stage. What was the importance of this scene, this confession of guilt? A conscience? He studied Thurlow, wondering if Ruth were released, would she go back to that creature? How could she after experiencing a Chem?

A pang of jealousy shot through Kelexel. He sat back, scowled.

Thurlow now gave evidence of being ready to start his test. He exposed the first card, started his stopwatch, kept a hand on it.

Murphey stared at the first card, pursed his lips. Presently, he said: "Been a car accident. Two people killed. That's their bodies beside the road. Lotsa accidents nowadays. People just don't know how to handle fast cars."

"Are you isolating part of the pattern or does the whole card give you that picture?" Thurlow asked.

Murphey blinked. "Just this little part here." He turned the card face down, lifted the second one. "This is a will or a deed like to property, but somebody's let it fall in the water and the writing's all smeared. That's how you can't read it."

"A will? Any idea whose?"

Murphey gestured with the card. "You know, when grand-

paw died, they never found the will. He had one. We all knew he had one, but Uncle Amos wound up with most of Gramp's stuff. That's how I learned to be careful with my papers. You've gotta be careful with important papers."

"Was your father cautious like that?"

"Paw? Hell, no!"

Thurlow appeared caught by something in Murphey's tone. He said: "You and your father ever fight?"

"Jawed some, that's all."

"You mean argued."

"Yeah. He always wanted me to stay with the mules and wagon."

Thurlow sat waiting, watchful, studying.

Murphey assumed a death's head grin. "That's an old saying we had in the family." Abruptly, he put down the card in his hand, took up the third one. He cocked his head to one side. "Hide of a muskrat stretched out to dry. They brought eleven cents apiece when I was a boy."

Thurlow said: "Try for another association. See if you can find something else in the card."

Murphey flicked a glance at Thurlow, back to the card. An appearance of spring-wound tension came over him. The silence dragged out.

Watching the scene, Kelexel had the sensation that Thurlow was reaching through Murphey to the pantovive's audience. He felt that he himself was being examined by the witch doctor. Logically, Kelexel knew this scene already was in the past, that it was a captured record. There was an immediacy about it, though, a sensation of moving freely in time.

Again, Murphey looked at Thurlow. "It might be a dead bat," he said. "Somebody might've shot it."

"Oh? Why would anyone do that?"

"Because they're dirty!" Murphey put the card on the table, pushed it away from him. He looked cornered. Slowly, he reached for the next card, exposed it as though fearful of what he might find.

Thurlow checked the watch, returned his attention to Murphey.

Murphey studied the card in his hand. Several times he appeared set to speak. Each time he hesitated, remained silent. Presently, he said: "Fourth of July rockets, the fire kind that go off in the air. Dangerous damn' things."

"The explosive kind?" Thurlow asked.

Murphey peered at the card. "Yeah, the kind that explode and shoot out stars. Those stars can start fires."

"Have you ever seen one start a fire?"

"I've heard about it."

"Where?"

"Lotsa places! Every year they warn people about those damn' things. Don't you read the papers?"

Thurlow made a note on the pad in front of him.

Murphey glowered at him a moment, went on to the next card. "This one's a drawing of where they've poisoned an ant hill and cut the hill in half to map out how the holes were dug."

Thurlow leaned back, his attention concentrated on Murphey's face. "Why would someone make such a map?"

"To see how the ants work it out. I fell on an ant hill when I was a kid. They bit like fire. Maw put soda on me. Paw poured coal oil on the hill and set a match to it. Man, did they scatter! Paw jumping all around, smashing 'em."

With a reluctant motion, Murphey put down the card, took up the next one. He glared at Thurlow's hand making notes, turned his attention to the card. A charged silence settled over him.

Staring at the card in Murphey's hand, Kelexel was reminded of Chem flitters against a sunset sky, a fleet of them going from nowhere to nowhere. He experienced a sudden fearful wondering at what Thurlow might say to this.

Murphey extended the card at arm's length, squinted his eyes. "Over on the left there it could be that mountain in Switzerland where people're always falling off and getting killed."

"The Matterhorn?"

"Yeah."

"Does the rest of the card suggest anything to you?"

Murphey tossed the card aside. "Nothing."

Thurlow made a notation on the pad, looked up at Murphey who was studying the next card.

"All the times I've seen this card," Murphey said, "I never noticed this place up at the top." He pointed. "Right up here. It's a shipwreck with lifeboats sticking up out of the water. These little dots are the drowned people."

Thurlow swallowed. He appeared to be debating a comment. With an abrupt leaning forward, he asked: "Were there any survivors?"

A look of sad relcutance came over Murphey's face. "No," he sighed. "This was a bad one. You know, My Uncle Al died the year the *Titanic* sank."

"Was he on the *Titanic?*"

"No. That's just how I fix the date. Helps you remember. Like when that Zeppelin burned, that was the year I moved my company into the new building."

Murphey went to the next card, smiled. "Here's an easy one. It's a mushroom cloud from an atomic bomb."

Thurlow wet his lips with his tongue, then: "The whole card?"

"No, just this white place here at the side." He pointed. "It's... like a photograph of the explosion."

Murphey's blocky hand shuffled to the next card. He held it close, squinting down at it. An air of brooding silence settled over the room.

Kelexel glanced at Fraffin, found the Director studying him.

"What's the purpose of all this?" Kelexel whispered.

"You're whispering," Fraffin said. "Don't you want Thurlow to hear you?"

"What?"

"These native witch doctors have strange powers," Fraffin said. "They're very penetrating at times."

"It's a lot of nonsense," Kelexel said. "Mumbo jumbo. The test doesn't mean a thing. The native's answers are perfectly logical. I might've said comparable things myself."

"Indeed?" Fraffin said.

Kelexel remained silent, returned his attention to the pantovive stage. Murphey was peering warily at Thurlow.

"Part through the middle might be a forest fire," Murphey said. He watched Thurlow's mouth.

"Have you ever seen a forest fire?"

"Where one'd been. Stank to heaven with dead cows. Burned out a ranch up on the Siuslaw."

Thurlow wrote on the pad.

Murphey glared at him, swallowed, turned to the final card. As he looked at it, he drew in a sharp, hard breath as though he'd been hit in the stomach.

Thurlow looked up quickly, studied him.

A look of confusion passed over Murphey's face. He squirmed in his chair, then: "Is this one of the regular cards?"

"Yes."

"I don't remember it."

"Oh. Do you remember all the other cards?"

"Kind of."

"What about this card?"

"I think you've rung in a new one."

"No. It's one of the regular Rorschach cards."

Murphey turned a hard stare on the psychologist, said: "I had a right to kill her, Doc. Let's remember that. I had a right. A husband has to protect his home."

Thurlow jerked his attention back to the card. "A junkyard," he blurted. "It reminds me of a junkyard."

Still, Thurlow remained silent.

"Wrecked cars, old boilers, things like that," Murphey said. He tossed the card asside, sat back with a look of cautious waiting.

Thurlow took a deep breath, collected the cards and data sheets, slipped them into a briefcase which he lifted from the floor beside his chair. Slowly, he

turned, stared directly into the pantovive.

Kelexel had the disquieting sensation that Thurlow was staring him in the eyes.

"Tell me, Joe," Thurlow said, "what do you see there?" He pointed at the pantovive's watchers.

"Huh? Where?"

"There." Thurlow continued to point.

Murphey now stared out of the pantovive at the audience. "Some dust or smoke," he said. "They don't keep this place too clean."

"But what do you see in the dust or smoke?" Thurlow persisted. He lowered his hand.

Murphey squinted, tipped his head to one side. "Ohh, maybe it's kinda like a lot of little faces... babies' faces, like cherubs or... no, like those imps they put in pictures of hell."

Thurlow turned back to the prisoner. "Imps of hell," he murmured. "How very appropriate."

At the pantovive, Fraffin slapped the cut-off. The scene faded from the stage.

Kelexel blinked, turned, was surprised to find Fraffin chuckling.

"Imps of hell," Fraffin said, "Oh, that's lovely. That is purely lovely."

"You're deliberately allowing an immune to watch us and record our actions," Kelexel said. "I see nothing lovely about that!"

"What did you think of Murphey?" Fraffin asked.

"He looked as sane as I am."

A spasm of laughter overcame Fraffin. He shook his head, rubbed his eyes, then: "Murphey's my own creation, Kelexel. My own creation. I've shaped him most carefully and certainly from his infancy. Isn't he delightful. Imps of hell!"

"Is he an immune, too?"

"Lords of Preservation, no!"

Kelexel studied the director. Surely Fraffin had penetrated the disguise by now. Why would he betray himself, flaunt an immune before an Investigator from the Primacy? Was it the witch doctor? Had these natives some mysterious power which Fraffin could use?

"I don't understand your motives, Fraffin," Kelexel said.

"That's obvious," Fraffin said. "What about Thurlow? Does it give you no pangs of guilt to watch the creature you've robbed of a mate?"

"The . . . witch doctor? The immune? He must be disposed of. How can I rob him of anything? It's a Chem's right to take whatever he desires from the lower orders."

"But . . . Thurlow's almost human, don't you think?"

"Nonsense!"

"No, no, Kelexel. He has a great native capability. He's superb. Couldn't you see how he was drawing Murphey out, ex-

posing the flesh of insanity?"

"How can you say the native's insane?"

"He is, Kelexel. I made him that way."

"I . . . don't believe you."

"Patience and courtesy," Fraffin said. "What would you say if I told you I could show you more of Thurlow without your seeing him at all?"

Kelexel sat up straight. He felt wary, as though all his previous fears had come back amplified. Bits of the scene Fraffin had just shown reeled through his mind, clinging and wisping away, its meanings changed and distorted. Insane? And what of Ruth, his pet? She had watched that scene, perhaps was still watching more of it. Why would she wish to see such a . . . painful thing? It must be painful for her. It must be. For the first time in his memory, Kelexel felt himself drawn to share another being's emotions. He tried to shake it off. She was a native, one of the lower orders. He looked up to find Fraffin staring at him. It was as though they had exchanged places with the two natives they'd just watched. Fraffin has assumed the role of Thurlow and he, Kelexel, was Murphey.

What powers has he gained from these natives? Kelexel asked himself. *Can he see into me, divine my thoughts? But I'm not insane . . . or violent.*

"What paradox is this you propose?" Kelexel demanded. And he was proud that his voice remained level, calm and questing.

Gently, gently, Fraffin thought. *He's well hooked, but he mustn't struggle with me too much—not yet.*

"An amusing thing," Fraffin said. "Observe." He gestured at the pantovive's stage, manipulated the controls.

Kelexel turned reluctantly, stared at the projected scene—the same drab room, the same barred window with its red and white curtains, the hissing radiator, Murphey seated in the same position at the scarred table. It was a tableau, identical with the scene they'd just watched except that another native sat behind Murphey, his back to the observers, a clipboard and papers on his knees.

Like Murphey, this new figure conveyed an impression of excessive bulk. The visible curve of cheek when he turned his head showed choleric. The back of his neck carried a sanitary barber-scraped appearance.

A scattered stack of the inkblot cards lay on the table before Murphey. He was tapping a finger on the back of one of them.

As Kelexel studied the scene, he observed a subtle difference in Murphey. There was a suggestion of greater calm. He was more relaxed, more sure of himself.

Fraffin cleared his throat, said:

"The native writing on that pad is another witch doctor, Whelye, an associate of Thurlow's. He had just finished administering the same test to Murphey. Observe him carefully."

"Why?" Kelexel asked. This repetition of native rites was beginning to bore him.

"Just observe," Fraffin said.

Abruptly, Murphey picked up the card he'd been tapping, looked at it, discarded it.

Whelye turned, raised his head to expose a round face, two buttons of blue eyes, a steep shelf of nose and thin mouth. Satisfaction poured from him as though it were a light he shone on everything within range of his senses. In the satisfaction there lay a stalking craftiness.

