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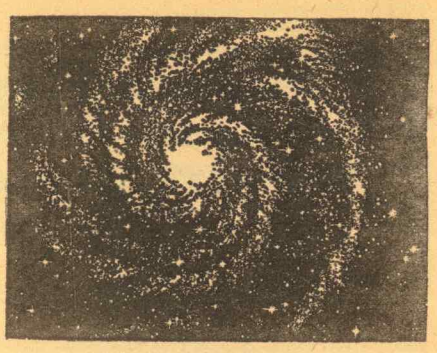
The Visitor at the Zoo
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Galaxy MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

Galaxy is published in French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish. The U. S. Edition is published in Braille and Living Tape.



June, 1968 ● Vol. 26, No. 5

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Milford, Pennsylvania 18337

On Inventing Futures

If you skipped the two pages of ads just before this page, turn back and look at them, because they're interesting.

As you will see, about a hundred and fifty of your favorite science-fiction writers, and ours, have taken a stand on America's activities in Vietnam. Unfortunately for everyone concerned, there are nearly as many on one side of the question as there are on the other; and when we say "unfortunately for everyone," that's exactly what we mean. Most of all it's unfortunate for America.

For there has never been in the past century an issue which has so thoroughly and passionately divided the American people; it is an enormous dipole, and nearly all of us are standing up to be counted, one way or another. Is there any agreement at all? Yes, nearly everyone is agreed that the war is a botch. Is there agreement on *why* it is a botch? No. Because the war itself is immoral, dangerous and practically insane, say those who favor ending it at once; because our armies are fighting it under wraps, prohibited from taking the measures

that would win it, say those who would favor fighting on.

The issue has been debated endlessly, and we do not propose to debate it again here. It seems to us that the debate has been a tragic and divisive waste; and it further seems to us that this is a built-in defect to this sort of debate on polar opposites.

Because, obviously, neither side of the debate will win. We are not going to abandon the war in Vietnam overnight; there is simply no way for it to happen. And equally we are not going to keep our moral commitments to the Vietnamese; it is too late for that, their country and their social structure have been destroyed.

And as long as our discussions on the subject remain limited to this two-valued choice of alternatives, the debate will protract itself endlessly, and so will the war.

What makes it worse is that this sort of polarized debate, which is essentially a discussion of a choice of tactics, makes opponents of people who should be friends. Look down the list of signers to the two divergent ads. You've seen stories by nearly every one of these people in the pages of *If* and *Galaxy;* from their stories, you have an opportunity to judge of the kinds of worlds they would like for the future, and even more of the kinds they would like to avoid. To the best of our knowledge there's not a pennyworth of difference between them. To the best of our opinion, if these two groups were each constituted a committee for the construction of a World of Twenty-Sixty-Eight, and their optimum worlds were compared, they would be essentially the same world. There would be some differences in labels, perhaps, little in realities.

Predicting the future, says Dennis Gabor, is hard work and essentially pointless; what is easier to do is to *invent* the future you want. Einstein, Fermi, Franklin D. Roosevelt and a few others decided to invent a future that contained atomic energy; they succeeded. Russian and American leaders decided to invent a future in which man would travel in space; they are succeeding now.

Now, what group of people in this country are most skilled at inventing futures? Why, we are! Writers, editors, readers, whatever; we look at Today as only a step on the way to Tomorrow; we are time-binders, prepared to consider change as natural and inevitable, because that is what science fiction is all about. G. B. Shaw was not a science-fiction writer (except perhaps in plays like *Back to Methuselah*), but he spoke for us when he said, "Most

people look at what *is*, and ask 'why?' I look at what has never been, and ask 'why not?' " In our role as Omnipotent Observers, we can look at tomorrow and cast it in any form we wish; and then, given the various forms of futures as a sort of shopping list, we can make a selection among them, choosing future that suits best.

Make no mistake, this is a valued skill. Perhaps this is why one finds science-fiction readers, and writers, among the world's top leaders in science, government, business and the arts; perhaps it is why representative groups from these areas are so willing to have science-fiction writers come to address them. It is easy for us, because we do it all the time; and perhaps sometimes we don't realize how hard it is for others.

And if it is true that we have this expertise, might it not also be true that we can use it for a productive purpose? Might we not even use it to find some alternative options in this polar debate? Some measures that might replace the opposite imperatives of "Get out!" or "Win!"?

Maybe it's vanity speaking. But we think that there's a chance that this might in fact be possible; and we propose to give it a whacking good try.

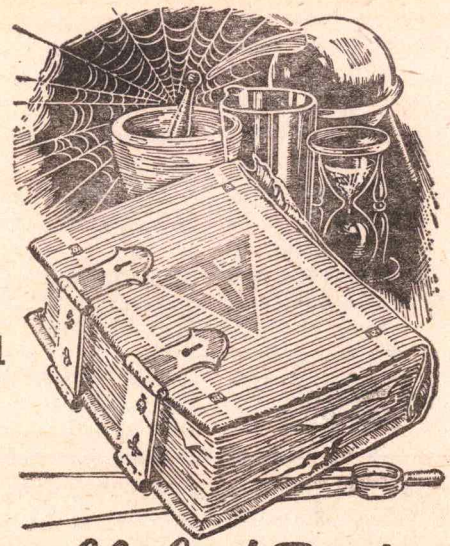
These two ads were paid for by the people who signed them. Each group ponied up $250, which is now resting securely in our corporate bank account, a total of $500 in all.

We don't propose to leave it there. We propose to take that $500 and give it away, $100 at a clip, to the five people who first give us the five most immediately provocative ideas on what we *should* do about Vietnam that, in fact, we *can* do.

Details appear in the advertisement that follows. Entries can be from anyone; as many as you like; only please put each one on a separate sheet of paper. Judging will be by the *Galaxy* editors, with whatever help we can draft if the number is too big to handle on our own. The principal considerations will be in terms of *newness* of the suggestion; *practicality* of the suggestion; and *desirability* of the suggestion; the weights to be given to each element will be at the discretion of the judges, and if two or more people give essentially the same suggestion, the first one received will get the prize.

We are aware, of course, that these are puny rewards to give for suggestions that hopefully might accomplish what expenditures of thirty billion dollars a year have failed to do. But we don't really believe anyone would enter a contest like this for money anyway; we think that what might make

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a busy person take time to think of other options is the hope that in fact they might do us all some good.

And along those lines, what strikes us as being most important about all this is not the cash awards, nor even the contest itself, but what we propose to do with the suggestions after they are received. The contest is not the end of the matter. It is the mere beginning.

In the past few decades, the world's think tanks have devised scores of ways of dealing with the future, planning and predicting, scenario-writing and making cost-effectiveness studies, etc. We've had occasion to mention some of these problem-solving techniques here before; perhaps you're familiar with them.

One of them, and in some ways what strikes us as the most productive of them, is the RAND Corporation's "Delphi" technique. Its primary purpose was to predict technological change. In the process of doing this, those who developed it discovered that it was performing a quite different function, and maybe a more valuable one: it was offering ways of assessing the feasibility and desirability of some of these changes, and helping to clarify questions so that even those which originally were so cloudily phrased as to be unanswerable were changed — so that they became answerable, and were in fact answered.

Let us assume, what we think is likely, that out of the entries to this contest we will receive some dozens or scores of ideas that seem to be worth considering.

What we will then do is submit these suggestions to a quasi-Delphic panel of experts in all the various areas of technology, government, industry, public affairs, the armed forces — as representative a group as we can find; and as we already have made a start in securing participants, we are confident it will be a high-powered team, representing not only all the disciplines involved but also the various shades of opinion. And the results will be published here — and, unless we are greatly mistaken, in a number of other places as well.

And, when we've done all this, will we have anything useful to show for it?

We don't know. All we know is that it seems to us to be worth a try.

— THE EDITOR

What Would YOU Do About Vietnam?

Assume you are being asked for advice. Assume the people who ask you are the President of the United States, the Congress, the State Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff — anyone and/or everyone who has any decision-making authority concerning American involvement in Vietnam. Assume they want one suggestion from you . . . and assume they will follow it.

What would you tell them to do?

Don't tell them. Tell us. We will take the most provocative and seemingly productive suggestions received, submit them to problem-solving analysis, and present the results in a forthcoming issue of *Galaxy*.

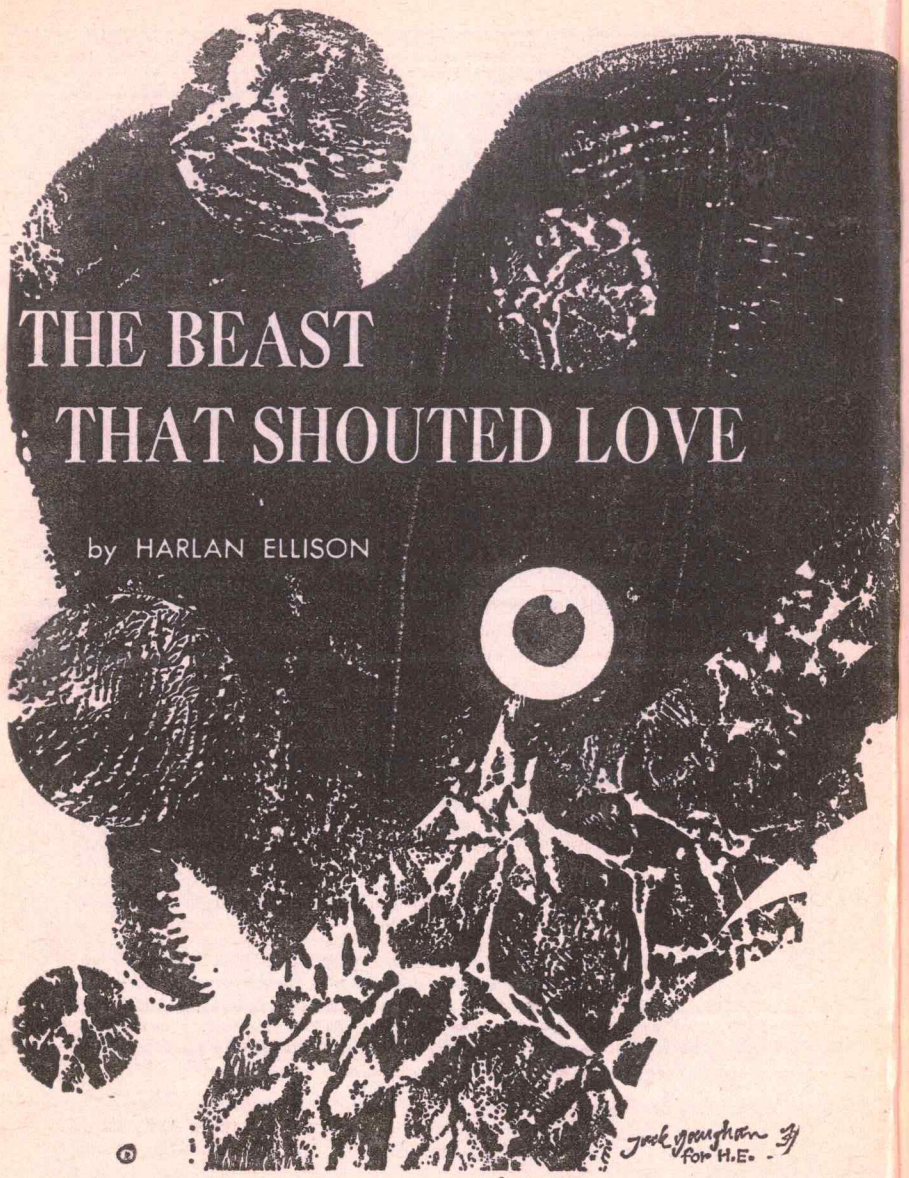
The Rules

1. Anyone is eligible to enter, and may submit as many entries as he likes. Each entry must be on a separate sheet of paper, one side only, and include your name and address. All entries will become the property of Galaxy Publishing Corporation. Please limit yourself to a maximum of 100 words for each entry, preferably in the form of (a) your suggestion, (b) followed, if you wish, by a statement of why you think it worth doing.