"That card," he said, his voice petulant. "Why'd you look at that card again?"

"I . . . ah, just wanted another look," Murphey said. He lowered his head.

"Do you see something new in it?"

"What I always see in it—an animal skin."

Whelye stared at the back of Murphey's head with a look of glee. "An animal skin, the kind you trapped when you were a boy."

"I made a lot of money off those skins. Always had an eye for money."

Whelye's head bobbed up and down, a curious wracking motion that rippled a fold of flesh against his collar. "Would you like a second look at any of the other cards?"

Murphey wet his lips with his tongue. "Guess not."

"Interesting," Whelye murmured.

Murphey turned slightly, spoke without looking at the psychiatrist. "Doc, maybe you'd tell me something."

"What?"

"I had this test from another of you headsrhinkers, you know—from Thurlow. What's it show?"

Something fierce and pouncing arose in Whelye's face. "Didn't Thurlow tell you?"

"No. I figured you're more of a right guy, that you'd level with me."

Whelye looked down at the papers in his lap, moved his pencil absently. He began filling in the "o's" of a printed line. "Thurlow has no medical degree."

"Yeah, but what's the test show about me?"

Whelye completed his pencil work on the line of print, sat back and examined it. "It takes a little time to evaluate the data," he said, "But I'd hazard a guess you're as normal as the next fellow."

"Does that mean I'm sane?" Murphey asked. He stared at the table, breath held, waiting.

"As sane as I am," Whelye said.

A deep sigh escaped Murphey. He smiled, looked sidelong at the ink blot cards. "Thanks, Doc."

The scene faded abruptly.

Kelexel shook his head, looked across the desk to see Fraffin's hand on the pantovive's cut-off controls. The director was grinning at him.

"See," Fraffin said. "Someone else who thinks Murphey's sane, someone who agrees with you."

"You said you were going to show me Thurlow."

"But I did!"

"I don't understand."

"Didn't you see the compulsive way this witch doctor filled in those letters on his paper? Did you see Thurlow doing anything like that?"

'No, but . . . ."

"And didn't you notice how much this witch doctor enjoyed Murphey's fear."

"But fear *can* be amusing at times."

"And pain, and violence?" Fraffin asked.

"Certainly, if they're handled correctly."

Fraffin continued to stare at him, smiling.

I enjoy their fear, too, Kelexel thought. *Is that what this insane director's suggesting? Is he trying to compare me to these . . . creatures? Any Chem enjoys such things!*

"These natives have conceived the strange idea," Fraffin said, "that anything which degrades life—degrades *any* life—is a sickness."

"But that depends entirely on what form of life's degraded," Kelexel objected. "Surely, even these natives of yours wouldn't hesitate to degrade a . . . a . . . a worm!"

Fraffin merely stared at him.

"Well?" Kelexel demanded.

Still Fraffin stared.

Kelexel felt his rage rising. He glared at Fraffin.

"It's merely an idea," Fraffin said, "something to toy with. Ideas are our toys, too, aren't they?"

"An insane idea," Kelexel growled.

He reminded himself then that he was here to remove the menace of this storyship's mad director. And the man had exposed his crime! It would bring severe censure and relocation at the very least. And if this were widespread—ah, then! Kelexel sat studying Fraffin, savoring the coming moment of denunciation, the righteous anger, the threat of eternal ostracism from his own kind. Let Fraffin go into the outer blackness of eternal boredom! Let this madman discover what *Forever* really meant!

The thought lay there a moment in Kelexel's mind. He had never approached it from quite this point of view before. Forever. *What does it really mean?* he asked himself.

He tried to imagine himself iso-

lated, thrown onto his own resources for time-without-end. His mind recoiled from the thought, and he felt a twinge of pity for what might happen to Fraffin.

"Now," Fraffin said. "Now is the moment."

Can he be goading me to denounce him? Kelexel wondered. *It isn't possible!*

"It's my pleasant task to tell you," Fraffin said, "that you're going to have another offspring."

Kelexel sat staring, stupified by the words. He tried to speak, couldn't. Presently, he found his voice, rasped: "But how can you . . . ."

"Oh, not in the legally approved manner," Fraffin said. "There'll be no delicate little operation, no optimum selection of ovarian donor from the banks of the Primacy's creche. Nothing that simple."

"What do you . . . ."

"Your native pet," Fraffin siad. "You've impregnated her. She's going to bear your child in the . . . ancient way, as we once did before the orderly organization of the Primacy."

"That . . . that's impossible," Kelexel whispered.

"Not at all," Fraffin said. "You see, what we have here is a planet full of wild Chem."

Kelexel sat silently absorbing the evil beauty of Fraffin's revelation, seeing the breadth behind the words, seeing things here as he was meant to see them. The crime was so simple. So simple! Once he overcame the mental block that clouded thinking about such matters, the whole structure fell into place. It was a crime fitting Fraffin's stature, a crime such as no other Chem had ever conceived. A perverse admiration for Fraffin seeped through Kelexel.

"You are thinking," Fraffin said, "that you have but to denounce me, and the Primacy will set matters right. Attend the consequences. The creatures of this planet will be sterilized so as not to contaminate the Chem bloodlines. The planet will be shut down until we can put it to some *proper* use. Your new offspring, a half-breed, will go with the rest."

Abruptly, Kelexel sensed forgotten instincts begin to war in him. The threat in Fraffin's words opened a hoard of things Kelexel had thought locked away. He'd never suspected the potency or danger of these forces he'd supposed were chained—forever.

Odd thoughts buzzed in is mind like caged birds. Something free and wild rose in him and he thought:

Imagine having an unlimited number of offspring!

Then: *So this is what happened to the other Investigators!*

In this instant, Kelexel knew he had lost.

"Will you let them destroy your offspring?" Fraffin asked.

The question was redundant. Kelexel had already posed it and answered it. No Chem would hazard his own offspring—so rare and precious a thing, that lonely link with the last past. He sighed.

In the sigh, Fraffin saw victory and smiled.

Kelexel's thoughts turned inward. The Primacy had lost another round with Fraffin. The precise and formal way he had participated in that loss grew clearer to Kelexel by the minute. There was the blind (was it really blind?) way he'd walked into the trap. He'd been as easy for Fraffin to manipulate as any of the wild creatures on this wonderful world.

The realization that he must accept defeat, that he had no choice, brought an odd feeling of happiness to Kelexel. It wasn't joy, but a backward sorrow as poignant and profound as grief.

I will have an unlimited supply of female pets, he thought. *And they will give me offspring.*

A cloud passed across his mind then, and he spoke to Fraffin as a fellow conspirator: "What if the Primacy sends a *female* Investigator?"

"Make our task easier," Fraffin said. "Chem females, deprived of the ability to breed, but *not* deprived of the instinct, find great joy here. They dabble in the pleasures of the flesh of course. Native males have a wonderful lack of inhibitions. But the magnetic attraction for our females is a very simple thing. One exposure and they're addicted to watching at the births! They get some vicarious pleasure out of it that I don't understand, but Ynvic assures me it's profound."

Kelexel nodded. It must be true. The females in this conspiracy must be held by some strong tie. But Kelexel was still the Investigator in his training. He noted the way Fraffin's mouth moved, the creasing of lines at the eyes: little betrayals. There was an element here that Fraffin was refusing to recognize. The battle would be lost some day. Forever was too long for the Primacy to lose every exchange. Suspicions would mount to certainty, and then *any* means would be employed to unveil this secret.

Seeing this, Kelexel felt a pang of grief. It was as though the inevitable already had happened. Here was an outpost of the Chem mortality and it, too, would go—in time. Here was a part of all Chem that rebelled against *Forever.* Here was the proof that somewhere in Every Chem, the fact of immortality hadn't been accepted. But the evidence would be erased.

"We'll find you a planet of your own," Fraffin said.

The instant he'd spoken, Fraffin wondered if he'd been too precipitate. Kelexel might need time

to digest things. He'd appeared to stiffen there, but now he was rising, the polite Chem taking his leave, accepting defeat—no doubt going to be rejuvenated. He'd see the need for that at once.

Kelexel lay back on the bed, his head cupped in his hands, watching Ruth pace the floor. Back and forth, back and forth she went, her green robe hissing against her legs. She did this almost every time he came here now—unless he set the manipulator at a disgustingly high pressure.

His eyes moved to follow the pacing. Her robe was belted at the waist with emeralds chained in silver that glittered under the room's yellow light. Her body gave definite visible hints of her pregnancy—a mounding of the abdomen, a rich glow to her skin. She knew her condition, of course, but aside from one outburst of hysterics (which the manipulator controlled quickly) she made no mention of it.

Only ten rest periods had passed since his interview with Fraffin, yet Kelexel felt the past which had terminated in the director's salon receded into dimness. The 'amusing little story' centered on Ruth's parent had been recorded and terminated. (Kelexel found it less amusing every time he viewed it.) All that remained was to find a suitable outpost planet for his own uses.

Back and forth Ruth paced. She'd be at the pantovive in a moment, he knew. She hadn't used it yet in his presence, but he could see her glancing at it. He could sense the machine drawing her nearer.

Kelexel glanced up at the manipulator controlling her emotions. The strength of its setting frightened him. She'd be immune to it one day; no doubt of that. The manipulator was a great metal insect spreading over the ceiling.

Kelexel sighed.

Now that he knew Ruth was a wild Chem, her ancestry heavily infused with storyship bloodlines, he found his feelings about her disturbed. She had become more than a creature, almost a *person.*

Was it right to manipulate a person? Wrong? Right? Conscience? The attitudes of this world's exotics infused strange doubts into him. Ruth wasn't full Chem—never could be. She hadn't been taken in infancy, transformed and stunted by immortality. She was marked down at no position in Tiggywaugh's web.

What would the Primacy do? Was Fraffin correct? Would they blot out this world? The were capable of it. But the natives were so attractive it didn't seem possible they'd be obliterated. They were Chem—wild Chem. But no matter the Primacy's in-

tentions, this place would be overwhelmed. No one presently partaking of its pleasures would have a part in the new order.

Arguments went back and forth in his mind in a pattern like Ruth's pacing.

Her movement began to anger him. She was doing this to annoy, deliberately testing the limits of her power. Kelexel reached beneath his cloak, adjusted the manipulator.

Ruth stopped as though drawn up against a wall. She turned, faced him. "Again?" she asked, her voice flat.

"Come forward." he said.

She stood unmoving.

Kelexel exerted more pressure, repeated his command. The manipulator's setting went up...up ... up ....

Slowly, woodenly she obeyed.

"Turn around," he said.

With the same wooden movement, she obeyed.

"Face me," Kelexel said.

When she'd obeyed, Kelexel released the manipulator's pressure. *How superbly graceful she is,* he thought.

But Ruth, with a deep, ragged breath, had turned away.

There! she thought. *I've resisted him. I've asserted myself at last. It'll be easier next time.* And she remembered the sudden pressure of the manipulator, the compulsion which had forced her to move. Even in that extremity, she'd felt the sureness that a time would come when she could resist Kelexel's manipulator no matter its pressure. There'd be a limit to the pressure, she knew, but no limit to her growing will to resist. She had only to think of what she'd seen on the pantovive to strengthen that core of resistance.

"You're angry with me," Kelexel said. "Why? I've indulged your every fancy."

For answer she turned to the pantovive's metal webwork, moved its controls. Keys clicked. Instruments hummed.

How deftly she uses her toy., Kelexel thought. *She's been at it more than I suspected. Such practiced sureness! But when has she had time to become this sure? She's never used it in front of me before. I've been here each rest period. Perhaps time moves at a different rate for mortals. How long to her has she been with me? A quarter of her sun's circuit or maybe a bit more.*

He wondered then how she really felt about the offspring within her body. Primitives felt many things about their bodies, knew many things without recourse to instruments. Some wild sense they had which spoke to them from within. Could the potential offspring be why she was angered?