2. Suggestions may be on any area of American involvement in Vietnam — ways of winning the war, ways of bringing about a peaceful settlement, whatever you think would be of value.

3. Five prizes of $100 each will be awarded to those entries which, in the opinion of the judges, best deserve them. In the event of duplicate suggestions, the first entries received will get the prize. Judges will consist of, or be appointed by, the Editors of Galaxy Publishing Corporation. Winners will be notified by mail, and their names will be published in a forthcoming issue of this magazine.

4. Send your entries to: "What Would You Do About Vietnam?", Galaxy Publishing Corporation, 421 Hudson Street, New York, N.Y. 10014. Entries must be received by July 4th, 1968, to be eligible for prizes.



THE BEAST THAT SHOUTED LOVE

by HARLAN ELLISON



A galaxy drenched with hatred and madness had to export it somewhere. Why not Earth?

After an idle discussion with the pest control man who came once a month to spray around the outside of his home in the Ruxton section of Baltimore, William Sterog stole a cannister of Malathion, a deadly insecticide poison, from the man's truck and went out early one morning, following the route of the neighborhood milkman, and spooned medium-large quantities into each bottle left on the rear doorstep of seventy homes. Within six hours of Bill Sterog's activities, two hundred men, women and children died in convulsive agony.

Learning that an aunt who had lived in Buffalo was dying of cancer of the lymph glands, William Sterog hastily helped his mother pack three bags and took her to Friendship Airport, where he put her on a jet with a simple but efficient time bomb made from a Westclox Travalarm in her three-suiter. The jet exploded somewhere over Harrisburg,

Pennsylvania. Ninety-three people — including Bill Sterog's mother — were killed in the explosion, and flaming wreckage added seven to the toll by cascading down on a public swimming pool.

On a Sunday in November, William Sterog made his way to Babe Ruth Plaza on 33rd Street where he became one of 54,000 fans jamming Memorial Stadium to see the Baltimore Colts play the Green Bay Packers. He was dressed warmly in gray flannel slacks, a navy blue turtleneck pullover and a heavy hand-knitted Irish wool sweater under his parka. With three minutes and thirteen seconds of the fourth quarter remaining to be played, and Baltimore trailing seventeen to sixteen on Green Bay's eighteen yard line, Bill Sterog fought his way up the aisle to the exit above the mezzanine seats and fumbled under his parka for the U. S. Army surplus M-3 submachine gun he had bought for $49.95 from a mail-order armaments dealer in Alexandria, Virginia. Even as 53,999 screaming fans leaped to their feet — making his range of fire that much better — as the ball was snapped to the quarterback, holding for the defensive tackle most able to kick a successful field goal Bill Sterog opened fire on the massed backs of the fans below him. Before the mob could bring him down, he had killed forty-four people . . . .

Some considerable number of centuries later, when the first Expeditionary Force to the elliptical galaxy in Sculptor descended on the second planet of a fourth magnitude star the Force had designated Flammarion Theta, they found a thirty-seven-foot-high statue of a hitherto-unknown blue-white substance — not quite stone, not much like metal — in the shape of a man. The figure was barefoot, draped in a garment that vaguely resembled a toga, the head encased in a skull-tight cap, and holding in its left hand a peculiar ring-and-ball device of another substance altogether. The statue's face was curiously beatific. It had high cheekbones; deep-set eyes; a tiny, almost alien mouth; and a broad, large-nostriled nose. The statue loomed enormous among the pitted and blasted curvilinear structures of some forgotten architect. The members of the Expeditionary Force commented on the peculiar expression each noted on the face of the statue. None of these men, standing under a gorgeous brass moon that shared an evening sky with a descending sun quite dissimilar in color to the one that now shone wanly on an Earth unthinkably distant in time and space, had ever heard

of William Sterog. And so none of them were able to say that the expression on the giant statue was the same as the one Bill Sterog had shown as he told the final-appeals judge who was about to sentence him to death in the lethal gas chamber, "I love everyone in the world. I do. So help me God, I love you, all of you!" He was shouting.

Crosswhen, through interstices of thought called time, through reflective images called space; another then, another now. This place, over *there*. Beyond concepts, the transmogrification of simplicity finally labeled *if*. Forty and more steps sidewise but later, so very much later. There, in that ultimate center, with everything radiating outward, becoming infinitely more complex, the enigma of symmetry, harmony, apportionment singing with fine-tuned order in *this* place, where it all began, begins, will always begin. The center. Crosswhen.

Or: a hundred million years in the future. And: a hundred million parsecs beyond the farthest edge of measurable space. And: warpages beyond counting across the universes of parallel existences. Finally: an infinitude of mind-triggered leaps beyond human thought.

There: Crosswhen.

On the mauve level, crouched down in deeper magenta washings that concealed his arched form, the maniac waited. He was a dragon, squat and round in the torso, tapered ropey tail tucked under his body; the small, thick osseous shields rising perpendicularly from the arched back, running down to the end of the tail, tips pointing upwards; his taloned shorter arms folded across his massive chest. He had the seven-headed dog faces of an ancient Cerberus. Each head watched, waiting, hungry, insane.

He saw the bright yellow wedge of light as it moved in random patterns through the mauve, always getting closer. He knew he could not run, the movement would betray him, the specter light finding him instantly. Fear choked the maniac. The specter had pursued him through innocence and humility and nine other emotional obfuscations he had tried. He had to do something, get them off his scent. But he was alone on this level. It had been closed down some time before, to purge it of residual emotions. Had he not been so terribly confused after the killings, had he not been drowning in disorientation, he would never have trapped himself on a closed level.

Now that he was here, there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to escape the specter light that

would systematically hunt him down. Then they would purge *him.*

The maniac took the one final chance; he closed down his mind, all seven brains, even as the mauve level closed down. He shut off all thought, banked the fires of emotion, broke the neural circuits that fed power to his mind. Like a great machine phasing down from peak efficiency, his thoughts slackened and wilted and grew pale. Then there was a blank where he had been. Seven dog-heads slept.

The dragon had ceased to exist in terms of thought, and the specter light washed past him, finding nothing there to home in on. But those who sought the maniac were sane, not deranged as he was; their sanity was ordered, and in order they considered every exigency. The specter light was followed by heat-seeking beams, by mass-tallying sensors, by trackers that could hunt out the spoor of foreign matter on a closed-down level.

They found the maniac. Shut down like a sun gone cold, they located him and transferred him; he was unaware of the movement; he was locked away in his own silent skulls.

But when he chose to open his thoughts again, in the timeless disorientation that follows a total shutdown, he found himself locked in stasis in a drainage ward on the 3rd Red Active Level. Then, from seven throats, he screamed.

The sound, of course, was lost in the throat baffles they had inserted, before he had turned himself back on. The emptiness of the sound terrified him even more.

He was imbedded in an amber substance that fit around him comfortably. Had it been a much earlier era, on another world, in another continuum, it would have been simply a hospital bed with restraining straps. But the dragon was locked in stasis on a red level, crosswhen. His hospital bed was anti-grav, weightless, totally relaxing, feeding nutrients through his leathery hide along with depressants and toners. He was waiting to be drained.

Linah drifted into the ward, followed by Semph. Semph, the discoverer of the drain. And his most eloquent nemesis, Linah, who sought Public Elevation to the position of Proctor. They drifted down the rows of amber-encased patients: the toads, the tambour-lidded crystal cubes, the exoskeletals, the pseudopodal changers and the seven-headed dragon. They paused directly in front and slightly above the maniac. He was able to look up at them, images seven times seen; but he was not able to make sound.

"If I needed a conclusive reason, here's one of the best," Linah said, inclining his head toward the maniac.

Semph dipped an analysis rod into the amber substance, withdrew it and made a hasty reading of the patient's condition. "If you needed a greater *warning,*" Semph said quietly, "this would be one of the best."

"Science bends to the will of the masses," Linah said.

"I'd hate to have to believe that," Semph responded quickly. There was a tone in his voice that could not be named, but it undershadowed the aggressiveness of his words.

"I'm going to see to it, Semph. *Believe it.* I'm going to have the Concord pass the resolution."

"Linah, how long have we known each other?"

"Since your third flux. My second."

"That's about right. Have I ever told you a lie, have I ever asked you to do something that would harm you?"

"No. Not that I can recall."

"Then why won't you listen to me *this* time?"

"Because I think you're wrong. I'm not a fanatic, Semph. I'm not making political hay with this. I feel very strongly that it's the best chance we've ever had."

"But disaster for everyone and everywhere else, all the way back, and God only knows how far across the plenum. We stop fouling our own nest, at the expense of all the other nests that ever were."

Linah spread his hands in futility. "Survival."

Semph shook his head slowly, with a weariness that was mirrored in his expression. "I wish I could drain *that* too."

"Can't you?"

Semph shrugged. "I can drain *any*thing. But what we'd have left wouldn't be worth having."

The amber substance changed hue. It glowed deep within itself with a blue intensity. "The patient is ready," Semph said. "Linah, one more time. I'll beg if it'll do any good. Please. Stall till the next session. The Concord needn't do it *now.* Let me run some further tests, let me see how far back this garbage spews, how much damage it can cause. Let me prepare some reports."

Linah was firm. He shook his head in finality. "May I watch the draining with you?"

Semph let out a long sigh. He was beaten and knew it. "Yes, all right."

The amber substance carrying its silent burden began to rise. It reached the level of the two men, and slid smoothly through the air between them. They drifted after the smooth container with

the dog-headed dragon imbedded in it, and Semph seemed as though he wanted to say something else. But there was nothing to say.

The amber chrysalloid cradle faded and vanished, and the men became insubstantial and were no more. They all reappeared in the drainage chamber. The beaming stage was empty. The amber cradle settled down on it without sound, and the substance flowed away, vanishing as it uncovered the dragon.

The maniac tried desperately to move, to heave himself up. Seven heads twitched futilely. The madness in him overcame the depressants, and he was consumed with frenzy, fury, crimson hate. But he could not move. It was all he could do to hold his shape.

Semph turned the band on his left wrist. It glowed from within, a deep gold. The sound of air rushing to fill a vacuum filled the chamber. The beaming stage was drenched in silver light that seemed to spring out of the air itself, from an unknown source. The dragon was washed by the silver light, and the seven great mouths opened once, exposing rings of fangs. Then his double-lidded eyes closed.

The pain within his heads was monstrous. A fearful wrenching that became the sucking of a million mouths. His very brains were pulled upon, pressured, compressed and then purged.

Semph and Linah looked away from the pulsing body of the dragon to the drainage tank across the chamber. It was filling from the bottom as they watched. Filling with a nearly colorless roiling cloud of smokiness, shot through with sparks. "Here it comes," Semph said, needlessly.

Linah dragged his eyes away from the tank. The dragon with seven heads was rippling. As though seen through shallow water, the maniac was beginning to alter. As the tank filled, the maniac found it more and more difficult to maintain his shape. The denser grew the cloud of sparkling matter in the tank, the less constant was the shape of the creature on the beaming stage.

Then it was impossible, and the maniac gave in. The tank filled more rapidly, and the shape quavered and altered and shrank and then there was a superimposition of the form of a man, over that of the seven-headed dragon. Then the tank reached three-quarters filled, and the dragon became an underlying shadow, a hint, a suggestion of what had been there when the drainage began. Now the man-form was becoming more dominant by the second.

Finally, the tank was filled, and a normal man lay on the beaming stage, breathing heavily, eyes closed, muscles jumping involuntarily.

"He's drained," Semph said.

"Is it all in the tank?" Linah asked softly.

"No, none of it."

"Then — "

"This is the residue. Harmless. Reagents purged from a group of sensitives will neutralize it. The dangerous essences, the degenerate force-lines that make up the field . . . they're gone. Drained off already."

Linah looked disturbed, for the first time. "Where did it go? All the rage insanity you drained, where did it go?"