"Look," Ruth said.

Kelexel sat upright, focused on the pantovive's image stage, the glowing oval where Fraffin's al-

most-people performed. Figures moved there, the gross wild Chem. Kelexel was suddenly reminded of a comment he'd heard about Fraffin's productions—"Their reverse doll-house quality." Yes, his *creatures* always managed to seem emotionally as well as physically larger than life.

"These are relatives of mine," Ruth said. "My father's brother and sister. They came out for the trial. This is their motel room."

"Motel?" Kelexel slipped off the bed, crossed to stand beside Ruth.

"Temporary housing," she said. She sat down at the controls.

Kelexel studied the stage. Its bubble of light contained a room of faded maroon. A thin, straw-haired female sat on the edge of a bed at the right. She wore a pink dressing gown. One heavily veined hand dabbed a damp handkerchief at her eyes. Like the furniture, she appeared faded—dull eyes, sagging cheeks. In the general shape of her head and body, she resembled Joe Murphey, Ruth's father. Kelexel wondered then if Ruth would come to this one day. Surely not. The female's eyes peered from deep sockets beneath thin brows.

A man stood facing her, his back to the viewers.

"Now, Claudie," the man said, "there's no sense . . . ."

"I just can't help remembering," she said. There was a sob in her voice.

Kelexel swallowed. His body seemed to drink emotional identification with the creatures. It was uncanny—repellent and at once magnetic. The pantovive's sensi-mesh web projected a cloying sweet emotion from the woman. It was stifling.

"I remember one time on the farm near Marion," she said. "Joey was about three that night we was sitting on the porch after the preacher'd been there to dinner. Paw was wondering out loud how he could get that twelve acres down by the creek."

"He was always wondering that."

"And Joey said he had to go toi-toi."

"That danged outhouse," Grant said.

"Remember them narrow boards across the mud? Joey was still wearing that white suit Ma'd made for him."

"Claudie, what's the use remembering all . . . ."

"You remember that night?"

"Claudie, that was a long time ago."

"I remember it. Joey asked all around for someone to go out with him across them boards, but Paw said for him to git along. What's he scared of?"

"Doggone, Claudie, you sound like Paw sometimes."

"I remember Joey going out there all by hisself—a little white

blot like in the dark. Then Paw yipped: 'Joey! Look out for that buck nigger ahint you!"

"And Joey ran!" Grant said. "I remember."

"And he slipped off into the mud."

"He come back all dirty," Grant said. "I remember." He chuckled.

"And when Paw found out he'd wet hisself, too, he went and got the razor strop." Her voice softened. "Joey was such a little feller."

"Paw was a strict one, all right."

"Funny the things you remember sometimes," she said.

Grant moved across to a window, picked at the maroon drapery. Turning, he revealed his face—the same fine bone structure as Ruth, but with heavy flesh over it. A sharp line crossed his forehead where a hat had been worn, the face dark beneath it, light above. His eyes appeared hidden in shadowed holes. The hand at the drapery was darkly veined.

"This is real dry country," he said. "Nothing ever looks green out here."

"I wonder why he done it?" Claudie asked.

Grant shrugged. "He was a strange one, Joey."

"Listen to you," she said. "*Was* a strange one. Already talking like he was dead."

"I guess he is, Claudie. Just as good as." He shook his head. "Either dead or committed to an insane asylum. Same thing really when they stick you away like that."

"I heard you talk plenty about what happened when we was kids," she said. "You figure that had anything to do with him going . . . like this?"

"What had anything to do with it?"

"The way Paw treated him."

Grant found a loose thread in the drapery. He pulled it out, rolled it between his fingers. The sensi-mesh web projected a feeling of long-repressed anger from him. (Kelexel wondered then why Ruth was showing him this scene. He understood in a way the pain she must feel at seeing this, but how could she blame him or be angry at him for this?)

"That time we went to the county fair to hear the darky singers," Grant said. "In the mule wagon, remember? Paw says: 'Come along, boy. Don't you want to hear them niggers?' And Joey says: 'I guess I'll stay with the mules and wagon."

Claudie nodded.

Another thread came out of the drapery into Grant's hand. He said: "I heard you plenty of times when you didn't want to go someplace say: 'Guess I'll stay with the mules and wagon.' We had half the county saying it."

"Joey was like that," she said. "Always wanting to be alone."

Grant's lips formed a harsh

smile. "Everything seemed to happen to Joey."

"Was you there when he ran away?"

"Yep. That was after you was married, wasn't it. Paw sold Joey's horse that he'd worked all summer cutting wood to buy from old Poor-John Weeks, Ned Tolliver' brother-in-law."

"Did you see the ruckus?"

"I was right there. Joey called Paw a liar and a cheat and a thief. Paw went to reach for the white oak club, but Joey was quicker. He must've been seventeen then, and strong. He brung that club down on Paw's head like he wanted to kill him. Paw went down like a pole-axed steer. Joey ripped the money Paw'd got for the horse outen his pocket, ran upstairs, packed the Gladstone and left."

"That was a terrible thing," she said.

Grant nodded. "Long as I live I'll remember that boy standing there on the porch, that bag in his hand and holding that screen door. Maw was sobbing over Paw, dabbing at his head with a wet towel. Joey spoke so low we'd never've heard if we hadn't all been so scared and quiet. We thought Paw was dead for sure."

"'I hope I never see any of you again,' Joey says. And he run off."

"He had Paw's temper and that's for sure," Claudie said.

Ruth slapped the pantovive cut-off. The images faded. She turned, her face composed and blank from the pressures of the manipulator, but there were tear stains down her cheeks.

"I must know something," she said. "Did you Chem do that to my father? Did you . . . make him that way?"

Kelexel remembered Fraffin boasting how he'd *prepared* the killer . . . boasting and explaining how an Investigator from the Primacy stood no chance to escape the traps of this world. But what was important about a few sub-orders demeaned and shaped to a Chem's needs? They weren't sub-orders, though, Kelexel reminded himself. They were wild Chem.

"You did, I see," Ruth said. "I suspected it from what you've told me."

Am I so transparent to her? Kelexel asked himself. *How did she know that? What strange powers do these natives have?*

He covered his confusion with a shrug.

"I wish you could die," Ruth said. "I want you to die."

Despite the manipulator's pressure on her, Ruth could feel rage deep inside her, remote but distinct, a burning and smoldering anger that made her want to reach out and waste her fingernails clawing at this Chem's impervious skin.

Ruth's voice had come out so

level and flat that Kelexel found he'd heard the words and almost passed over them before he absorbed their meaning. Die! She wished him dead! He stepped back. What a boorish, outrageous thing for her to say!

"I am a Chem," he said. "How dare you say such a thing to a Chem?"

"You really don't know, do you?" she asked.

"I've smiled upon you, brought you into my society," he said. "Is this your gratitude?"

She glanced around her prison room, focused on his face—the silvery skin dull and metallic, the features drawn into a sharp frown of disdain. Kelexel's position standing beside her chair put him only slightly above her, and she could see the dark hairs quivering in his nostrils as he breathed.

"I almost pity you," she said.

Kelexel swallowed. *Pity?* Her reaction was unnerving. He looked down at his hands, was surprised to find them clasped tightly together. *Pity?* Slowly, he separated his fingers, noting how the nails were getting the foggy warning look, the reaction from breeding. Reproducing itself, his body had set the clock of flesh ticking. Rejuvenation was needed, and that soon. Was this why she pitied him, because he'd delayed his rejuvenation? No; she couldn't know of the Chem subservience to the Rejuvenators.

Delay . . . delay . . . why am I delaying? Kelexel wondered.

Suddenly, he marveled at himself—his own bravery and daring. He'd let himself go far beyond the point where other Chem went racing for the Rejuvenators. He'd done this thing almost deliberately, he knew, toying with sensations or mortality. What other Chem would've dared. They were cowards all! He was almost like Ruth in this. Almost mortal! And here she railed at him! She didn't understand. How could she, poor creature?

A wave of self pity washed through him. How could anyone understand this? Who even knew? His fellow Chem would all assume he'd availed himself of a Rejuvenator when he'd needed it. No one understood.

Kelexel hesitated on the verge of telling Ruth this daring thing he'd done, but he remembered her words. She wished him dead.

"How can I show you?" Ruth asked. Again, she turned to the pantovive, adjusted its controls. This disgusting machine, product of the disgusting Chem, was suddenly very important to her. It was the most vital thing in her life at this moment to show Kelexel why she nurtured such a seed of violent hate toward him. "Look," she said.

Within the pantovive's bubble of light there appeared a long room with a high desk at one end, rows of benches below it

set off behind a rail, tables, another railed-off section on the right with twelve natives seated in it in various poses of boredom. The side walls were spaced out Grecian columns separated by dark wood paneling and tall windows. Morning sunlight poured in the windows. Behind the high desk sat a round ball of a man in black robes, a bald pod of a head bent forward into the light.

Kelexel found he recognized some of the natives seated at the tables below the high desk. There was the squat figure of Joe Murphey, Ruth's parent; and there was Bondelli, the legal expert he'd seen in Fraffin's story rushes—narrow face, black hair combed back in beetle wings. In chairs immediately behind the railing there were the witch doctors, Whelye and Thurlow.

Thurlow interested Kelexel. Why had she chosen a scene containing that native male? Was it true that she'd have mated with this creature?

"That's Judge Grimm," Ruth said, indicating the man in black robes. "I . . . I went to school with his daughter. Do you know that? I've...been in his home."

Kelexel heard the sounds of distress in her voice, considered a higher setting on the manipulator, decided against it. That might introduce too much inhibition for her to continue. He found himself intensely curious now as to what Ruth was doing. What could her motives be?

"The man with the cane there at the left, at that table, that's Paret, the District Attorney," Ruth said. "His wife and my mother were in the same garden club."

Kelexel looked at the native she'd indicated. There was a look of solidness and integrity about him. Iron gray hair topped a squarish head. The hair made a straight line across his forehead and was trimmed closely above prominent ears. The chin had a forward thrust. The mouth was a prim, neat modulation on the way to a solid nose. The brows were bushy brown ovals above blue eyes. At their outer edges, the eyes made a slight downward slant accented by deep creases.

The cane leaned against the table beside his chair. Now and again, Paret touched its knobbed top.

Something important appeared to be happening in this room now. Ruth turned up the sound and there came a noise of coughing from the ranked spectators, a hissing sound as papers were shuffled.

Kelexel leaned forward, a hand on the back of Ruth's chair, staring as Thurlow arose and went to a chair beside the high desk. There was a brief religious rite invoking truthfulness and Thurlow was seated, the legal expert, Bondelli, standing below him.

Kelexel studied Thurlow—the wide forehead, the dark hair. Without the manipulator, would Ruth perfer this creature? Thurlow gave the impression of crouching behind his dark glasses. There was an aura of shifting uneasiness about him. He was refusing to look in a particular place. It came over Kelexel that Thurlow was avoiding Fraffin's shooting crew in this scene. He was aware of the Chem. Of course! He was immune.

A sense of duty returned momentarily to Kelexel then. He felt shame, guilt. And he knew quite suddenly why he hadn't gone to one of the storyship's Rejuvenators. Once he did that, he'd be committed finally to Fraffin's trap. He'd be one of them, owned by Fraffin as certainly as any native of this world. As long as he put it off, Kelexel knew he was just that much free of Fraffin. It was only a matter of time, though.

Bondelli was speaking to Thurlow now, and it seemed a tired, useless little scene. Kelexel wondered at his reaction.

"Now, Dr. Thurlow," Bondelli said, "You've enumerated the points this defendant has in common with other insane killers. What else leads you to the conclusion that he is in fact insane?"

"I was attracted to the recurrence of the number seven," Thurlow said. "Seven blows with the sword. He told the arresting officers he'd be out in seven minutes."

"Is this important?"