"Do you love your fellow man, tell me?"

"Please, Semph! I asked where it went . . . when it went?"

"And I asked if you cared at all about anyone else?"

"You know my answer . . . you know *me!* I want to know, tell me, at least what you know. Where . . . when . . . ?"

"Then you'll forgive me, Linah, because I love my fellow man, too. Whenever he was, wherever he is; I have to, I work in an inhuman field, and I have to cling to that. So . . . you'll forgive me . . . "

"What are you going to . . . ."

In Indonesia they have a phrase for it: Djam Karet — *the hour that stretches.*

In the Vatican's Stanza of Heliodorus, the second of the great rooms he designed for Pope Julius II, Raphael painted (and his pupils completed) a magnificent fresco representation of the historic meeting between Pope Leo I and Attila the Hun, in the year 452.

In this painting is mirrored the belief of Christians everywhere that the spiritual authority of Rome protected her in that desperate hour when the Hun came to sack and burn the Holy City. Raphael has painted in Saint Peter and Saint Paul, descending from Heaven to reinforce Pope Leo's intervention. His interpretation was an elaboration on the original legend, in which only the Apostle Peter was mentioned — standing behind Leo with a drawn sword. And the legend was an elaboration of what little facts have come down through antiquity relatively undistorted. Leo had no cardinals with him and certainly no wraith Apostles. He was one of three in the deputation. The other two were secular dignitaries of the Roman state. The meeting did not take place — as legend would have us believe — just outside the gates of Rome, but in northern Italy, not far from what is today Pescara.

Nothing more than this is known of the confrontation. Yet Attila, who had never been stopped, did not raze Rome. He turned back.

Djam Karet. The force-line field spewed out from a center crosswhen, a field that had pulsed through time and space and the minds of men for twice ten thousand years. Then cut out suddenly, inexplicably, and Attila the Hun clapped his hands to his head, his mind twisting like rope within his skull. His eyes glazed, then cleared, and he breathed from deep in his chest. Then he signaled his army to turn back. Leo the Great thanked God and the living memory of Christ the Savior. Legend added Saint Peter. Raphael added Saint Paul.

For twice ten thousand years — *Djam Karet* — the field had pulsed, and for a brief moment that could have been instants or years or millennia, it was cut off.

Legend does not tell the truth. More specifically, it does not tell *all* of the truth: forty years before Attila raided Italy, Rome had been taken and sacked by Alaric the Goth. *Djam Karet.* Three years after the retreat of Attila Rome was once more taken and sacked, by Gaiseric, king of all the Vandals.

There was a reason the garbage of insanity had ceased to flow through everywhere and everywhen from the drained mind of a seven-headed dragon . . . .

Semph, traitor to his race, hovered before the Concord. His friend, the man who now sought his final flux, Linah, Proctored the hearing. He spoke softly, but eloquently, of what the great scientist had done.

"The tank was draining; he said to me, 'Forgive me, because I love my fellow man. Whenever he was, wherever he is; I have to, I work in an inhuman field, and I have to cling to that. So you'll forgive me.' Then he interposed himself."

The sixty members of the Concord, a representative from each race that existed in the center, bird-creatures and blue things and large-headed men and orange scents with cilia shuddering . . . all of them looked at Semph where he hovered. His body and head were crumpled like a brown paper bag. All hair was gone. His eyes were dim and watery. Naked, shimmering, he drifted slightly to one side, then a vagrant breeze in the wall-less chamber sent him back. He had drained himself.

"I ask for this Concord to affix sentence of final flux on this man. Though his interposition only lasted a few moments, we have no way of knowing what damage or unnaturalness it may have caused crosswhen. I submit that his intent was to overload the drain and thereby render it inoperative. This act, the act of a beast who would condemn the sixty races of the center to a future in which insanity still prevailed, is an act that can only be punished by termination."

The Concord blanked and meditated. A timeless time later they re-linked, and the Proctor's charges were upheld; his demand of sentence was fulfilled.

On the hushed shores of a thought, the papyrus man was carried in the arms of his friend, his executioner, the Proctor. There in the dusting quiet of an approaching night, Linah laid Semph down in the shadow of a sigh.

"Why did you stop me?" the wrinkle with a mouth asked.

Linah looked away across the rushing dark.

"Why?"

"Because here, in the center, there is a chance."

"And for them, out there, no chance ever?"

Linah sat down slowly, digging his hands into the golden mist, letting it sift over his wrists and back into the waiting flesh of the world. "If we can begin it here, if we can pursue our boundaries outward, then perhaps one day, sometime, we can reach to the ends of time with that little chance. Until then, it is better to have one center where there is no madness."

Semph hurried his words. The end was rapidly striding for him. "You have sentenced them all. Insanity is a living vapor. A force. It can be bottled. The most potent genie in the most easily uncorked bottle. And you have condemned them to live with it always. In the name of love."

Linah made a sound that was not quite a word, but called it back. Semph touched his wrist with a tremble that had been a hand. Fingers melting into softness and warmth. "I'm sorry for you, Linah. Your curse is to be a true man. The world is made for strugglers. You never learned how to do that."

Linah did not reply. He thought only of the drainage that was eternal now. Set in motion and kept in motion by its necessity.

"Will you do a memorial for me?" Semph asked.

Linah nodded. "It's traditional."

Semph smiled softly. "Then do it for them; not for me. I'm the one who devised the vessel of their death, and I don't need it. But choose one of them; not a very important one, but one that will mean everything to them if they find it, and understand. Erect the memorial in my name

to that one. Will you do that?"

Linah nodded.

"Will you?" Semph asked. His eyes were closed, and he could not see the nod.

"Yes. I will," Linah said. But Semph could not hear. The flux began and ended, and Linah was alone in the cupped silence of loneliness.

The statue was placed on a far planet of a far star in a time that was ancient while yet never having been born. It existed in the minds of men who would come later. Or never.

But if they did, they would know that hell was with them, that there was a Heaven that men called Heaven, and in it there was a center from which all madness flowed; and once within that center, there was peace.

In the remains of a blasted building that had been a shirt factory in what had been Stuttgart, Friedrich Drucker found a many-colored box. Maddened by hunger and the memory of having eaten human flesh for weeks, the man tore at the lid of the box with the bloodied stubs of his fingers. As the box flew open, pressed at a certain point, cyclones rushed out past the terrified face of Friedrich Drucker. Cyclones and dark, winged, faceless shapes that streaked away into the night, followed by a last wisp of purple smoke smelling strongly of decayed gardenias.

But Friedrich Drucker had little time to ponder the meaning of the purple smoke, for the next day, World War IV broke out.

— HARLAN ELLISON

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How We Banned the Bombs

by MACK REYNOLDS



Illustrated by Bode

We solved the population problem. Now if we can only solve the solution!

I

Jerome Allen met David Lehman at the Juarez Airport, just to the north and east of Mexico City. When the rocketplane landed, Allen was one of the first at the bottom of the ladder which had snaked up to its door.

His immediate superior scowled at him, after they had gone through the usual banalities. Lehman took him to one side, even as the other passengers were debouching to be taken under the wings of clucking Mexican hostesses.

He said, "Jerry, how'd you get in here?"

"Get in where?"

"Here, right at the plane, along with the airport personnel. Friends, relatives and such don't get to greet the passengers until they've been ushered through the airport red tape."

"Oh, that," Jerry Allen grinned. "Well, you know how it is. Rank

has its privileges, particularly in this part of the United States of the Americas."

The other looked at him.

Jerry said, "Okay. So I flashed my buzzer. Zoroaster! So what?"

"You told them you were a Reunited Nations bureau man, meeting a bureau V.I.P. Is that it?"

"Well, yes. What of it, Dave? Listen, I've already cleared you through. We can go."

They started toward the complex of airport buildings, two obvious *norteamericanos* with the freshness of face of the Americans, the aggressive energy of Americans, the height of Americans, all but incongruous in Mexico. They were twin-like in their conservative dark gray suits, their spotless white shirts, their Byron-revival cravats. Jerry Allen was sandy of hair, blue of eye, his face seldom in composure, but either grinning or scowling; there was seldom middle-ground for Jerry Allen. Dave Lehman was on the darker side, a light touch of premature gray in otherwise jet hair, eyes dark as a Pakistani's, his smile rare, to the sorrow of those few women who had loved the man. Dave Lehman's smiles meant as much as Jerry Allen's meant little.

He was saying now, even as they walked, "Because we're on a raid, which by its very nature means it's hush-hush. You've done everything but get tri-vision photographers out here. That's all we'd need. Every vader in Mexico could head for the hills."

"*Zo-ro-as-ter,* Dave, what brought all this up? You'd think the vaders had some sort of underground spies watching out for bureau personnel. By the way, you've been invited for dinner tonight."

"Don't think it can't happen," Lehman muttered.

Jerry scowled at him. "What're you talking about?"

"Two months ago, in Common Eur-Asia. Greece, to be exact. We flushed a vader. Small town in the Peloponnesos near Patros. Practically the whole village was in on it, and two relatives in Athens were keeping them informed on possible bureau raids. It was the embryo of an underground."

Jerry registered shock. "What'd you do?"

"What could we do? Priority A. Not only those we *knew* were guilty, but the whole town, just to be sure we didn't miss any. If they'd condoned it, they'd do it themselves." Lehman's face took on a frustrated element. "The number of bombs we find to defuse has been falling off geometrically. I haven't any data, but one possibility is that the vaders are getting foxy as the years go by."

The local bureau head said meaninglessly, "I hate vaders. I hate them the way people must have hated lepers back in the Middle Ages."

Lehman shot him a glance and growled, "Well, you shouldn't. This is a job, a necessary job, but hate isn't involved. By the way, how's Dorothy?"

They had reached a side door, passed through it, and Jerry Allen was leading the way toward a floater. He said, over his shoulder, "No vacuum-tube terminal in the vicinity. We'll have to go in this. Dorothy's all right, I suppose." He grunted in deprecation. "You know what? She needs a baby."

Dave Lehman's face was wry.

Jerry held the floater's door open for the other, saw him into the seat and then walked around to the driver's side. "I'll send one of the boys over for your luggage later."

"There is no luggage. I'll shuttle back to Greater Washington and then over to Geneva tonight. Old Fatso Zogbaum wants to see me about some crisis or other."

"Dotty'll be disappointed." Jerry Allen hit the lift lever for clearance, then depressed the accelerator. In a few minutes, he dialed coordinates and let the auto take over.

His superior was looking at him. "What's this about Dorothy wanting a baby?"

"I didn't say she wanted one. Just that she needs one." Jerry ran a hand through his sandy thatch and grimaced. "Well, I guess she wants one, too."

Lehman said nothing, waited for more.

Jerry Allen was uncomfortable. "She hasn't anything to keep her busy, really. I work, so, of course, she's exempt from the labor draft in spite of her high degree of training. Ultramation has hit harder here than even up north. We had more time to get ready for it back before these other countries were admitted into the States. If she had a kid . . . ."

Dave said, understanding in his voice, "How's your priority, when the decade's up?"

"High. We've been married twelve years and no children at all."

"It should be high. You're not sterile, then?"

"Zoroaster, no! Neither is Dotty."

"Good. You still have time."

"It's a long time to wait."

They rode in silence, somehow depressed. The floater was taking them down Tacuba Boulevard.

Looking idly out the window at a city he had visited many a time before, it came to Dave Lehman how little new there was in travel any more. Madrid looked like St.

Louis, or, say, Cincinnati, and Vera Cruz looked like Cleveland. Architecture in the world of the Ultra-welfare State was so standardized as to seem to come from some automated mold. Clothing had become so, long since, and for decades the every day food of York, England, had differed little from that of New York. Or for that matter, that of the original Moscow from that of Moscow, Idaho — crossing over to Common Eur-Asia, didn't bring much in the way of change. Yes, it was a pity that world-wide trade on the grand scale had collapsed local tastes.

Finally, Dave said, "What's the story on this raid?"

"We'll pick up the boys at the office."