"Seven has religious significance: the Lord made the world in seven days, and so on. It's the kind of thing you find dominant in the actions of the insane."

"Did you, Dr. Thurlow, examine this defendant some months ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"Under what circumstances?"

Kelexel glanced at Ruth, noted with a sense of shock the tears streaming down her cheeks. He looked at the manipulator's setting and began to understand how profound her emotions must be.

"Mr Murphey had turned in a false fire alarm," Thurlow said. "He was identified and arrested. I was called in as court psychologist."

"Why?"

"False fire alarms are not a thing to be disregarded, especially when turned in by a man well along in his adult years."

"This is why you were called in?"

"No—that was routine, more or less."

"But what's the significance of the false fire alarm?"

"It's sexual, basically. This incident occurred at about the time this defendant first complained of sexual impotency. These two things, taken together, paint a very disturbing psychological picture."

"How is that?"

"Well, he also displayed an almost complete lack of warmth in his nature. It was a failing in those things we usually refer to as *kindly*. He produced Rorschach responses at that time which were almost completely lacking in those elements we refer to as *alive*. In other words, his outlook was centered on death. I took all of those things into consideration: a cold nature centered on death plus sexual distrubance."

Kelexel stared at the figure on the pantovive's stage. Who was he talking about? Cold, centered on death, sexually disturbed. Kelexel glanced at the figure of Murphey. The defendant sat huddled over his table, eyes downcast.

Bondelli ran a finger along his mustache, glanced at a note in his hand.

"What was the substance of your report to the Probation Department, doctor?" Bondelli asked. As he spoke, he looked at Judge Grimm.

"I warned them that unless he changed his ways radically, this man was headed for a psychotic break."

Still without looking at Thurlow, Bondelli asked: "And would you define a psychotic break, doctor?"

"By example—a sword slaying of a loved one using violence and wild passion is a psychotic break."

Judge Grimm scribbled on a piece of paper in front of him. A woman juror on the far right frowned at Bondelli.

"You predicted this crime?" Bondelli asked.

"In a real sense—yes."

The District Attorney was watching the jury. He shook his head slowly, leaned over to whisper to an aide.

"Was any action taken on your report?" Bondelli asked.

"To my knowledge, none."

"Well, why not?"

"Perhaps many of those who saw the report weren't aware of the dangers involved in the terms."

"Did you attempt to impress the sense of danger upon anyone?"

"I explained my worries to several members of the probation department."

"And still no action was taken?"

"They said that surely Mr. Murphey, an important member of the community couldn't be dangerous, that possibly I was mistaken."

"I see. Did you make any personal effort to help this defendant?"

"I attempted to interest him in religion."

"Without success?"

"That's right."

"Have you examined defendant recently?"

"Last Wednesday—which was my second examination of him since he was arrested."

"And what did you find?"

"He's suffering from a condition I'd define as paranoic state."

"Could he have known the nature and consequences of his act?"

"No, sir. His mental condition would've been such as to override any considerations of law or morality."

Bondelli turned away, stared for a long moment at the District Attorney, then: "That is all, doctor."

The District Attorney passed a finger across the squared off hairline of his forehead, studied his notes on he testimony.

Kelexel, absorbed in the intricacies of the scene, nodded to himself. The natives obviously had a rudimentary legal system and sense of justice, but it was all very crude. Still, it reminded him of his own guilt. Could that be why Ruth showed him this? he wondered. Was she saying: 'You, too, could be punished.'? A paroxysm of shame convulsed him then. He felt that somehow Ruth had put him on trial here, placed him by proxy in that room of judgment which the pantovive reproduced. He suddenly identified with her father, sharing the native's emotion through the pantovive's sensi-mesh web.

And Murphey was seated in silent rage, the emotion directed with violent intensity against Thurlow who still sat in the witness chair.

This immune must be destroyed! Kelexel thought.

The pantovive's image focus shifted slightly, centered on the District Attorney. Paret arose, limped to a position below Thurlow, leaned on the cane. Paret's narrow mouth was held in a thin look of primness, but anger smoldered from the eyes.

"Mr. Thurlow," he said, pointedly withholding the title of doctor. "Am I correct in assuming that, in your opinion, defendant was incapable of determining right from wrong on the night he killed his wife?"

Thurlow removed his glasses. His eyes appeared grey and defenseless without them. He wiped the lenses, replaced them, dropped his hands to his lap. "Yes, sir."

"And the kinds of tests you administered, were they generally the same kinds as were administered to this defendant by Dr. Whelye and those who agreed with him?"

"Essentially the same—ink blot, wool sorting, various other shifting tests."

Paret consulted his notes. "You've heard Dr. Whelye testify that defendant was legally and medically sane at the time of this crime?"

"I heard that testimony, sir."

"You're aware that Dr. Whelye is a former police psychiatrist for the city of Los Angeles and has served in the Army medical corps?"

"I'm aware of Dr. Whelye's qualifications." There was a lonely, defensive quality to Thurlow's voice that brought a twinge of sympathy to Kelexel as he watched.

"You see what they're doing to him?" Ruth asked.

"What does it matter?" Kelexel asked. But even as he spoke, Kelexel realized that Thurlow's fate mattered enormously. And this was precisely because Thurlow, even though he was being destroyed and knew it, was sticking to his principles. There was no doubt that Murphey was insane. He'd been driven insane by Fraffin—for a purpose.

I was that purpose, Kelexel thought.

"Then you have heard," Paret said, "this expert *medical* testimony rule out any element of organic brain damage in this case? You've heard these qualified *medical* men testify that defendant shows no manic tendencies, that he does not now suffer and never has suffered from a condition which could be legally described as insanity?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then can you explain why you've arrived at an opinion conflicting with the one held by these qualified *medical* men?"

Thurlow uncrossed his legs, planted both feet firmly on the floor. He put his hands on the arms of his chair, leaned forward. "That's quite simple, sir. Ability in psychiatry and psychology are usually judged by results. In this case. I stake my claim to a different viewpoint on the fact that I *predicted* this crime."

Anger darkened Paret's face.

Kelexel heard Ruth whispering: "Andy, oh, Andy . . . oh, Andy . . . " Her voice sent a sudden pain through Kelexel's breast and he hissed: "Be silent!"

Again, Paret consulted his notes, then: "You're a psychologist, not a psychiatrist, is that correct?"

"I'm a clinical psychologist."

"What's the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist?"

"A psychologist is a specialist in human behavior who does not have a medical degree. The...."

"And you disagree with men who *do* have medical degrees?"

"As I said previously...."

"Ah, yes, your so-called prediction. I've read that report, Mr. Thurlow, and I'd like to ask you this: Is it not true that your probation report was couched in language which might be translated several ways—that it was, in a word, ambiguous?"

"It might be considered ambiguous only by someone who was

unfamiliar with the term *psychotic break.*"

"Ahh, and what is a psychotic break?"

"An extremely dangerous break with reality which can lead to acts of violence such as that being considered here."

"But if there'd been no crime, if this defendant had recovered from the alleged illness which you say he has, could your probation report have been construed ad predicting *that?*"

"Not without an explanation of *why* he recovered."

"Let me ask this, then: Can violence have no other explanation except psychosis?"

"Certainly it can, but . . . . "

"Is it not true that *psychosis* is a disputed term?"

"There are differences of opinion."

"Differences such as are being evidenced here?"

"Yes."

"And any given act of violence may be caused by things other than a psychosis?"

"Of course." Thurlow shook his head. "But in a delusionary system . . . ."

"Delusionary?" Paret snapped at the word. "What is delusion, Mr. Thurlow?"

"Delusion? That's a kind of inner ineptness at dealing with reality."

"Reality," Paret said. And again: "Reality. Tell me Mr. Thurlow, do you believe the defendant's accusations against his wife?"

"I do not!"

"But if defendant's accusations were real, would that change your opinion, sir, about his *delusionary* system?"

"My opinion is based on . . . ."

"Yes or no, Mr. Thurlow! Answer the question!"

"I *am* answering it!" Thurlow pushed himself back in his chair, took a deep breath. "You're trying to blacken the reputation of a defenseless . . . ."

"Mr. Thurlow! My questions are aimed at whether defendant's accusations are reasonable in the light of all the evidence. I agree they cannot be proved or disproved with the principal dead, but are the accusations reasonable?"

Thurlow swallowed, then: "Was it reasonable to kill, sir?"

Paret's face darkened. His voice came out low, deadly: "It's time we quit playing with words, Mr. Thurlow. Will you tell the court, please if you have any other relationship with the defendant's family than that of . . . psychologist?"

Thurlow's knuckles went white as he gripped the chair arm. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Were you not at one time engaged to defendant's daughter?"

Thurlow nodded mutely.

"Speak up," Paret said. "Were you?"

"Yes."

At the defense table, Bondelli stood up, glared at Paret, looked up at the judge. "Your honor, I object. This line of questioning is not relevant."

Slowly, Paret swiveled. He leaned heavily on his cane, said: "Your honor, the jury has the right to know *all* factors which may have guided this *expert* witness in arriving at his opinion."

"What is your intention?" Judge Grimm asked. He looked over Paret's head at the jury.

"Defendant's daughter is not available for testimony, your honor. She is missing under mysterious circumstances attendant upon the death of her husband. This *expert* witness was in the immediate vicinity when the husband . . . ."

"Your honor, I object!" Bondelli pounded a fist on the table.

Judge Grimm pursed his lips. He glanced down at Thurlow's profile, then at Paret. "What I say now I do not say as approval or disapproval of Dr. Thurlow's present testimony. But I will state by way of accepting his qualifications that he is psychologist for this court. As such, he may present opinions in disagreement with the opinions of other qualified witnesses. This is the privilege of expert testimony. It is up to the jury to decide which experts it will accept as being the most reliable. The jury may arrive at such decision strictly on the expert qualifications of the witnesses. Objection sustained."

Paret shrugged. He limped a step closer to Thurlow, appeared about to speak, hesitated, then: "Very well. No more questions."

"Witness may stand down," the judge said.

As the scene began to fade under Ruth's manipulation of the pantovive, Kelexel focused on Joe Murphey. The defendant was smiling, a sly, secretive smile.

Kelexel nodded, matched that smile. Nothing was entirely lost when even the victims could share amusement at their predicament.

Ruth turned, saw the smile on Kelexel's face. In her flat, controlled voice, she said: "God damn you for every second of your god damn' eternity."

Kelexel blinked.

"You're as crazy as my father," she said. "Andy's describing you when he talks about my father." She whirled back to the pantovive. "See yourself!"

Kelexel took a deep, shivering breath. The pantovive screeched as Ruth twisted its controls and rapped keys. He wanted to jerk her away from the machine, fearful of what she might show him. *See myself?* he wondered. It was a terrifying thought. A Chem did not see himself in the pantovive!

The bubble of light on the image stage became Bondelli's law office, the big desk, glass-fronted

bookcases shielding the mud-red backs of law books with their gold lettering. Bondelli sat behind the desk, a pencil in his right hand. He pushed the pencil point down through his fingers, repeated the action with the eraser against the desk. The eraser left little rubber smudges on the polished surface.

Thurlow sat across from him behind a scattering of papers. He clutched his heavy glasses like a lecturer's pointer in his left hand, waving them as he spoke.

"The delusional system is like a mask," Thurlow said. Vertical cords smoothed and reappeared in his neck as he gestured. "Behind that mask, Murphey *wants* to be found sane even though he knows that this condemns him to death."

"It's not logical," Bondelli muttered.

"And if it isn't logical, it's the most difficult thing there is to prove," Thurlow said. "This is hard to put into words that can be understood by people who haven't had long familiarity with such things. But if Murphey's delusional system were shattered, if we penetrated it, broke it down, this could be compared to what it would be like for an ordinary person to awaken one morning and find his bed different from the one he thought he went to sleep in, the room different, a different woman saying, 'I'm your wife!', unfamiliar youngsters claiming him as father. He'd be overwhelmed, his whole concept of his life destroyed."