"No."

Jerry looked at him, scowling again.

Lehman said patiently, "I told you some of these vaders were getting sneaky. They must be beginning to dream up angles. If this whole thing is to continue to work, we can't let a single vader succeed. To the extent one gets by with it, somebody else'll try. Enough start trying, and the whole machinery would break down. For all we know, there's a dozen bombs in this town, not just one. And for all we know there may be someone staked out somewhere in, or in the vicinity of, the bureau's local office. They spot me, driving up, and bingo, the cloddies are all digging in."

"Yeah. Well, we haven't had any trouble like that here."

"We'll make sure it doesn't happen the first time. Have the other operatives meet us at some public spot."

"Plaza de Santiago Tlalteloc?"

The other shrugged.

Jerry got on the floater's phone.

II

They picked up the other three staff men, and Jerry Allen headed back up the Calle de Guadalupe, on a higher level now and at a good hundred kilometer clip.

Two of the three newcomers were Mexicans, one a Rumanian. Dave Lehman knew only the Rumanian, who worked out of the central Reunited Nations office of the bureau in Geneva. Jerry introduced the other two.

Dave said idly, "You men all equipped?"

One of them said, "*Si.*" His face wasn't happy.

Lehman shot a glance at him. "You don't seem to like your work, Candelas."

The Mexican said defiantly, "Do you?"

After a moment, Lehman said, "No. But it has to be done. I've never met anyone who liked it."

"I know. However, I am a Catholic, sir."

"I supposed you were," Lehman said without inflection. Then, "My own people are noted for their love of children."

"Yes, sir."

Dave Lehman said to Jerry, in way of changing a sticky subject, "Where's the bomb located?"

"A few miles north. A former suburb, now turned semi-slum. Area known as Villa Madero."

"Any complications?"

"No."

"Then why do we need so many men? Why couldn't you and I handle it?"

"They all live in individual houses. To surround one, you'll need at least four men, five to be safe. If you just came to the front door and knocked, they'd possibly sneak the bomb out the back."

"Very well."

"You've got the court order?"

"Of course."

"Carte blanche?"

"Of course."

They left the outskirts of Mexico City, heavy with its grim anthill apartment houses and for a brief moment were in countryside. Then the houses began again. Individual houses, now. As Jerry Allen had said, semi-slums. The Mexican sun seemed even more brutal in these surroundings.

Dave Lehman made a face. "Is there still a housing shortage in this area? It seems unbelievable."

The Rumanian, whose name was Dumitrescu, grumbled, "It's the same in Common Eur-Asia. Given present methods, you can build ultramodern housing for all in one generation. But you can't teach a people to live in them in one generation."

Lehman looked to him. "What is that remark supposed to mean?"

"Here in this part of the United States of the Americas, as in my native Balkans, the older generation is used to, and prefers, crowded quarters, closed windows, rather than screened ones. They find the fumes of cooking food pleasant, and have no great antipathy for dirt. They are distrustful of doctors with hypodermic needles and a great many of them, at least, have similar distrust of public schools." For a moment the Rumanian seemed about to add something to this but then he broke it off with, "Did you expect Utopia to be Utopian?"

His superior had to laugh one of his rare laughs. "As a matter of fact, I suppose I did. Now, perhaps I realize that some of our changes will take a generation or two to be realized."

"At least," Dumitrescu grunted.

Lehman ended his amusement with a snort and said to Jerry Allen, "Your local group seems to be on the pessimistic side, Jerry."

Allen turned the floater sharply to the left on a minor road and flickered off the auto to take hand controls. He cut his speed in half, now that his own reflexes were in charge.

He said, "Mexico is one of the slower areas of the Ultrawelfare State. Great deal of tradition, customs, so forth. They were all hot for double-hemisphere government, before it came, and sort of bewildered after. We're almost there."

"You've cased this place?"

"We've rehearsed the whole thing." Jerry Allen gave Lehman a quick rundown on the scheme of operations. It was routine, and his superior merely grunted acceptance.

They turned off on still another and smaller side road, drove approximately a half kilometer and pulled up before what must have once been an attractive suburban home of a more than averagely well to do Mexican of the 1960's or so. There was an extensive lawn about the place and a hedge. Two or three neglected rock gardens made up the balance of the yard. It could have been Floridian or perhaps Southern Californian. The floater sank to the road surface.

Twenty wide stone steps led up to a terrace some fifteen by twenty feet in extent. Dave Lehman and Jerry Allen mounted them and knocked at the door, after surmising that the bell was in disrepair. The house had been built before the advent of identity-panels. The three sub-operatives had melted away to their own assigned positions.

A small woman of possibly thirty answered. Her face held an element of weary fear, as though she had long lived in expectation of disaster. Behind her were two children, almost adult in age. They too had a strained air.

Why did they do it? Lehman agonized inwardly. *Why did they do this to themselves?*

He brought the court order from his pocket and began to read it.

"*Yo no hablo ingles,*" she said nervously.

"That doesn't matter for the moment," Lehman said. He began to read again.

Jerry, whose face was now tense, spoke to her in Spanish.

Suddenly she gurgled something and turned to run. The children, behind her, their eyes wide in terror, impeded her for a moment. She thrust them aside, wildly, and stumbled on.

Jerry was through the door and after her. "No, you don't . . . !" he yelled.

A door banged somewhere in the back.

Dave Lehman entered the short hallway and moved on into what was obviously the living room. It looked well lived in, in a yesteryear manner. There were a good many more photographs on the walls than were called for by the dictates of taste — aunts and uncles, grandfathers and grandmothers, and probably great grandfathers and great grandmothers, to boot. There were highly colored saints and bleeding hearts. There were gaudy gimcracks, probably won at some fair or fiesta of long ago. There was over much furniture, which had seen over much use. And there was a total lack of reading material, even of the more popular periodicals. In one corner sat the inevitable tri-vision set.

Dave Lehman stood there stolidly, his court order in hand.

Dumitrescu, Candelas and Jerry Allen brought in a mad-eyed, desperate, struggling Mexican who bore a blanket-wrapped something in his arms. He could have been no more than five feet four and was probably not quite forty years of age. His thin chest was heaving with the exertion of his struggle with the larger men.

Dave Lehman knew the words, had no need to read them, but he made his eyes go down to the paper. He said, firmly, "Jose Antonio Morales, you are charged by the Bureau of Population of the Reunited Nations with having an infant. With having evaded the laws of the United States of the Americas. With having conspired with your wife, Consuelo, to ignore the decade ban and all priority and thus endanger the race. Have you anything to say?"

He had nothing to say, except meaningless shouts.

The child he held in his arms began to scream.

Lehman motioned with his head.

The third operative had entered the front door behind them. He now seized the mother, who had already collapsed into hysterical tears, by the arms.

Jerry Allen and Dumitrescu, with the help of Candelas, took the child from the protesting, bawling Morales. Dumitrescu and Candelas held the man while Allen brought forth a kit. He put the child on a couch and prepared a hypodermic needle.

Morales screamed piercingly, struggling.

"Hold the pig," Allen grated. "Two healthy kids, and he has to be a vader!"

He bent over the child with his hypo. He pulled down its diaper, slapped him smartly on the bottom and pressed the needle home.

The father roared, tore sudden-



ly loose and darted at the agent.

Jerry Allen, his own face working, clipped the man neatly on the jaw, felling him like a poled ox. He turned and took up another needle.

"Hey," Lehman snapped. "What — "

But Jerry had knelt with a fluid motion. "Pig!" he ground out, pressing a second hypo into the fallen man's arm.

The wife screamed.

Jerry Allen said to Candelas, "Tell her that neither her husband nor the child are hurt. Tell her they'll be all right. I'm too worked up to think in Spanish."

Candelas said something to her in her own tongue, though she seemed not to hear.

Dave Lehman said hotly to Allen, "You're a little quick with that needle, Jerry. Our instructions weren't to defuse Morales."

Jerry looked at him, his face strangely changed. "You said you have a carte blanche order, didn't you? What are you going to do, let this vader keep turning out bombs indefinitely? Sure, we found this one. We sterilized the kid. But it wasn't the kid's fault he'd been brought in the world. It was his parents'. Okay, if Morales can't obey the same law all the rest of us have to, let him be sterilized too. We're not going to end the population explosion by letting vaders keep going."

Lehman sighed. "All right. It's done now. Let's go. Our dirty work's done."

Candelas looked at him emptily. "Now who doesn't seem to like this work?"

Lehman closed his eyes. "Yeah," he said.

Helmut Zogbaum mumbled in satisfaction at the chart his secretary handed him. "The British," he told her. "You can't beat the British."

Marcy Kneedler was English, but she didn't know what he was talking about.

Her bureau chief, pleased at the latest success, traced it out on the chart for her. "Finally, Borneo," he said. "Even the area once known as Sarawak, which was the hardest of all to crack — less superstitious than the rest. Even they have crossed the line."

"How wizard, Herr Zogbaum! The bureau will certainly get citations from both Common Eur-Asia and the United States."

Zogbaum worked his fat lips into a pout. "If there was justice, Miss Kneedler. If there was justice to be found in the Reunited Nations. But no, this eternal bickering. And we seem all but forgotten these days."

Marcy said, "But you said something about the British?"

"Uh? Oh, yes, the British." He beamed at her fatly. She was a

pretty girl in the fine skinned, delicate featured English tradition. A bit on the slim side for Teutonic taste, perhaps, but pretty. He wheezed a sigh for yesteryear's youth. "Absolute geniuses as field men, Miss Kneedler. It would never have occurred to me."

He went back to the chart.

Marcy Kneedler tried to keep testiness from her voice. "But what happened? How did we carry Borneo? And what did the British do?"

He put down the chart and chuckled. "I am sorry. So sorry. I had forgotten you were not privy . . . ." He paused. "Is that how you use the word?"

"Sometimes," she said, patiently. That was one of the aspects of working for other nationalities in the Reunited Nations organization. You were often assigned to someone whose Amer-English was seemingly better than your own. Then out of a clear sky they'd up with some question such as . . . . Well, there was just last week when an Iranian, who had supposedly taken his degree at Harvard, wanted to know what, in idiom, a son-of-a-bee was. It took her some time to convey the idea that the Americanism had no connection with apiculture.

"Yes," Zogbaum was saying. "The project was more or less, ah, kept under wraps, you say." He patted his tummy in satisfaction. "We had tried everything. Logic meant nothing to these people. Nothing meant anything."

"Just look at this chart!" He traced the earlier lines of the graph. "At the rate they were going, they would have doubled their population in sixteen and a quarter years. Sixteen and a quarter years, Miss Kneedler!"

"But," she said, "the British."

He beamed at her as though she had just contributed a brilliant remark. "Yes, the British. A team recruited from, ah, now, what was the organization, once so strong while we were still having international difficulties? The counter-espionage people. James Bond and all that sort of thing?"

"M-16?" she frowned.

"M-16, exactly. Cloak and dagger men, eh? Rather elderly fellows now. Absolutely. Infiltrated. Took months. Years, actually. It was wonderful." Herr Zogbaum sighed deep down in satisfaction, as though he had explained all.

Marcy Kneedler regarded him for a long frustrated moment. What did the Reunited Nations have in mind, putting absent-minded old fuddy-duddies like Zogbaum into responsible positions such as this?

However, she said, "What did they do?"

"What did they do? Ah, ha, it was simple, Miss Kneedler. They first studied most carefully the religion of the aborigines, eh? Then, very subtle, they planned to send pseudo — you say pseudo?"

When she had assured him she said pseudo, he went on. "Pseudo-holy men in, from a score of different points. Ah, they had consulted the stars, or the winds, or the gods of the storms, or whatever it is consulted by these wild men of Borneo, eh? And the gods had decided, among other things, that having a family of more than two children was an abomination, eh?"

He scowled heavily down at one of the reports. "However, sometimes your countrymen would seem to become too, ah, precipitate. I am afraid there will be some recriminations in the higher echelons. Particularly among those so touchy East Asian fellows of Common Eur-Asia."

Marcy was gathering up the paraphernalia of her work, preparatory to leaving. Herr Zogbaum wasn't her regular, even though her bureau chief. His usual secretary was on vacation.

Not to let the conversation drop completely, she said, "Precipitate?"

He grunted worriedly, whilst scanning the report. "It would seem that in issuing contraceptive capsules they took it upon themselves to actually dispense sterilization tablets to those they thought mentally or physically inferior." He pursed his fat lips and shook his jowls. "There will be recriminations."

Possibly there would be, Marcy thought. There were always recriminations. The world had once been composed of over one hundred nations, continually bickering. Now there were the two giants, and a handful of neutrals. But the world's problems had not magically disappeared as a result. At least, all of them hadn't.

III

When David Lehman returned to the apartment that night, Marcy Kneedler was pleasingly surprised to see him. He sank into his favorite chair and looked up at her wordlessly. Their mutual affection was such that continual demonstration was unnecessary.

"I'll get you a drink," she said, going over to the auto-bar. "Whiskey?"

"Fine," he sighed. "But none of that seaweed stuff."

"My. Our tastes are getting luxurious, don't you think?"

"Whale steaks, I'll eat. Plankton protein I'll put up with, in its hundred and one forms. But

my alcohol I'll defend as I would my castle!"

"Nobly spoken, Sir Knight," she said, even as she dialed his drink. "And by that I assume you mean that by the end of the few bottles of real Scotch in the distribution center, you will become a teetotaler." She handed him the whiskey and water.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that according to today's tri-vision newscast the Common Eur-Asia Central Production Planning has banned the use of grain cereals for beverages."

"Oh, great. My one big vice, shot. Central Production Planning yet. I sometimes wonder if this part of the world wasn't better off back when they had that pseudo-communism of theirs."

She sat opposite him and looked down at the intricate webbing of her Etruscan revival sandals. "I thought I was your big vice, darling."

He smiled one of his rare smiles at her. "You're my one big virtue, Marcy."

She snorted her amusement at him and changed the subject. "Weren't you to be in Mexico City tonight?"

"I finished the business. Just a routine raid. As a matter of fact, they're becoming so rare lately they can hardly be called routine."

"Did you find a bomb?"

"Yes. A semi-illiterate family which already had two children. Zoroaster only knows how she avoided her contraceptive ration."

"What happened?"

"The usual. The neighbors had kept quiet — as usual. What is this satisfaction in thwarting authority, even when the law involved is so obviously needed by all? I sometimes think there are those who would shelter a rabid dog in their cellar to prevent the proper authorities from dispatching the poor beast."

Marcy said lowly, "An infant child is not exactly a rabid dog, Dave."

He took down half his drink, scowling at her over the rim of the glass. "But considerably more dangerous to the human race."

"You're being a bit overly dramatic, don't you think?"

"Am I? You should know, honey. You too work for the Bureau of Population."

She held her elbows to her sides, tightly, as though to suppress a shiver. "What did you do?"

"To the child? The usual. A bomb is a bomb. We defused it. And the father, too."

"The father? You sterilized him too?"

Dave Lehman said uncomfortably, "Jerry Allen. Before I could stop him. The man already had two pre-ban children." He hesitated before adding, "Jerry seems to be on the upset side, these days. His wife —"

"Dotty?"

"Yes. She must be halfway through her thirties now. Jerry says she needs a baby. I suspect she's a bit on the neurotic side."

"Well, the decade ban will be over shortly. I'd think the Allens would be able to swing a priority, since they haven't had any children at all."

"I imagine." Dave finished his drink.

Marcy said suddenly, "Darling, why don't we get married?"

He was taken aback by the quick switch, and now there was something behind the darkness of his eyes.

"Why?"

"Why not? Isn't it the usual thing under the circumstances?"

He shook his head. "For that matter, I doubt if it is, these days."

Marcy Kneedler was irritated. "You say you love me . . . ."

"I don't even have to say it. You know it full well, honey." He shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "But I still say *why?* What's the purpose of marriage, Marcy?"

"You are being deliberately aggravating, I dare say."

"I'm not trying to be. Marriage as an institution is rapidly losing its original purpose, honey. Women no longer need the protection it once afforded." He saw that he had either said too much or too little and went on. "I've never accepted the belief that women are basically the weaker sex. However, in the past nature put woman in a position where she was, at least temporarily, weaker than man. That period when she was pregnant and that period when her child was too small to fend for itself. Since man's animal instinct is to impregnate as many females as possible, society was forced to invent such institutions as marriage so that he would provide for his wife and children."

"This is rather a basic lecture for someone of my years, don't you think?"

"Simply background, honey. As things stand today, you and I have no children. Nor would, nor could, we have even one, in the immediate future." He grunted depreciation. "Unless we wished to produce a bomb, of course."

"But even if we did produce a child," he continued, "the original need for marriage no longer applies. You are no longer dependent upon a man to support you — nor is any citizen of either the United States of the Americas or Common Eur-Asia. Man's problems of production have been

solved. Society provides amply of all the necessities and many of the luxuries of life for all. So what is the present need of marriage?"

Her generous mouth tightened. "There are certain moral considerations."

"Oh, really now, Marcy. What Greek was it who said: Morals are the invention of the weak to protect themselves from the strong?"

"Plato, I believe," she said tightly.

"Very well. Women are no longer weak. They don't need that particular code of morality to protect themselves."

She seemed again to suddenly switch subjects, even as she leaned toward him, urgently. "Dave. Dave, we could have a sterilie."

"Honey, what is all this, all of a sudden? What's gotten into you? Aren't you happy about us? About our way of life? Obviously, it isn't ideal, but the world is in a condition of flux. We're making sacrifices, long range plans. Ultimately — " He let the sentence die.

"Yes, ultimately," she said. She held her elbows tight against her sides again, in her characteristic gesture of rejection. "But . . . I . . . I feel something, darling. Something's very wrong."

"Intuition?"

She came suddenly to her feet and turned her back to him. "Don't laugh at me, Dave. Something's wrong. I don't know what."

"Something is wrong," Helmut Zogbaum said, scowling and moving his fat lips in and out.

Dave Lehman found a chair, crossed his legs and waited for his chief to go on.

The bureaucrat tapped with a chubby finger the pile of reports and charts on his desk. "You probably think I do nothing all day, eh? Just sit here while such as you are out in the field doing the, ah, dirty work, eh?"

It was exactly what David Lehman thought. However, he said drily, "I've never envied your job, Herr Zogbaum."

"Ah, so, eh? You are quite correct. But now, I tell you, David. Something is very wrong."

"I thought we were doing pretty well. There haven't been more than a dozen bombs show up in the past year. Except for that freak situation in Greece, we haven't had any special problems."

"That is what is wrong, friend David."

Dave Lehman looked at him, holding his peace.

Zogbaum had taken up one of his endless reports and was scowling at it heavily. "It is not enough bombs — as you call them," He grunted. "From whence — you say, from whence? — did that silly name come?"

Dave shrugged ruefully. "Darned if I know. Possibly derived from the idea of the population explosion. Explosion — bomb. The individual unit of the population was a baby — thus a bomb." He thought a moment. "Or possibly it's derived from *bambino*. We had some of our roughest goes in Italy, during the early years of the bureau. But what's this about not being enough? On the face of it, that doesn't make sense. My particular division is in charge of tracing down every individual illegal birth that takes place, whether in Point Barrow, Alaska or Icá at the headwaters of the Amazon. I've been to both, by the way, false alarms in both cases. It's easier to hide a bomb in London or Peking, than it is back somewhere in the boondocks."

The fat man was nodding impatiently. "Yes. But tell me, friend David. What is the total population of the world?"

"It's down to three and a half billion, give or take a few millions."

"And does it not seem strange to you that of all this preposterous number you have but a dozen illegal births in a year's time?"

Dave Lehman hesitated. "We've got it down rather efficient, by now."

Zogbaum was nodding and scowling unhappily as he took up one report after another and scanned them, or at least went through the motions. The man would seem naked, Dave Lehman decided, without a report or graph in his pudgy hand.

He grumbled, "Almost ten years ago the Bureau of Population was inaugurated by the Reunited Nations. It had to be, eh? At last the warnings of our obscure English curate, this Robert Thomas Malthus, they must be heeded, eh? So dramatic measures must be taken, eh?"

Dave Lehman said, "Actually, the world has seldom taken up a crusade so nearly unanimously, so passionately, wholeheartedly. There's an element of inspiration, a feeling of humble awe at the ability of the human race to so surmount instinct, to bypass age-old religious beliefs when faced by an emergency of such magnitude."

The older man grunted. "You sound as though you are lecturing some woman's club, friend David."

His field man flushed, even through his dark complexion.

Zogbaum said, placatingly, "But perhaps you are correct, eh? However, David, something is wrong. We cannot expect such perfection in our operations." He

waggled a fat finger. "Very well, we pass emergency worldwide legislation. All nations participate. We declare a — what do you say, moratorium? — on all births for a period of ten years. Each woman, upon reaching the age of but eight must take her monthly ration of progestin hormones and estrogen hormone, which act upon the pituitary gland and eventually suppress the output of the ovary."

"A ridiculous age to begin — eight," Dave muttered.

The fat man shook his jowls. "No. It is astonishing, friend David, how early in life it is possible for some females to reproduce. We have records of children as young as six producing offspring."

His field man made a grimace of distaste.

"Yes, yes. I agree with you. However, let us face reality. But one example. Among the Moslems of such lands as Morocco, as they once called it, marriage at the age of eight was legal, religiously acceptable and quite common right up until practically the present."

"So," Dave conceded, "we start them on the contraceptive pills at the age of eight."

The older man was waggling a fat finger again. "For a decade, we decided, it was necessary to enforce our moratorium, to bring order from the chaos of exploding populations. At the termination of this period our machinery for selective breeding will be complete, eh? Would-be parents will be given priority ratings. Persons incapable of producing healthy offspring, in both the mental and physical sense will continue to be restrained."

Dave grimaced again. That phase of the bureau's work was another that bothered him. He couldn't help inwardly asking the age-old question: Who is to judge the judges? Who is to decide? A bit of doggerel Jerry Allen had once laughingly quoted him, came back:

Who's to police the police?
They who carry the lashes?
Who shrinks the psychiatrist's head?
Who hauls the janitor's ashes?

Very amusing, perhaps. But what is mentally healthy? In a mad world, the sane are misfits. In the old days, when there were still wars, the psychiatrists would sometimes declare a pacifist mentally unbalanced and send him to an institution.

What is physically healthy? Among the Caucasians a man less than five feet in stature is considered a physical misfit. In large areas of the Orient a man of six feet is a freak.

Zogbaum was saying, "But no matter how popular our crusade, no matter to what an extent our race has risen to meet its emergency, there should be more exceptions."

"At the beginning there were. We had millions of operatives policing the world, but there were hundreds of thousands trying to beat the rap. I personally have had to defuse . . . ."

"Defuse? Another term of you field men?"

"Sterilize. I personally have sterilized as many as fifty a day. But that was more than five years ago."

"Yes. That is what I mean. What has happened to this large number of would-be vaders of the law?"

"We sterilized a lot of them. Especially men, but women too. You know that."

The older man nodded heavily. "Yes. But there should be more. With three and a half billion, friend David, we should be having hundreds of thousands of would-be vaders of the population-control laws. I say something is wrong."

"We've been efficient, is all. So few have been successful that the others have been warned off."

"Very well. We will assume, for the moment, you are correct. But there is something still wrong. Where are the — what is your field man's term? — where are the sterilies?"

Dave Lehman stared at him. In truth, he had his moments of question about this aspect himself. But now he waited for the fat man to go on.

Zogbaum picked up one of his endless reports. "By Bureau of Population policy, a couple may have a child if they are willing to have it sterilized at birth. The child is not injured in any respect, eh? Except it will ever be incapable or reproducing. At the beginning of our decade of, ah, moratorium, many couples, especially those with no normal children whatsoever, decided upon sterilies. But behold this graph, friend David. There are currently being born as few sterilies as bombs. A mere handful on a planet of three and a half billion, eh?"