"Total unreality," Bondelli whispered.

"Reality from the standpoint of an objective observer isn't important here," Thurlow said. "As long as Murphey maintains the delusional system, he saves himself from the psychological equivalent of annihilation. That, of course, is the fear of death."

"Fear of death?" Bondelli appeared puzzled. "But that's what faces him if . . . . "

"There're two kinds of death here. Murphey has far less fear for real death in the gas chamber than he has for the kind of death he'd experience in the collapse of his delusional world."

"But can't he *see* the difference?"

"No."

"That's crazy!"

Thurlow appeared surprised. "Isn't that what we've been saying?"

Bondelli dropped the pencil onto the desk with a sharp click. "And what happens if he's judged sane?"

"He'd be convinced he controlled this one last piece of his misfortune. To him, insanity means loss of control. It means he's not the all great, all powerful person in control of his own destiny. If he controls even his own death, this is grandeur—a delusion of grandeur."

"This isn't something you can

prove in a court of law," Bondelli said.

"Especially not in this community and not right now," Thurlow said. "That's what I've been trying to tell you from the beginning. You know Vauntman, my neighbor to the south? My walnut tree had a limb overhanging his yard. I've always let him have the nuts off it. We made a joke about it. Last night he sawed that limb off and threw it into my yard—because I'm testifying for Murphey's defense."

"That's insane!"

"Right now it's the norm," Thurlow said. He shook his head. "Vauntman's perfectly normal under most circumstances. But this Murphey thing's a sex crime, and it's stirred up a rat's next of unconscious content—guilt, fear, shame—that people aren't equipped to handle. Vauntman's just one isolated symptom. The whole community's undergoing a kind of psychotic break."

Thurlow put on his dark glasses, turned, stared directly out of the pantovive.

"The whole community," he whispered.

Ruth reached out like a blind person, shut off the pantovive. As the stage darkened, Thurlow still stared out at her. *Goodbye, Andy,* she thought. *Dear Andy. Destroyed Andy. I'll never see you again.*

Abruptly, Kelexel whirled away, strode across the room. He turned there, stared at Ruth's back, cursing the day he'd first seen her. *In the name of Silence!* he thought. *Why did I succumb to her?*

Thurlow's words still rang in his ears—*Grandeur! Delusion! Death!*

What was it about these natives that locked on the mind and the senses, refusing to let go? A rage such as he'd never before experienced flooded through Kelexel then.

How dare she say I am like her father?

How dare she harbor one thought for her puny native lover when she has me?

An odd rasping sound was coming from Ruth. Her shoulders trembled and shook. Kelexel realized she was sobbing despite the manipulator's suppression. The realization fed his rage.

Slowly, she turned in the pantovive's chair, stared at him. Strange lines of grief wavered across her face. "Live forever!" she hissed. "And every day you live, I hope your crime gnaws at you!" The hate was stark in her eyes.

A sense of dismay shook Kelexel. *How can she know of my crime?* he asked himself.

But rage was there to support him.

She was contaminated by that immune! he thought. *Let her see what a Chem can do to her lover, then!*

With a vicious movement, Kelexel twisted the manipulator's controls beneath his tunic. The pressure, building up abruptly, jerked Ruth backward into her chair, stiffened her body then relaxed it. She slumped into unconsciousness.

Fraffin swept onto the landing platform with long, angry strides, his cloak whipping about his bowed legs. The sea shone like dark green crystals beyond the spider lines of the enclosing field. A file of ten flitters stood ready along the grey ramp, prepared to debark on his orders, checking the status of their 'lovely little war.' Perhaps it could still be saved. There was a biting smell of damp ozone in the air. It made the guardian layers of Fraffin's skin crawl in a protective reflex.

He could sense the planet flowering for him up there, spewing forth story after story in such a profusion as it had never done before. But if the report on Kelexel were true . . . . It couldn't be true. Logic said it couldn't be true.

Fraffin slowed his stride as he approached traffic control, the yellow bubble eye with Lutt, his Master of Craft, personally in charge. The squat, solid body of the crewman imparted a feeling of reassurance to Fraffin. Lutt's square face was bent over the yellow eye.

There was a crafty look to Lutt, though, and Fraffin suddenly remembered Cato saying: "Fear kings whose slaves are crafty." Ah, there'd been a native to admire—Cato. And Fraffin recalled Cato's Carthaginian enemies, the two kings looking down from Citadel-Brysa onto the inner harbor of Corthon. "Proper sacrifice, right thinking, the best gods—these bring victory." Cato had said that, too.

But Cato was dead, his life whirled up in the crazy time-blur that was a Chem's memory. He was dead and the two kings were dead.

Surely the report on Kelexel is wrong, Fraffin thought.

A waiting flitter crewman signaled Lutt. The Master of Craft straightened, turned to face Fraffin. An alert air of caution in the man destroyed all illusion of reassurance.

He looks a little like Cato, Fraffin thought as he stopped three paces from Lutt. *The same sort of bone structure in the face. Ah, we've bred much of ourselves into this place.* Fraffin pulled his cloak around him, aware of a sudden chill in the air.

"Honored director," Lutt said. How warily he spoke!

"I've just heard a disturbing report about the Investigator," Fraffin said.

"The Investigator?"

"Kelexel, you oaf!"

Lutt's tongue darted out and

across his lips. He glanced left, right, returned his attention to Fraffin. "He . . . he said he had your permission to . . . he had the native female with him in a tagalong floater . . . she . . . what is wrong?"

Fraffin took a moment to compose himself. There was a slack-drum throbbing through every micro-instant that lay immersed in his being. This planet and its creatures! The erection/detumescence of each instant he'd shared with them lay on his awareness with scalding pressure. He felt like a bivalve at the tide-edge of the universe. History was collapsing within him, and he could only remember the ages of his crime.

"The Investigator is gone then?" Fraffin asked, and he was proud of how calmly his voice emerged.

"Just a short trip," Lutt whispered. "He said just a short trip." Lutt nodded, a swift, jerking motion full of nervousness. "I . . . everyone said the Investigator'd been snared. He had the female with him. She was unconscious!" Lutt pounced on this revelation as though it were a most important discovery. "The native female was unconscious in the litter!" A sly smile twitched Lutt's mouth. "The better to control her, he said."

Fraffin spoke through a dry mouth: "Did he say where?"

"Planetside." Lutt hooked a thumb upward.

Fraffin's eyes followed the motion, noting the warty skin, his mind filled with wonder that such a casual gesture could carry such a weight of terrifying possibilities.

"In his needleship?" Fraffin asked.

"He said he was more familiar with its controls," Lutt said.

There was a veil of fear over Lutt's eyes now. The director's bland voice and appearance couldn't conceal the slashing purpose of these questions—and there'd already been one flash of anger.

"He assured me he had your approval," Lutt rasped. "He said it was part of his training for when he gets his own . . . ." The glare in Fraffin's eyes stopped him, then: "He said the female would enjoy it."

"But she was unconscious," Fraffin said.

Lutt's head bobbed in affirmation.

Why was she unconscious? Fraffin wondered. Hope began to grow in him. *What can he do? We own him! I was a fool to panic.*

Beside Lutt, the eye of the traffic control selector shifted from yellow to red, blinked twice for override. The instrument emitted a harsh buzzing and projected Ynvic's round face onto the air in front of them. The shipsur-

geon's features were drawn into a tight mask of worry. Her eyes stared fixedly at Fraffin.

"There you are!" she snapped. Her gaze darted to Lutt, to the platform background, returned to Fraffin. "Has he gone?"

"And taken the female with him," Fraffin said.

"He's not been rejuvenated!" Ynvic blurted.

It took a long minute for Fraffin to find his voice. "But all the others . . . he . . . you . . ." Again, he felt the distant slack-drum.

"Yes, all the others went immediately to the Rejuvenator," Ynvic agreed. "So I assumed this one'd been handled by an assistant or had taken care of it himself." There was a rasp of feral anger in her voice. "Who'd think otherwise? But there's not a trace of him in Master Records. He's not been rejuvenated!"

Fraffin swallowed in a dry throat. This was unthinkable! He felt himself go deathly still as though listening for the passage of suns and moons and planets his kind had all but forgotten. Not rejuvenated! The time . . . the time . . . His voice came out a husky whisper: "It's been at least . . . ."

"One of my assistants saw him with the female just a short while ago and alerted me," Ynvic said. "Kelexel shows obvious signs of deterioration."

Fraffin found it difficult to breathe. His chest ached. Not rejuvenated! If Kelexel destroyed all traces of the female . . . . But he couldn't! The storyship had a complete record of the liaison with the native. But if Kelexel destroyed her . . . .

Lutt tugged at Fraffin's cloak.

In a rage, Fraffin whirled on him: "What do you want?"

Lutt ducked backward, peered up at Fraffin. "Honored director, the intercom . . . ." Lutt touched the pickup instrument imbedded in the bone of his neck. "Kelexel's needleship has been seen planetside."

"Where?"

"In the home region of the female."

"Do they still see him?"

Fraffin held his breath.

Lutt listened a moment, shook his head. "The ship was seen to pass without shields. one who saw it inquired about this breach of security. He no longer has the ship in view."

Planetside! Fraffin thought.

"You will drop every other activity!" he rasped. "You will order out every pilot and vehicle. That ship must be found! It must be found!"

"But . . . what do we do when we find it?"

"The female," Ynvic said.

Fraffin glanced at the disembodied face projected above the traffic control selector, returned his attention to Lutt. "Yes, the female. You'll take her into cus-

tody and return her here. She's our property. We'll have an understanding with this Kelexel. No nonsense, you hear? Bring her to me."

"If I can, honored director."

"You had better find a way." Fraffin said.

Thurlow awoke at the first click of his alarm clock, turned it off before it rang. He sat up in bed, fighting a deep reluctance to face this day. It'd be hellish at the hospital, he knew. Whelye was putting on the pressure would keep it up until . . . Thurlow took a deep sighing breath. When it got bad enough, he knew he'd quit.

The community was helping him to this decision—crank letters, vicious phone calls. He was a pariah.

The professionals were an odd contrast—Paret and old Judge Victor Venning Grimm among them. What they did in court and what they did outside of court appeared to be held in separate, carefully insulated compartments.

"It'll blow over," Grimm had said. "Give it time."

And Paret: "Well, Andy, you win some, you lose some."

Thurlow wondered if they had any but detached emotions about Murphey's death. Paret had been invited to the execution, and the courthouse grapevine had said he debated going. Good sense had prevailed, though. His advisors had warned against him appearing vindictive.

Why did I go? Thurlow asked himself. *Did I want to extract the last measure of personal pain from this?*

But he knew why he'd gone, meekly accepting the condemned man's wry invitation to "watch me die." It'd been the lure of his own personal hallucination: Would the watchers be there, too, in their hovering craft?

They . . . or the illusion had been there.

Are they real? Are they real? his mind pleaded. Then: *Ruth, where are you?* He felt that if she could only return with a reasonable explanation for her disappearance, the hallucinations would go.

His thoughts veered back to the execution. It would take more than one long weekend to erase that memory. Recollection of the sounds bothered him—the clang of metal against metal, the whisper-shuffling of feet as the guards came into the execution area with Murphey.

The memory of the condemned man's glazed eyes lay across Thurlow's vision. Murphey had lost some of his dumpiness. The prison suit hung slackly on him. He walked with a heavy, dragging limp. Ahead of him walked a black-robed priest chanting in a sonorous voice that concealed an underlying whine.

In his mind, Thurlow watched them pass, feeling all the spectators caught up abruptly in a spasm of silence. Every eye turned then to the executioner. He looked like a drygoods clerk, tall, bland-faced, efficient—standing there beside the rubber-sealed door into the little green room with its eyeless portholes.

The executioner took one of Murphey's arms, helped him over the hatch sill. One guard and the priest followed. Thurlow was in a line to look directly through the hatchway and hear their conversation.

The guard passed a strap over Murphey's left arm, told him to sit farther back in the chair. "Put your hand here, Joe. A little farther this way." The guard cinched the strap. "Does that strap hurt?"

Murphey shook his head. His eyes remained glazed, a trapped animal look in them.

The executioner looked at the guard, said: "Al, why don't you stay in here and hold his hand?"

In that instant, Murphey came out of the depths to shatter Thurlow, forcing him to turn away. "You best stay with the mules and wagon," Murphey said.

It was a phrase Thurlow had heard Ruth use . . . many times, one of those odd family expression that meant something special to the inner circle of intimates. Hearing Murphey use it then had forged a link between father and daughter that nothing could break.

All else was anticlimax.

Remembering that moment, Thurlow sighed, swung his feet out of the bed onto the cold floor. He pulled on his slippers, donned a robe and crossed to the window. There, he stood staring at the view which had brought his father to buy this house twenty-five years before.

The morning light hurt his eyes, and they began to water. Thurlow took up his dark glasses from the bedstand, slipped them on, lightened the setting to just below the pain threshhold.

The valley had its usual morning overcast, the redwood fog that would burn off sometime around eleven. Two ravens sat perched in the branches of a live oak below him calling to unseen companions. A drop of condensation spilled from an acacia leaf directly beneath the window.

Beyond the tree there was motion. Thurlow turned toward it, saw a cigar-shaped object about thirty feet long lift into view. It drifted across the top of the oak, scattering the ravens. They flapped away, croaking with harsh dissonance.

They see it! Thurlow told himself. *It's real!*

Abruptly, the thing launched itself across the sky to his left, lanced into the overcast. Behind

it came a covey of spheres and discs.

All were swallowed by the clouds.

Into the shocked stillness with which Thurlow enveloped himself there came a rasping voice: "You are the native, Thurlow."

Thurlow whirled to see an apparition in his bedroom doorway—a squat, bow-legged figure in a green cape and leotards, square face, dark hair, silvery skin, a wide gash of mouth. The creature's eyes burned feverishly under pronounced brows.

The mouth moved, and again came that harsh, resonant voice: "I am Kelexel." The English was clear, clipped.

Thurlow stared. *A dwarf?* he asked himself. *A lunatic?* He found his mind jammed with questions.

Kelexel glanced out the window behind Thurlow. It had been faintly amusing to watch Fraffin's pack go hounding after the empty needleship. The programmed course couldn't elude the pursuers forever, of course, but by the time they caught it, all would have been accomplished here. There'd be no bringing back the dead.

Fraffin would have to face that . . . and his crime.

Resurgent pride firmed Kelexel's will. He frowned at Thurlow, thinking: *I know my duty.* Ruth would waken soon, he knew, and come to their voices. When she did, she could watch the supreme triumph. *She'll be proud that a Chem smiled upon her,* he thought.

"I have watched you, witch doctor," Kelexel said.

A thought flickered through Thurlow's mind: *Is this some weird psychotic come to kill me because of my testimony?*

"How did you get into my house?" Thurlow demanded.

"For a Chem it was simplicity," Kelexel said.

Thurlow had the sudden nightmare feeling that this creature might be connected with the objects that had flown into the clouds, with the watchers who . . . *What is a Chem?* he wondered.

"How have you watched me?" Thurlow asked.

"Your antics have been captured in . . . in a . . ."—Kelexel waved a knob-knuckled hand in exasperation. It was so difficult to communicate with these creatures.— ". . . in a thing like your movies," he concluded. "It's much more, of course—a sensation transcript that works directly on the audience by empathetic stimulation."

Thurlow cleared his throat. The words made only the vaguest sense, but his feelings of disquiet increased. His voice came out hoarsely: "Something new, no doubt."

"New?" Kelexel chuckled. "Older than your galaxy."

He must be a crank, Thurlow

reassured himself. *Why do they always pick on psychologists?*

But he remembered the ravens. No blandishment of logic could erase the fact that the ravens had seen those . . . things, too. Again, he asked himself: *What is a Chem?*

"You don't believe me," Kelexel said. "You don't *want* to believe me." He could feel relaxation seep through his body like a warm drink. Ahh, this was amusing. He saw the fascination Fraffin's people must have known once intimidating these creatures. The anger and jealousy he had directed against Thurlow began to dissipate.

Thurlow swallowed. His reason directed him into outrageous channels of thought. "If I believed you," he said, "I'd have to infer you were . . . well, some kind of . . . ."

"Someone from another world?"

"Yes."

Kelexel laughed. "The things I could do! I could frighten you into a stupor like that!" He snapped his fingers.

It was a solidly human gesture from this inhuman looking person. Thurlow saw it and took a deep breath. He gave a closer examination to his caller's clothes: the cape, the leotards. He looked at the oddly high-positioned ears. *The cape could've come from a theatrical outfitter,* he thought. *He looks like a dwarf Bela Lugosi. Can't be over four feet tall.*

A near panic fear of his visitor shot through Thurlow then.

"Why're you here?" he demanded.

Why am I here? For a moment no logical reason came to Kelexel's mind. He thought of Ruth unconscious on the tagalong in the other room. This Thurlow might've been her mate. A pang of jealousy gripped Kelexel.

"Perhaps I came to put you in your place," he said. "Perhaps I'll take you in my ship far above your silly planet and show you what an unimportant speck it is."

I must humor him, Thurlow thought. He said: "Let's grant this isn't a joke in bad taste and you're . . . ."

"You don't tell a Chem he has bad taste," Kelexel said.

Thurlow heard the violence in Kelexel's voice. By an effort of conscious will, he paced his breathing to an even rhythm, stared at the intruder. *Could this be the reason Ruth is gone?* he wondered. *Is this one of the creatures who took her, who've been spying on me, who watched poor Joe Murphey die, who . . . .*

"I've broken the most important laws of my society to come here," Kelexel said. "It astonishes me what I've done."

Thurlow took off his glasses, found a handkerchief on his dresser, polished the lenses, returned them to his nose. *I must keep him talking,* he thought. *As long as*

he continues to talk, he's venting his violence.

"What is a Chem?" Thurlow asked.

"Good," Kelexel said. "You have normal curiosity." He began to explain the Chem in broad outline, their power, their immortality, the storyships.

Still no mention of Ruth. Thurlow wondered if he dared ask about her.

"Why have you come to me?" he asked. "What if I told about you?"

Perhaps you'll not be able to tell about us," Kelexel said. "And who'd believe you if you did?"

Thurlow focused on the threat. Granting that this Kelexel was who he said he was, then here was profound danger. Who could stand against such a creature? Thurlow suddenly saw himself as a Sandwich Islander facing iron cannon.

"Why're you here?" he repeated.

Annoying question! Kelexel thought. A momentary confusion overcame him. Why was the witch doctor so persistent? But he was a witch doctor, a primitive, and perhaps knowledgeable in mysterious ways. "You may know things helpful to me," he said.

"Helpful? If you come from such an advanced civilization that you . . . ."

"I will question you and dispute with you." Kelexel said. "Perhaps something will emerge."

Why is he here? Thurlow asked himself. *If he's what he says he is . . . why?* Bits of Kelexel's phrases sorted themselves through Thurlow's awareness. *Immortal. Storyships. Search for amusement. Nemesis boredom. Immortal. Immortal. Immortal . . . .*

Thurlow's stare began to rasp on Kelexel. "You doubt your sanity, eh?" he asked.

"Is that why you're here?" Thurlow asked. "Because you doubt your sanity?" It was the wrong thing to say, and Thurlow knew it the moment the words were out of his mouth.

"How dare you?" Kelexel demanded. "*My* civilization monitors the sanity of all its members. The orderliness of our neural content is insured by the original setting of Tiggywaugh's web when the infant receives the gift of immortality."

"Tiggy . . . Tiggywaugh's web?" Thurlow asked. "A . . . a mechanical device?"

"Mechanical? Well . . . yes."

Great heavens! Thurlow thought. *Is he here to promote some wild psychoanalytic machine? Is this just a promotion scheme?*

"The web links all Chem," Kelexel said. "We're the daoinesithe, you understand? The many who are one. This gives us insights you couldn't imagine poor

creature. It makes the storyships possible. You have nothing like it and you're blind.

Thurlow suppressed a feeling of outrage. *A mechanical device!* Didn't the poor fool realize he was talking to a psychologist? Thurlow put aside anger, knowing he couldn't affor it, said: "Am I blind? Perhaps. But not so blind I'm unable to see that any mechanical psychoanalytic device is a useless crutch."

"Oh?" Kelexel found this an astonishing statement. *A useless crutch? The web?* "You understand people without such things, eh?" he asked.

"I've had a fair amount of success at it," Thurlow said.

Kelexel took a step into the room, another. He peered up at Thurlow. On the evidence, the native *did* understand his own kind. Perhaps this wasn't an idle boast. But could he also see into the Chem, understand them? "What do you see in me?" he asked.

Thurlow studied the oddly squared oss, sensitive face. There been pathos, a pleading in that question. The answer must be gentle. "Perhaps," he said, "you've played a part so long that you've almost *become* that part."

Played a part? Kelexel wondered. He searched for other meaning in the words. Nothing came to him. He said: "My mechanical device has no human failures."

"How safe that must make the future," Thurlow said. "How full of certainty. Then why are you here?"

Why am I here? Kelexel wondered. He could see now that the reasons he'd given himself were mere rationalizations. He began to regret this confrontation, felt a sense of naked exposure before Thurlow. "An immortal Chem doesn't have to have reasons," he said.

"Are you truly immortal?"

"Yes!"

Suddenly, Thurlow believed him without reservation. There was something about this intruder, some outrageous quality of person that belied pretense and sham. As abruptly, Thurlow realized why Kelexel had come here. Knowing this, he wondered how he could tell the creature.

"Immortal," Thurlow said. "I know why you're here. You're drunk on too much living. You're like a person climbing a sheer cliff. The higher you climb, the farther it is to fall—but oh how attractive the depths seem. You came here because you fear an accident."

Kelexel focused on the one word: *Accident!*

"There's no such thing as an accident for a Chem," he sneered. "The Chem is human and intelligent. Original intelligence may've been an accident, but nothing after that is an accident. Everything that happens to a Chem

from the day he's taken from his vat is what he sets out to accomplish."

"How orderly," Thurlow said. "Of course!"

"Such an ultimate neatness," Thurlow said. "When you do that to a garment, you take the life out of it. Neatness! Do that to a person, and he'll live a life like an epigram . . . that's proved wrong after his death."

"But *we* do not die!"

Kelexel began to chuckle. This Thurlow was, after all, so transparent and easy to best in an argument. He controlled his chuckling, said: "We are mature beings who . . . ."

"You're not mature," Thurlow said.

Kelexel glared at him, remembering that Fraffin had said this same thing. "We *use* your kind for our amusement," he said. "We can live your lives vicariously without a . . . ."

"You came here to ask about death, to play with death," Thurlow said, blurting it out. "You want to die, and you're afraid to die!"

Kelexel swallowed, stared at Thurlow in shock. *Yes,* he thought. *That's why I'm here. And this witch doctor has seen through me.* Almost of itself, his head executed a betraying nod.

"Your mechanical device is a closed circle, a snake with its tail in its mouth," Thurlow said.

Kelexel found the will to protest: "We live forever by its psychological truth!"

"Psychological truth!" Thurlow said. "That's whatever you say it is."

"We're so far ahead of you primitive . . . ."

"Then why're you here asking help from a primitive?"

Kelexel shook his head. An oppressive sense of danger came over him. "You've never seen the web at work," he said. "How can you . . . ."

"I've seen you," Thurlow said. "And I know that any *school* based on mechanism is a closed circle of limited logic. The truth can't be enclosed in a circle. The truth's like countless lines radiating outward to take in a greater and ever greater space."