Dave said slowly, "There's been a trend against them. They're looked upon as freaks. Everybody knows that any child of less than ten is sterile. Besides, society isn't geared for them. This decade of moratorium on births has thrown a lot of institutions out of gear. Schools, for instance. Industries that used to be based on babies and young children. They aren't turning out their products. A child is automatically a misfit, for this ten-year period. There's no place for

him. Not even other kids to play with.

Parents soon found it out, and sterilies have become unpopular. Everybody's waiting to have a real child, when the decade is up and they can stand for priority."

The fat man shifted lardy shoulders in impatience. "Perhaps. I have heard that explanation before, of course. However, the number is far from enough. *Some* persons would want a child, no matter if he be a misfit or not. No, something is wrong, definitely wrong."

"What?" his assistant asked, becoming impatient of the constant repetition of the same old statement.

"That I do not know." The bureau head beamed at him, heavily. "And now I can forget about it for the nonce, eh? You say nonce? Very well. You are now taken off your regular duties and will devote full time to finding out, not where bombs are hidden, but why there are so few to be hidden."

"Oh, great," Dave said, coming to his feet. "My job is to look for something that really doesn't exist."

"Exactly," Helmut Zogbaum nodded, as though the other had made some brilliant statement conducive to the solving of their problem.

IV

Dave Lehman let himself into the apartment, shucked his coat and tossed it to the back of a chair, then loosened his Byronic cravat. He mused passingly on the incongruous qualities of men's clothing. How long had it been since there had been any really basic changes? Aside from an improvement in colors — they'd been on the grim side back in the Victorian through the pre-World War One periods — and an easing the tightness of collars and ties, men's clothes had changed little since the American Civil War.

On a day like this, when even Geneva and even facing on the lake could be brutally hot, Dave Lehman failed to appreciate long pants, jacket and tie. Face it, he told himself, man is sartorially his own worst enemy. He made his way to the auto-bar and dialed himself a whiskey and water. He remembered what Marcy had said about use of cereals for beverages and wondered how long it would be before present stocks of spirits ran out.

Well, it had just been a matter of time. Given the population explosion of the past couple of centuries and man simply couldn't afford to use cereals for drinks, nor even to feed the less productive meat animals. Chickens might be one thing. A pound of meat for two pounds of grain. But when it took the better part of ten pounds of grain to produce a pound of beef, then beef needs must go by the board. It had, actually, become prohibitively expensive for nine tenths of the world's population as far back as the mid-20th Century.

He took his glass to the window and stared idly out for a moment. A glint of light touched his eye, and he looked up at Satellite City, hovering like a tiny ball in the sky. He grunted deprecation. The last stronghold of undisciplined free enterprise.

He took his glass into the bedroom and decided to pack now for his trip, although, frankly, he didn't as yet know where he was going. Find out why there aren't more bombs and more sterilies, Zogbaum said. Oh, great. The big fat slob sits behind his desk and makes with orders like that. Find out why there aren't more bombs, he says.

On the face of it, it was a hush-hush project. Something was wrong, Zogbaum said. All right. Just let it get around the world that something was wrong with the Bureau of Population and the fat would be sizzling in the fire with a fine odor.

He brought out a suitcase, took a pull at his drink then sat it down and began to fetch shirts, socks and shorts from a drawer.

Jerry and Dorothy Allen, over in Mexico City. That was an idea. Dotty had worked with a king-size pharmaceutical outfit in Greater Washington before she had married Jerry. She'd had something to do with developing the diamines as a male contraceptive back in the early days. What had been the problem she'd received some sort of award for? Something like rearranging the diamine molecule so the drug prevented conception by stopping sperm production without the causing of nausea and rising blood pressure that had been side effects of the original diamine experiment. However, Dave was a layman when it came to such matters.

Yes, Jerry and Dorothy Allen. First, he could trust them. Second, he was in a position to make Jerry his assistant. Dotty then could draw on for technical aid.

He heard the front door open and close and looked at his watch.

When Marcy entered, looking for him, he kissed her briefly and said, "You're off early from the office, aren't you?" He returned to his packing.

"Yes," she said, her voice empty. "I quit. Are you off on another trip?"

He turned back to her. "Yes,

probably a rather long one, honey, sorry. What do you mean, quit?"

She sat down on the bed as though physically drained. "Suddenly I could bear the whole thing no longer. The whole purpose of the bureau's existence. Every instinct, every feminine instinct, just suddenly took over."

Dave tossed the clothing he had in his hands into the open bag and took up his glass. "I see," he said.

Marcy Kneedler looked into his face, and there was pleading in hers. "Darling, let's get married. Let's have a sterilie."

"I've told you, honey. It just isn't practical. There's no need for it."

"If we had a sterilie, you'd want it to have your name, wouldn't you?"

"To carry on the Lehman patronymic? A sterile child?"

Flushes came easy to her complexion. "You needn't be crude."

"I didn't mean to be. Marriage simply isn't called for, Marcy."

She went back to the escape room and when she returned it was with a drink of her own. Dave had turned back to his packing.

Marcy said, "Darling, I've been making decisions today. One of them is to quit my job with the bureau. The other is to come to a definite understanding with you."

"And what does that mean?"

"If you don't plan to marry me, Dave, don't bother to return here from your trip."

There was hurt in his dark eyes. "I see." Then, "It's been a long time, honey."

"Too long. I'm not getting any younger, Dave. I want . . . more of a feeling of permanency, I dare say. I want a child. Even a sterilie, if that's all I can have. But I want a child. And . . . and a man I *know* is mine."

"And you'll know that because there's a ring on your finger?" he said bitterly.

She looked at him without answer.

He held up his hands in a gesture of resignation. "All right, honey. No more evasions." He sat down on the bed where she had been only moments before. "Next year the decade of moratorium on births will be over. The world will turn to a highly planned, thoroughly organized system of population control. You will have one of the highest priorities, I am sure. You are in perfect health, you have never had a child."

She said quickly, earnestly, "Both of us, darling . . ."

He shook his head. He took a deep breath. "Remember when the Reunited Nations were first established. The end of the Cold War? The end of all war — knock on wood? The potential end of physical want? Remember the enthusiasm? Some of it ridiculous, extreme enthusiasm. The way we joined up with this, that and the other outfit and dashed off in all directions?"

He looked back in time and snorted self-deprecation. "I guess it was something similar to the Crusade fever in Europe back in the Middle Ages. Or perhaps the initial enthusiasm for the so-called Great Leap Forward in China — before it fell on its face. At any rate, we all felt it."

Marcy Kneedler was frowning. "What in the world are you talking about?"

He took a deep breath again. "Marcy, next year you'll be eligible to have a child."

"So will you!"

"No."

She stared at him.

He said slowly, "That initial enthusiasm. One of the biggest problems confronting the world was the population explosion. Very well, I was one of the earliest volunteers for permanent sterilization. There were some fifty million men in all."

He grunted self-deprecation. "It affects you not at all, of course, in any respect save actual reproduction. Your sex life is quite normal. Everything is quite the same. Except . . . ."

"Oh, Dave!"

He slammed his suitcase shut. "So, honey, so long as *nobody* could have children, I felt I wasn't robbing you by our living together. But our relationship can't be a permanent one. You want and need children. I simply can't have them."

Dave walked to the door and she stared after him.

"Good-bye, honey," he said.

"Good-bye." So softly he could hardly hear.

This time, he hadn't warned Jerome Allen of his coming. Instead, he stood before the door of the other's Old Mexico City apartment, located in the Chapultepec Park area and flicked the identity panel alive.

His long-time friend came charging to meet him, all beams, "Zoroaster, Dave! You back?" Jerry shook hands with even more enthusiasm than his immediate superior could have expected. "Don't tell me there's another bomb scare in Mexico again. The second one in less than two years. We've been getting lazy through lack of work."

He led the bureau representative from Geneva, back into the apartment's escape room.

Dave said, "Hello, Dorothy. Sorry I missed the dinner invitation last week."

He could see why Jerry had been so enthusiastic about his ar-

rival. From the taut expression on Dorothy Allen's face, they'd been having a quarrel before his appearance broke it up. She was a tiny woman, and overly thin, so much that only her characteristic enthusiasm and animation projected her as attractive.

She rose from her chair to approach him and let him kiss her cheek. "You arrived just in time to keep me from killing this cloddy," she said.

"Killing's too good for him," Dave Lehman told her.

Jerry ignored that. "How about a drink, my slave-driving friend?"

Dave sank into a chair and said suspiciously, "Of what?"

"Stone-age tequila, what else?"

"Made of what, prehistoric seaweed?"

"Ah, ha," Jerry said. "Haven't learned to roll with the blow, huh? Made of maguey plant, by the way of pulque, my whiskey-loving friend. Central Production has phased out using cereals but hasn't gotten around to maguey, which isn't really very edible and grows out in the deserts. Switch to tequila, chum-pal."

"I'll try it," Dave said.

Jerry went to dial the drinks.

Dorothy Allen sat down across from the visitor. "Another bomb in Mexico City?" Dave was surprised to detect the bitter note in her words.

He shook his head. "No. I'll tell you about it when Jerry gets back." He grimaced false amusement. "In fact, that seems to be our trouble. Our division isn't finding enough bombs. Zogbaum smells a rat."

She said, the bitterness still there, "He's afraid the poor vaders have figured out some method of avoiding persecution. Is that it?"

Dave Lehman eyed her. Jerry had been right, the last time he had seen the bureau's Mexico City representative. Dotty Allen was on the neurotically frustrated side. He wondered, passingly, how many women there were in the world thus frustrated. Too many, undoubtedly.

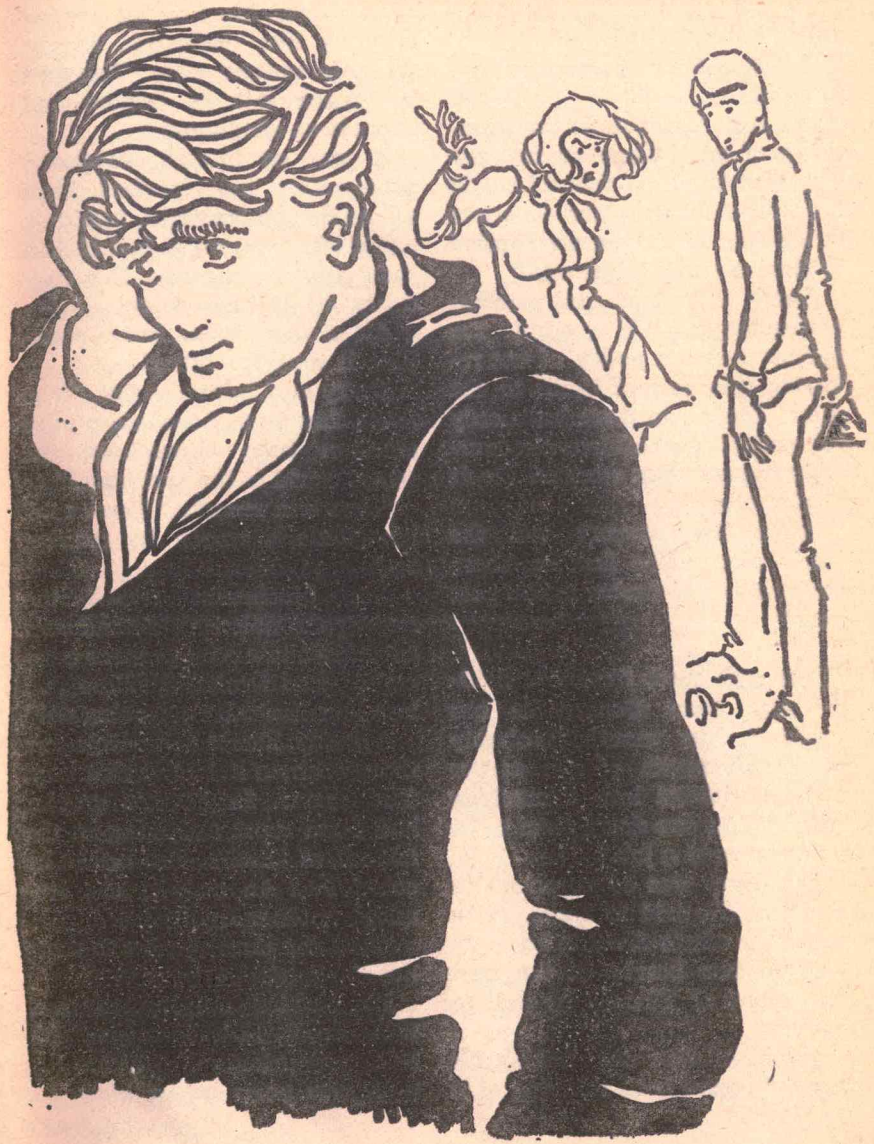
"Perhaps," he said cautiously.