Kelexel felt himself fascinated by the movements of Thurlow's mouth. Scalding words seemed to drip from that mouth. More than ever, Kelexel was sorry he'd come here. He could feel a shying away within himself, as though he stood before a closed door that might open any moment onto horror.

"In time, a curious thing happens to such schools," Thurlow said. "Your foundation philosophy begins to circle away from its original straight line. You're close at first. The error isn't recognized. You think you're still on course. And you swing farther and farther afield until the effort to devise new theorems

to explain the preceding ones becomes more and more frantic."

"We're totally successful," Kelexel protested. "Your argument doesn't apply to us."

"Past success based on past truth isn't proof conclusive of a continuing success or continuing truth," Thurlow said. "We never actually attain a thing. We merely approach various conditions. Every word you've said about your Chem society betrays you. You think you have the ultimate answers. But *you* are here. You feel trapped. You know unconsciously that you're in a fixed system, unable to escape, forced to circle endlessly . . . until you fall."

"We'll never fall."

"Then why have you come to me?"

"I . . . I . . . ."

"People who follow a fixed system are like processional caterpillars," Thurlow said. "They follow the leader, always follow the leader, led on by the slime trail of the one ahead. But the leader comes on the trail of the last one in line and you're trapped. The trail grows thicker and thicker with your excrescence as you continue around and around the same path. And the excrescence is pointed out as verification that you're on the right track! You live forever. You're immortal!"

"We are!"

Thurlow lowered his voice, noting how Kelexel hung on every word. "And the path always appears straight," Thurlow said. "You see so little of it at a time, you don't notice when it curves back upon itself. You still see it as straight."

"Such wisdom!" Kelexel sneered. "It didn't save your precious madman, your precious Joe Murphey!"

Thurlow swallowed. *Why am I arguing with this creature?* he wondered. *What button did he push to set me going like this?*

"Did it?" Kelexel demanded, pressing his advantage.

Thurlow sighed. "Another vicious circle," he said. "We're still figuratively burning the Jews because they spread the plague. Each of us is both Cain and Abel. We threw stones at Murphey because he's the side we rejected. He was more Cain than Abel."

"You've a rudimentary sense of right and wrong," Kelexel said. "Was it wrong to . . . *extinguish* this Murphey?"

Oh, God! Thurlow thought. *Right and wrong! Nature and consequences!* It's not a question of right and wrong!" he said. "This was a reaction right out of the depths. It was like . . . the tide . . . or a hurricane. It's . . . when it is, it *is!*"

Kelexel stared around the primitive room, noting the bed, the objects on the dresser—a picture of Ruth! How dare he keep a reminder of her? But who had bet-

ter right? This room was a terrible, alien place suddenly. He wanted to be far away from it. But where could he go?

"You came here searching for a better psychological philosophy," Thurlow said, "not realizing that all such philosophies are blind alleys, little worm holes in an ancient structure."

"But you're . . . you're . . . ."

"Who should know more about such worm holes than one of the worms?" Thurlow asked.

Kelexel wet his lips with his tongue. "There must be perfection somewhere," he whispered.

"Must there? What would it be? Postulate a perfect psychology and an individual brought to perfection within such a system. You'd walk around in your never ending perfect circle until one day you found to your horror that the circle wasn't perfect! It can end!"

Kelexel became extremely conscious of every clock-ticking sound in the room.

"Extinction," Thurlow said. "Therein lies the end of your perfection, the fallacy in Eden. When your perfect psychology has cured your perfect subject, it still leaves him within the perfect circle . . . alone." He nodded. "And afraid." He studied Kelexel, noting how the creature trembled. "You came here because you're terrified by the thing that attracts you. You hoped I had some panacea, some primitive word of advice."

"Yes," Kelexel said. "But what could you have?" He blinked. "You're . . . ." He gestured at the room, unable to find words to express the poverty of this native's existence.

"You've helped me reach a decision, and that's a great favor for which I thank you," Thurlow said. "If I was put here on earth to enjoy myself, that's what I intend to do. If I was put here at the whim of some superbeing who wants to watch me squirm—I'm not giving him the satisfaction!"

"Is there a superbeing?" Kelexel whispered. "What is there after . . . after . . . ."

"With such dignity as I can muster, I look forward to finding out . . . for myself," Thurlow said. "That's my choice, my decision. I think it'll leave me more time for living. I don't think time gives you any rest from this decision until you've made it."

Kelexel looked at his hands, the telltale fingernails, the puckered skin. "I live," he said. "Yet I live."

"But you haven't come to grips with the fact that all life's a *between* stage," Thurlow chided.

"Between?"

Thurlow nodded. He was speaking and acting from instinct now, fighting a danger whose shape he understood only vaguely. "Life's in motion," he said, "and there's just one big gamble—the

living itself. Only an idiot fails to realize that a condemned man dies but once."

"But we don't die," Kelexel said, his voice pleading. "We never . . . ." He shook his head from side to side like a sick animal.

"Yet there's still that cliff you're climbing," Thurlow said. "And remember the attractive abyss."

Kelexel put his hands over his eyes. In his primitive and mysterious way, the witch doctor was right—hideously, implacably right.

A lurching motion behind Kelexel brought Thurlow's head snapping up, his eyes focused in shock as Ruth appeared there, supporting herself against the doorway. She flicked a glance across Thurlow, down to Kelexel.

"Ruth," Thurlow whispered.

Her red hair was piled high, tied with a glittering rope of green stones. Her body was covered by a long green robe belted by a golden-linked strand of square-cut creme-de-menthe jewels. There was an exotic strangeness about her that frightened Thurlow. He saw the bulge of her abdomen then beneath the jeweled belt, realized she was pregnant.

"Ruth," he said, louder this time.

She ignored him, concentrated her fury on Kelexel's back. "I wish you could die," she muttered. "Oh, how I wish you could die. Please die, Kelexel. Do it for me. Die."

Kelexel lowered his hands from his face, turned with a slow dignity. Here she was at last, completely free, seeing him without any intervention from a manipulator. This was her reaction? This was the truth? He could feel Time running at its crazy Chem speed; all of his life behind him was a single heartbeat. She wanted him dead.

What he had planned for this moment stood frozen in his mind. It still could be done, but it wouldn't be a triumph. Not in Ruth's eyes. He raised a pleading hand to her, dropped it. What was the use? He could read the revulsion in her eyes. This was truth.

"Please die!" she hissed.

Thurlow, his face dark with anger, started across the room. "What have you done to her?" he demanded.

"You will stand where you are," Kelexel said. raising a palm toward Thurlow.

"Andy! Stop!" Ruth said.

He obeyed. There was a controlled terror in her voice.

Ruth touched her abdomen. "This is what he did," she rasped. "And he killed my mother, my father and ruined you and . . . ."

"No violence, please," Kelexel said. "It's useless against me. I could still obliterate you both."

"He could, Andy," Ruth whispered.

Kelexel focused on Ruth's bulging abdomen. Such an odd way to produce an offspring. "You don't wish me to obliterate your native friend?" he asked.

Mutely, she shook her head from side to side. God! What was the crazy little monster up to? There was such a feeling of terrible power in his eyes.

Thurlow studied Ruth. How weirdly exotic she appeared in that green robe and those big jewels. And pregnant! By this ... this ....

"How odd it is," Kelexel said. "Fraffin believes you can be a control factor in our development, that we can aspire to a new level of being through you—perhaps even to maturity. It may be that he is more right than he knows."

Kelexel looked up as Thurlow skirted him, went to Ruth.

She pushed Thurlow's arm aside as he tried to put it around her shoulders. "What're you going to do, Kelexel?" she asked. Her voice held a strange thrumming quality, over controlled.

"A thing no other immortal Chem has ever done," Kelexel said. He turned his back to her, crossed to Thurlow's bed, hesitated, smoothed the covers fastidiously.

Seeing him at the bed, Ruth had the terrifying thought that Kelexel was about to impose the manipulator upon her, force Andy to watch them. *Oh, God! Please, no!* she thought.

Kelexel turned back to them, sat on the edge of the bed, his hands resting lightly beside him. The bed felt soft, its cover warm and fuzzy. There was a stink of native perspiration from it that he found strangely erotic.

"What're you going to do?" Ruth whispered.

"You will both stay where you are," Kelexel said.

He focused inward then, searching out the drumming center of his own heartbeat. *It should be possible,* he thought. *Rejuvenation teaches us every nerve and muscle in our bodies. It should be possible.* He concentrated on his heart.

At first, there was no reaction. But presently he sensed the beat slowing, almost imperceptibly; then, as he learned control, the pace slackened with a definite downward surge. He timed the rhythm to Ruth's breathing: inhale-one beat; exhale-one beat.

It skipped a beat!

Uncontrolled panic shot through Kelexel. He relaxed his grip on the heartbeat, fought to restore normality. *No!* he thought. *This isn't what I want!* But another force had him now. Fear built on fear, terror on terror. Something gigantic and crushing gripped his chest. He could see the dark abyss, imagined Thurlow's cliff with himself upon its face clutching for

any handhold, scrabbling to stay himself from that awful plunge.

Somewhere out in the foggy haze that had become his surroundings, Ruth's voice boomed at him: "Something's wrong with him!"

Kelexel realized he had fallen backward onto Thurlow's bed. The pain in his chest was a molten agony now. He could feel his heart laboring within that pain: beat-agony; beat-agony; beat-agony . . . .

Slowly, he felt his hands relaxing their grip on the face of the cliff. The abyss yawned. He felt that there was a real wind past his ears as he plunged into the darkness, turning, twisting. Ruth's voice wailed after him to become lost in emptiness: "My, God! He's dying!"

Nothingness echoed upon nothingness, and he thought he heard Thurlow's words: *"Delusion of grandeur."*

Thurlow rushed to the bed, felt for a pulse at Kelexel's temple. Nothing. The skin felt dry, smooth as metal. *Perhaps they're not exactly like us,* he thought. *Maybe their pulse shows in another place.* He checked the right wrist. How limp and empty the hand felt! No pulse.

"Is he really dead?" Ruth whispered.

"I think he is." Thurlow dropped the flaccid hand, looked up at her. "You told him to die and he did."

A feeling oddly like remorse shot through her then. She thought of the Chem—immortal, all that seemingly endless living come to this. *Did I kill him?* she wondered. And aloud: "Did we kill him?"

Thurlow looked down at the still figure. He remembered the conversation with Kelexel, the Chem pleading for some kind of mystic reassurance from the primitive "witch doctor."

I gave him nothing, Thurlow thought.

"He was crazy," Ruth whispered. "They're all crazy."

Yes, this creature had a special kind of madness, and it was dangerous, Thurlow told himself. *I was right to deny him. He was capable of killing us.*

All crazy? Thurlow wondered. He recalled Kelexel's brief recital of Chem society. There were more of the creatures then. What would they do if they found two *natives* with a dead Chem?

"Should we do something?" Ruth asked.

Thurlow cleared his throat. What did she mean? Artificial respiration, perhaps? But he sensed the futility in such action. The Chem had willed himself to die. He looked up at Ruth just in time to see two more Chem press past her.

They ignored him, went to Kelexel on the bed.

Thurlow was caught by the tightly frozen looks on their faces.

One, green cloaked like Kelexel, was a bald, round-faced female, her body solid and barrel-like. She bent over Kelexel with a gentle sureness, probing, palpitating. There was a feeling of professional sureness about her. The other, in a black cloak, had craggy features, a hooked nose. The skin of both was that weirdly metallic silver.

Not a word passed between them while the female made her examination.

Ruth stood watching as though nailed to the floor. The female was Ynvic, and Ruth remembered the sharp encounter with the ship-surgeon. The male Chem, though, was another matter, a person she'd seen only on the room screens as Kelexel talked to him—Fraffin the director. Even Kelexel's tone had changed when speaking of Fraffin. Ruth knew she could never forget that haughty face.