Jerry said from the door, bearing three tall glasses and grinning at his friend, "Perhaps what? Here try Mexico's contribution to the whiskey shortage."

Dave took one of the drinks. "We might as well get down to it. I've picked you two to give me a hand on a special assignment Zogbaum's given me."

Dotty said tightly, "I have no desire to participate in tracking down poor unfortunates whose only crime is to bring a child into the world."

Jerry's grin fell off, and he lifted his eyes to the ceiling in an exaggeration of despair. "Holy Zoroaster!" he protested.



Dave sipped at the fiery tequila while looking at her thoughtfully. "That's not my assignment, Dorothy."

The two Allens waited for him to go on.

He said, "Zogbaum's imagination is at work. He wants to know why that bomb we found here in the United States of the Americas is the first since one we flushed in Greece two months ago."

Dotty looked at him uncomprehendingly. "Of course, the bureau makes a policy of not releasing this sort of thing to the press. You mean there have only been two illegal children discovered in the past two months? Don't be ridiculous."

"And that doesn't tell the whole story. The fact is, there have only been twelve in the past year."

Her eyes went from the fieldman from Geneva to her husband. Her mouth, probably as an aftermath of the earlier quarrel, twisted into a mocking sneer. "You two don't seem to be doing so good a job."

But Jerry was as surprised as she was. He said to Dave, "You mean the whole division has only defused two bombs in the past two months? There'll be hell to pay."

Dave Lehman was shaking his head. "You're both thinking of it from the wrong angle. The bureau, and our division, is as efficient as ever. More so. Everything is going like clockwork. Everything is routine now. The last bottleneck was in Borneo and that's been eliminated."

It was as though, suddenly, precognition had touched them all, as though foresight, intuition, call it what you must, had flicked them with a fingertip. For suddenly all of them knew.

All of them knew, but humanlike, it must be talked out.

Dotty said, her voice flat, "You mean there have been only twelve children born throughout the whole world in the past year?"

"Fourteen months," Dave said, his stomach empty in growing fear.

The biochemist wiped the moist palm of her right hand over her mouth in a gesture more masculine than feminine. "How . . . how long has this been going on?"

Actually, David Lehman hadn't thought about it. Not in that way. The charts, Zogbaum's graphs, had been most satisfying in the fall off of bombs. But before he could find an answer, she had asked another question.

"And the same applies to sterilies?"

He nodded dumbly to that, then finally found words. "It's been going down steeply for . . . well, five years or so. Now, for

all practical purposes there just are no more bombs, nor sterilies, for that matter."

Dotty Allen's voice was the faintest of whispers. "Of what sex were the last few?"

Jerry and Dave were both staring at her, in shock now. The implications were obvious. Dave ran his tongue over his lips, without effect; there was no moisture in his mouth. "The last two were boys. I . . . I'd have to check back about the others."

Jerry came to his feet and went into the other room to return with a full bottle of tequila. He sloshed some, without bothering to offer ice or mixer, into all of their glasses. He said, "What . . . what could have gone wrong?"

Dotty, disbelief trying to break through, said, "How long has it been going, the way you said? *Everything is going like clockwork. Everything routine?*"

"For . . . years," Dave growled, as though defensively.

"HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN SINCE COMPETENT SCIENTISTS HAVE CHECKED THE EFFECT OF THE CONTRACEPTIVES?" she screamed.

He could only shake his head.

She was a fury! She was on her feet, screaming at them, cursing them, reviling them.

Dave came to his feet too, a hand forward, palm up, as though in supplication.

There was a break in her strained voice, and then her words meant nothing, and she mewed gibberish. When Jerry tried to approach, she clawed at him.

Dave Lehman stumbled toward the door, leaving them.

VI

Marcy Kneedler met him at the entrance of the apartment they had shared.

She said, "I thought you weren't coming back, Dave."

"Things have changed."

She hesitated, then turned and headed back for the escape room he knew so well but had expected never to see again. She stood by a window, as though not wishing to look at him, and stared out over the lake. The lake with its superlative villas along its edge, its dotting of sailing and motor craft, in the far distance the mountains of Switzerland. Lake Geneva, one of the world's most beautiful.

Marcy said, "I have no desire to hurt you, Dave."

"Of course not, honey."

She had winced at the endearment. She said, "But you were correct. I want a child, Dave. I *must* have a child."

His dark eyes were empty. And his voice, too, when he said, If you still want marriage, honey . . ."

She turned to him pleadingly. "You didn't listen. Dave, all my instincts — I'm a woman, Dave."

He nodded. "Sit down, honey. I've got something to tell you. Something you mustn't repeat. Not yet, at least."

She deliberately chose a straight chair, rather than taking a place next to him on the couch they had so often shared. She deliberately kept her attitude cool.

Dave said, "Do you remember my mentioning, the last time we met, the enthusiasm of the first years of the Reunited Nations, and the solving of most international problems? How we all burst into the new world as though it was a crusade, a new flowering of man's greatest ambitions?"

Marcy nodded, without comment.

"We joined this, we joined that. We threw our full resources into a hundred projects that had to be solved — we thought — immediately. Instead of billions spent on nuclear arms, guided missiles, armies and such wastes of the past, we threw our energies into defeating cancer, hunger, insecurity, illiteracy."

He took breath. "There's one difficulty with such crash programs, whether under a democracy or a dictatorship. In fact, I imagine the old-time dictators, Napoleon, Stalin, Hitler, Mao must have all come up against it. To maintain such enthusiasm there must be continual new goals, new crusades, new frontiers. And in these new challenges your crusaders tend to forget the enthusiasm of last year. It loses its potency in the new crash programs."

"What on earth is your point, Dave."

"Our Bureau of Population. It was one of the early crusades, the conquest of the population explosion. First, and heaven help us, one of the most successful. But the following year it was illiteracy. No hamlet so remote, no Eskimo in his igloo, but must needs be sought out and brought the alphabet. And the following year, the great diseases."

"What on *earth* are you getting at?"

He grunted self-contempt. "The bureau, though it still effected every man and woman on earth, became old hat. Routine. The problem had been solved, we thought. All that was needed was time and the efforts of those whose task it was to administer the program. People like you and me, honey."

He looked up into her face. "They pulled off our research people, our technicians, such as Dorothy Allen. And all we had to do was enforce the decade of ban on new births, and to see that

those who failed to conform were dealt with and the children — we called them bombs, heaven help us — sterilized. Everybody had to conform, otherwise, we figured no one would."

Dave said wearily, "Did you ever read about the thalidomide scandal, back in the 1960's?"

She shook her head.

"It was a sleeping-pill tranquilizer, supposedly checked out completely by the drug firms. Its deadly properties weren't brought to light until more than three thousand babies had died in West Germany alone, and three thousand more had been born with grotesque malformations."

"You mean —"

He wound it up, forgetting most of the explanation he had planned. "Honey," he said, "there's no reason now why we can't be married, if you still wish."

"But . . . but you said you were sterile."

"So are you."

The silence remained unbroken while she stared at him for long, long horrified moments.

At last she was able to say, "You mean, *everybody* is sterile?"

He shook his head in misery. "We don't know. We've been giving our capsules to every female over eight for the past nine and a half years. When a new child came to that age, her dosage was begun. Something went wrong, we don't know what. Possibly it's not too important at this stage. Suffice that something went wrong. The effect has become practically one hundred per cent, with all females of the species. In the past fourteen months, eleven children — we thought it was twelve, but we were being optimistic — were born. Two of them female."

She said, hoarsely, "What happened to them?"

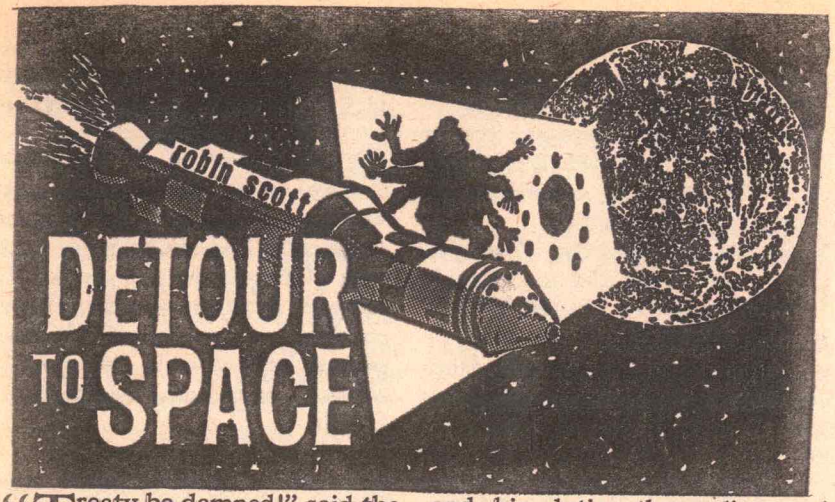
"We — the term was — defused them. We sterilized them."

She gave a short, hysterical laugh, and the only thing that came to her tongue was ludicrous. "Has it occurred to you, darling, that we're *both* out of work? That there will no longer be a Bureau of Population?"

Dave shook his head. "No, you're wrong there. A new crash program, Marcy. Possibly man's comeback would have been easier if we'd had that nuclear war we were afraid of for so long. We did it easier, but possibly even more thoroughly than the warhead bearing missiles would have."

"You see, the Bureau of Population continues, but we're not looking for bombs to defuse any more. We're looking for Eve."

— MACK REYNOLDS



"Treaty be damned!" said the general. "You know as well as I do them Sovs can't be trusted any more'n badger in a hen house!"

The general liked to affect rough, country talk. He thought it gave him an aura of masculinity, like his well chewed cigar and the fifty-mission crush on his blue and silver cap. And he had felt more need to assert his masculinity in the months since he had been forced to trade the raw concrete and corrugated iron of his Da Nang ready-room for the polished marble and walnut of the State Department's Inter-Agency Ad-Hoc Committee on Space. Not very deep inside, the general thought everyone in Washington outside the Pentagon was either a leftist or a homosexual, or both. Washington depressed him; the State Department and his duties there distressed him. Nothing upset him as much as the regular weekly confrontation with the bland smoothness of the senior old-school diplomat who chaired the Committee.

The old-school diplomat, a tubular gray person with the contrived look of distinction of a man in a whiskey ad, said nothing. This was a fight between the Air Force and NASA, and he could stay clear. He had enjoyed a long and successful career in the Foreign Service by avoiding controversy. He had been well served by his vast capacity for apathy, particularly in matters technical, such as the case at hand.

Nagorski, the man from NASA, was a technician, a confident young Ph.D. with too much black hair and pale eyes behind rimless spectacles who was convinced that every problem had a solution, every conflict a resolution. Logic and technical grasp had seen him through every controversy before he had come to Washington from one of the big R & D enterprises on the West Coast. He still had not quite grasped why these traits so regularly failed him now, and he had yet to develop the political wiles to replace them.