Presently, Ynvic straightened, spoke in shiptongue: "He has done it. He has certainly done it." There was a blank emptiness in her voice.

The sound was gibberish to Thurlow, but he sensed the horror.

To Ruth, a product of storyship education imprinters, the words were as clear as English, but there were overtones of meaning which escaped her.

Ynvic turned to stare at Fraffin. The look that passed between them was filled with the poignancy of defeat. They both knew what had really happened here.

Fraffin sighed, shuddered. The blurred-off moment of Kelexel's death had come to him through Tiggywaugh's web, the Chem oneness momentarily shattered by the impossible demarcation. Feeling that death, sensing its direction, he had known the dead one's identity with a terrifying sureness. Every Chem in the universe had felt it, of course, and turned in this direction, no doubt, but Fraffin knew that few had shared that certain knowledge of identity.

Dying, Kelexel had defeated him. Fraffin had known this even as he dashed with Ynvic for a flitter and homed on this point in space. The sky up there was full of craft from the storyship, all of the crewmen afraid to come closer. Most of them had guessed who'd died here, Fraffin realized. They knew the Primacy wouldn't rest until it identified the dead one. No Chem out there would rest until the mystery was solved.

Here was the first immortal Chem to die, the first in all that crazy endless time. This planet would soon be aswarm with the Primacy's minions, all the storyship's secrets exposed.

Wild Chem! It'd be an emotional blast through the Chem universe. There was no telling what might be done with these creatures.

"What . . . killed him?" Ruth ventured, speaking shiptongue.

Ynvic turned a glassy stare on her. The poor stupid female! What could she know of Chem ways? "He killed himself," Ynvic said, her voice soft. "It's the only way a Chem can die."

"What're they saying?" Thurlow asked. He felt that his foice came out overloud in the room.

"He killed himself," Ruth said.

He killed himself, Fraffin thought. He looked a Ruth, beautiful, unwarped, exotic creature. Fraffin felt a sudden communion with her and all the others like her. *They have no past except the past I gave them,* he thought.

His nostrils were suddenly filled with the same smell of bitter salt he'd inhaled once in the sistral winds of Carthage. He felt his own life identified with Carthage.

The Primacy would exile him to lonely, Chemless foreverness, he knew. It was the only punishment they could inflict on a fellow Chem, no matter the crime.

How long will I be able to withstand it before I take Kelexel's way out? he wondered.

Again, he inhaled the dusty, salt smell—Carthage, leafless, contaminated, stripped in the blaze-light of Cato's gloating, its survivors crouching, terrified.

"I told you it'd end this way," Ynvic said.

Fraffin closed his eyes against the sight of her. In his self-imposed darkness, he could see his own future, the eyrie come to shame, hidden in a dooryard. He could see it by the dark of the blood that fed the ravenous oracle within him. They'd fit him with every machine and device for comfort and foreverness—everything except a fellow Chem or any other living creature.

He imagined an automatic toaster erupting and himself begging life into it. His thoughts were like a skipped rock touching the surface of a lake. His memories of this planet would not let him alone. *He* was the skipped rock, condensing eons: A tree, a face... the glimpse of a face, and his memory shaped out Kallima-Sin's daughter given in marriage (at a Chem's discretion) to Amenophis III three thousand five hundred puny year-beats ago.

And facts: he remembered that King Cyrus had preferred archeology to the throne. The fool!

And places: a wall in a dirty village along a desert track, a place called Muqayyar. One wall and it called up mighty Ur as he had seen it last . . . . In his mind, Tiglath-Pileser was not gone, but marched yet before the Chem recorders, through Ishtar Gate, along Procession Street. It was a timeless parade with Sennacherib, Shalmaneser, Isem-Dagan, Sin-sarra-iskun, all dancing to the Chem tune.

There was a worldpulse in Fraffin's mind now, a sine-pounding timewave: diastole/systole, compelling blacksnake ripples that whipped across generations. His

thoughts dipped briefly into the Babylonian Lingua-franca that had served the merchant world for two thousand years before he'd stirred the pot by giving them Jesus.

Fraffin felt then that his own mind was the sole repository for his creatures, his person the only preservation they had—a place of yearnings, full of voices and faces and entire races whose passage had left no mark except distantly outraged whispering . . . and tears.

His mind was spinning, and he thought: *I'm seeing it from their point of view!*

From Sheba's time, his memory handed him a vision of her camel-station metropolis, a place that withstood Aelius Gallus and his legions, but now like Carthage and himself was reduced to jetty walls of crumbled dust, kitchen midden, sandspume, silent stones —a place waiting for some King Cyrus with shovels to expose its empty skulls.

Aurum et ferrum, he thought. *Gold and iron.*

And he wondered if there'd be a wink-flare of reason before the burning darkness.

I'll have no activity in which to hide my mind, he thought, *nothing at last to protect me from boredom.*

Epilogue

BY ORDER OF THE PRIMACY:

No further applications will be taken during this cycle from persons wishing to observe the wild Chem in their native habitat. Applications for the next cycle will be taken only from observers qualified in genetics, sociology, philosophy and Chem history and their related fields.

Applications for interviews with the native witch doctor, Androclesthurlow, and his mate, Ruth, are subject to the following restrictions:

1) Interviewer is prohibited from discussing mortality.

2) Interviewer is prohibited from discussing the punishment of Director Fraffin, Shipsurgeon Ynvic or the storyship crewmembers.

3) Interviewer may not question the native female on her relationship with Investigator Kelexel.

4) All interviews must be conducted at the witch doctor's hut on the native reserve planet under the usual security limitations.

Be it noted that no requests to adopt wild Chem infants from the native reserve planet or the seeded planets can be honored until completion of studies upon the offspring of Kelexel and the native female. Studies and tests of selected wild Chem infants are now being conducted and results will be announced when those studies are completed.

For security reasons, all unauthorized attempts to visit the native reserve planet are subject to severe punishment.

(SEALED THIS DAY IN THE NAME OF THE PRIMACY)

The End

(Continued from page 4)

I don't know what it is that American writers do all the time, but British writers seem to have sort of cultural paranoia, perhaps as a result of the loss of the Empire. So here we go again, the World Destroyed, "All Fools' Day by Edmund Cooper (Walker and Company, $3.50). This time it is a "new type of solar radiation" that does the job, triggering suicidal impulses in a great proportion of the population. I wish Mr. Cooper had used a better device, mysterious and unknown "radiations" went out with the large-size AMAZING. We can now detect and measure all portions of the spectrum from light waves at one end to drum beats at the other. If it cannot be detected in any way then for all purposes it does not exist—and I do not think that is quite what the author had in mind. However, Cooper is an excellent writer—and a serious one, and populates his book with real people. They're pretty sexy people too, and this book is about the closest thing to "The Carpetbaggers" in sf to date. Lots of action, lots of guns going off, so that it is easy to forget the fact that you've read the story before a dozen times.

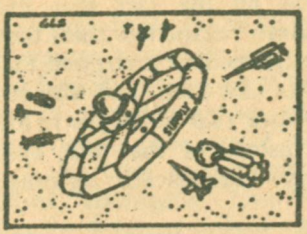
Thank goodness for Clifford D. Simak. I am sure that he would rather move from Minnetonka than write a world-ending book. What he has done in "Why Call Them Back From Heaven?" (Doubleday & Company, $3.95) is to explore, in good sf extrapolatory fashion, the possible results of the present-day movement to deep freeze us all after death, then stack us away like so many frozen kippers until the time in the bright future when we might be revived and cured. Simak wants to know what will happen to our economy if this plan goes into effect—and what will happen to the world when all these sleepers awake. He asks the questions, answers them, and the resulting novel moves along at a brisk, readable clip. But I do have some bones to pick. The basic idea is fine—what will happen if belief in physical immortality replaces spiritual immortality?—but he has barely explored all the possibilities. And I was jarred by too many cliche phrases; "One tiny corner of his mind . . . ," "He seemed to be falling . . ." when he *was* really falling,". . . the lantern cast . . . puddle of illumination." When will sf writers start putting in that little extra bit of work?

This is my day to be nasty to the British. I did not plan it that way, but I can only review what lands on my desk. "Colossus" by D.F. Jones (G.P. Putnam's Sons, $4.95) arrived with a positive thud, all 256 pages of it.

Mr. Jones is an impressive story teller with a wonderful sense of immediate suspense. He could put his talents to better use if he did a little more homework. This book is about the giant computers of the USA and the USSR that join forces to take over the world. This is a novel idea only to Mr. Jones who never bothered to read the upteen hundred stories and books on this theme. He slowly drags us over the familiar ground again, taking pages and pages to tell us what we have known for years. And, the ultimate crime, the author knows *nothing* about computers nor has he bothered to buy a book and bone up about them. Every fact he states is wrong. At the end he has the engineers furiously designing a "drawing board" for the computer to draw on—when these have been in common use for some time now. He uses the mathematical term "parameter" a good deal—but seems to think it means *"perimeter."* The thing that really appealed to me most was the language. The author, old sea dog, former Commander in the British Navy, has written a book in which all the characters are American. "My dear Forbin . . ." is the first bit of typical American speech that we hear. Then we meet a President of the United States who says he is "het up" and refers to something as a "damned clever piece of work." Damned clever bit of mid-Atlantic dialogue, this. I was also charmed by the fact that the "American" characters think that air conditioned air is no good, full of stinks and such, and one engineer uses two *oil lamps* in his office instead of that foul, eye-injuring luminescent lighting. Wow!

"Tarnsman of Gor" by John Norman (Ballantine Books, 75¢) *is a very good book. The hero Tarl Cabot got himself into and out of spots that an ordinary hero would never go near! The villains were the worst ever.*
Todd Harrison, age 11-1/2

So Mr. Norman appears to have that market sewn up—but what about the readers who are older than my son? If they like Edgar Rice Burroughs they'll be happy to hear that Norman studied the master well and this is the best thing to come along since "Princess of Mars." More sophisticated readers might be offended by the fact that the author thinks steel can strike sparks from marble and for a "doctor of philosophic logic," as the jacket copy describes him, he knows scarcely anything about English grammar. Still, the book pretends to be nothing except what it is, and I am not sticking my neck out too far when I predict that Tarnsman Tarl will hew his way through a number of volumes before old age strikes him low.



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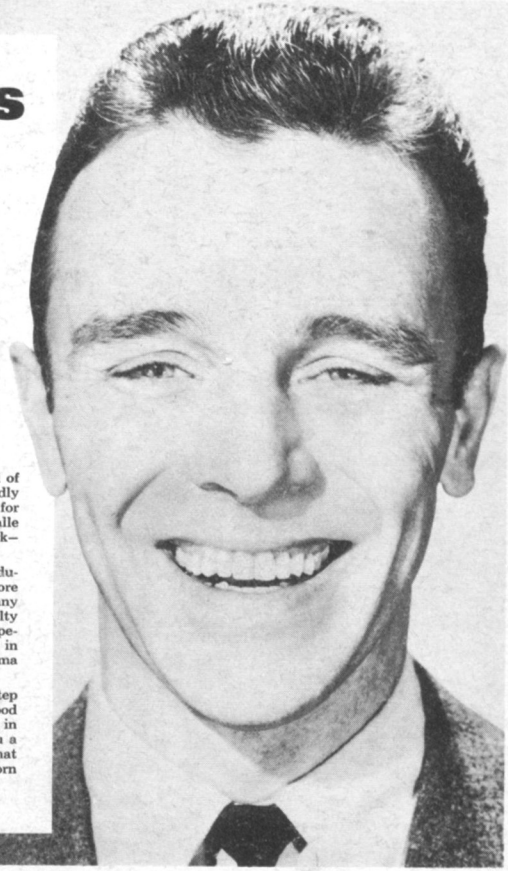

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