He peered near-sightedly around the oval table and then fixed his gaze somewhere around its center. "Look, General," he said, "even if you don't believe the Soviets are honoring the Weapons in Space Treaty, consider the following facts: first, number 3475 has an orbital inclination of 87 degrees. Our best calculations indicate the Soviets *could* hit that orbit from, say, Plesetsk. But they've never done it before."

"The Chinese Reds never fired a fusion device either," interrupted the general, "until last week, that is."

"Second," continued the NASA man, "the altitude of 3475 puts it way too high for a reconnaissance satellite. It can't be a commo satellite. So the question remains, if it is a Soviet vehicle, what's it for?"

"For Chrissakes," said the general with red-faced impatience, turning to appeal the absurdity of the question to the dozen men at the table. None of whose rank was equal to that of the general's. All grinned in conspiratorial contempt for the NASA man's naivete.

"Third," continued Nagorski, aware that he was wasting his time but incapable of doing anything about it, "imagery from the Nunn-Bakers and from high-resolution arrays at Echo Station indicate that number 3475 is not less than 6.3 feet long and not more than 6.5 long. It has a probable diameter of 3.5 feet. Optical brightness is -.74 on the Allen scale and is electronically silent. We know of no Soviet hardware, no second stage, tankage, warhead, re-entry vehicle or satellite that fits those characteristics."

The general marshaled his troops with a sweep of the head and ground his cigar in the ash tray with exaggerated force. "Look here!" he exploded. "This is all crap! We got us an unidentified satellite number 3475 in the catalogue. It shows up three days ago, and we can't correlate it with any of our stuff. It ain't tumbling and it's close enough to a regular Plesetsk orbit to satisfy *me* the Reds put it up there, and you tell me it doesn't match up with any known Sov hardware. Of course it doesn't! Man, they've put a goddamn orbital bomb up there! And if we let 'em get away with

it, they'll put another one up there, and another, and then we'll all be in a goddamn sling!"

The old-school diplomat was weary of the argument. When the general subsided, he held up his hand. "Gentlemen," he said, "I've been listening to this debate for over an hour and a half, and it appears to me we have no agreement in prospect. You, General Brody — " the diplomat nodded toward the cloud of smoke from a fresh cigar that all but obscured the fifty-mission crush — "seem convinced that the Soviet Union has launched the first in a series of orbital bombs, which I quite agree would be a most serious development."

Hillyard, the diplomat, half turned in his chair to face the man from NASA. "You, Mr. Nagorski, are not persuaded of this argument and feel, as I confess I do, that the Soviet Union would be unlikely to risk a breach of the Weapons in Space Treaty by taking such a step. I suspect your position is also reinforced by your fear that employment of resources to investigate number 3475 as the Air Force proposes would seriously delay progress in the Apollo program."

The man from NASA nodded, his faint eyes unfocused. The general removed his cigar from its socket, ready to speak.

"Still," said the diplomat, his hand raised to fend off interruption, "we have been convened to produce a recommendation for the President . . . ."

"Motion!" said the general, his eyes hard.

The diplomat left unfinished his sentence, cleared his throat and read from the sheet before him. "The motion is: 'This panel recommends that unidentified satellite number 3475 not be listed in the February, 1968, *Satellite Situation Report,* and that NASA and the Air Force be directed to launch an Apollo spacecraft to rendezvous with and inspect unknown satellite number 3475.' May I see a show of hands? Those in favor?"

Nine hands shot up.

"Those opposed?"

The NASA man and his assistant raised their hands. Nagorski had lost.

But he was beginning to learn something. "Mr. Chairman," he said. "I would like to make my dissent a matter of record."

"I will footnote it in the minutes," said Hillyard.

The Flight Communicator was bone tired. Dangerously so, he thought, and shook his head to clear his mind. There had been six weeks of day and night labor to prepare the special Apollo launch. The move to Vandenburg from the more familiar facilities at the Cape — necessary for a safe launch into near-polar orbit — had strained every resource of every agency involved. It was a wonder that there had been no serious errors. But the launch had gone well, and now, six hours into flight, the spacecraft was approaching its rendezvous point with 3475.

The Flight Communicator shook off his weariness and concentrated on the screen before him and on the little world of crackling sound in his earphones. At a signal from the plotting room, he thumbed his microphone to life and spoke: "Apollo 3. this is Apollo control. Plot shows you ready for visual acquisition."

The earphones sang in his head, and then a voice, thin and harsh: "Ah-roger. Report visaul acquisition. Closing at three-five. Range three miles."

"Ah-roger," said the Flight Communicator. He was very happy the flight was secret. There would be no network coverage, no demand on him to satisfy the NASA PR men and the public hunger for the bullring spectacle of men risking their lives for purposes only dimly understood.

"Range one mile and closing at two zero," crackled the earphones.

"Ah-roger."

A red light glowed on the Flight Communicator's console. A command message from the Air Force Flight Controller had been recorded for him. He depressed a toggle, and a clear, gruff voice boomed in his earphones. "Tell Michelson to start talking as soon as he can see anything and to keep talking. The Soviets just might have booby-trapped that damn thing, and we want every scrap of info we can get. Tell him we want Connell to start talking when he commences EVA and not to stop. Tell him to get Hirsch hot on those cameras. And tell him — " there was muffled conversation in the background — "tell him to warn Connell again."

The Flight Communicator switched channels and delivered his message. There was silence for a while, and the Flight Communicator allowed himself the luxury of a cigarette.

His earphones crackled. "Rendezvous! Range 60 feet and steady. Preparing for EVA."

"Ah-roger, Apollo 3. Commence commentary."

"Ah-roger, Apollo control." Michelson was a trained communicator. His training and a series of high and low-pass filters removed most of the emotion from his voice, but the Flight Communicator could detect some of the excitement Michelson felt. His earphones sang their secret song for a moment, the movements of a billion electrons danc-

ing to their own pace. Then the commentary began.

"EVA has commenced. Hatch open. Hirsch is shooting alternately with the hundred millimeter and the Haselblad. Good view of 3475. A real weirdo. Cylindrical, with a lot of jelly-looking gunk on it. Green stuff. Kind of shredded or torn in places. Like some kind of thick coating that got messed up. Don't see how it got up through the atmosphere. Unless maybe shrouding . . . real weirdo. Overall color greenish-black. No markings. No antennae. No propulsion visible. Just smooth all over except for that green stuff. No hatches. No thrusters. How's it maintain an attitude? Connell is out. Tether looks good. He is approaching 3475. Report Jim. Report Jim."

Another voice, with even fewer highs and lows, took up the commentary. "Exit okay. Pack okay. Thrusters okay. Oxy four-seven. Temperature eight-eight and stable. Tether clear. 'Bout half-way there. Green stuff looks sticky, like Jello. No hatches. No markings. Green jelly on brownish-black. Can't see any rockets at all from this end. No attitude control. How's the bastard maintain attitude? Closing slowly. Six feet and thrusting. Contact!"

Two voices chattered each other into intelligibility in the Flight Communicator's earphones. "Jim! You okay? . . . green stuff . . . rubbery . . . pretty solid . . . hold on to . . . tether holding . . . okay, okay, all right."

There was a moment of soft electronic singing. "Apollo Control, this is Apollo 3. Connell okay. Spin stabilized. He's on 3475 and he's okay."

"Ah-roger, Apollo 3," said the Flight Communicator, his voice professionally emotionless.

Connell resumed his commentary. "I'm okay, Ed. Give me a little thrust. We've got some way on; that tether is going to tighten up on me. Okay. Okay. Good. You're closing slightly, but we've got time. Greenish stuff looks like it covered everything once. But it's torn in a lot of places. Pebbles stuck in it. Glassy. It's a couple of inches thick, but there're some pebbles near the surface. I'll see if I can't dig a couple out. Little depression here. Just back of the near end. Man's hand ought to fit it. Give me a handhold. HEY!"

There was a gabble of voices, Connell's and Michelson's. Connell's was high-pitched in shock as Michelson subsided: ". . . saw anything like it . . . hand in the depression and this panel slid up . . . maybe two by three . . . lighted screen with pictures . . . hell, I don't know . . . never saw . . . yeah! Drawings . . . nine dots around it, around the circle in the middle . . . funny looking thing like an ape with too many arms . . . rows and rows of little figures, numbers maybe . . . got the little 35 mm . . . whole magazine full . . ."

The red light on the Flight Communicator's console blinked furiously, but the Flight Communicator was too stunned to acknowledge it. For a second his tired mind was totally preoccupied with trying to recall when and where he had last eaten lamb chops, with mint jelly. There was new silence from Apollo 3.

Then Michelson broke it with a quieter order: "Okay, Jim. Come on back in."

Curious the flow of events, thought the old-school diplomat. Chairman again in the same meeting. Same disputants; basically the same issue. A sense of *deja vu* came over him as the NASA man droned on. He wished he were in his Georgetown garden weeding the begonias or engaged in a good, solid staff study for the Policy Planning Group. The NASA man's voice trailed off.

"Crap!" said the general. "We can't let them Sovs get to the moon first. We've got to get on with Apollo. Too much delay already. Why, if they beat us there, they'd have a launch platform that'd . . . ."

This time it was the NASA man who interrupted. He was surer of himself. He'd learned some lessons. And he had the backing there, in that room, that day. "Forget it, General. Here are the facts. First, it's pretty clear we've got one of the greatest scientific finds of the century. Those pebbles Connell brought back are tektites, which pretty well proves the extra-terrestrial nature of 3475. Second, the analysts are getting a little sense out of the pictographs Connell photographed. They haven't cracked the thing yet, but they've got enough to know 3475 was *sent* here from somewhere. Third, as far as the Soviets are concerned, you were wrong before, General Brody, and you're wrong this time. We have no evidence the Soviets are ahead of us. No rendezvous experience worth speaking of. No practice in transfer orbits. No real improvement on the old Vostok-Voskhod series."

"Nuts," said the general, his cigar glowing like an after-burner. "With them big boosters they got, they don't need any frills."

"In any case, think of the scientific payoff in bringing 3475 down! A whole alien science handed to us as a gift!"

"It'll wait," said the general. "It ain't going anywhere."

The diplomat tuned the argument out again. He had heard it before. He looked around the

table. There weren't very many uniforms this time. The vote would be different. For the first time it struck him that the President chose his ad hoc committee members in accordance with decisions he had already reached. He was surprised at himself, that he had not realized it before, and a little saddened. Of course, he thought. How stupid of me.

The NASA man and the general subsided, the one to draw careful circles on his yellow scratch pad, the other to fire up a new cigar. The diplomat rose from his introspection and said: "Gentlemen, we are again at an impasse. I can appreciate and share Mr. Nagorski's excitement at the prospect of acquiring the alien device as quickly as possible."

Nagorski drew a large, heavy cross in one of his circles.

"At the same time," continued the diplomat, "I can appreciate General Brody's concern that the Apollo program will be seriously delayed, again by the commitment of resources to the recovery of 3475. I am not empowered to adjudicate between these two positions, but we are charged with bringing forward a recommendation to the President, and . . . ."

"Motion!" said the NASA man, his pale eyes strangely hard.

The diplomat left unfinished his sentence, cleared his throat, and read from the sheet before him. "The NASA motion is: 'This panel recommends that no public disclosure be made of the unusual nature of satellite number 3475, that it not be listed in the May, 1968, *Satellite Situation Report*, and that NASA and the Air Force be directed to proceed with all dispatch to launch two Apollo spacecraft, one for crew and one adapted as a reentry vehicle to contain 3475, in order to rendezvous with and recover number 3475.' May I see a show of hands? Those in favor?"

Nine hands shot up.

"Those opposed?"

The general crushed his cigar as if it were the Washington Monument and thrust his hand up in a vulgar gesture. "This is a bunch of crap, Hillyard, and I goddam want it in writing."

"I will footnote your dissent in the minutes," said the old-school diplomat.

In a small but elaborately instrumented bunker two *versts* south of launch complex B at Plesetsk, Colonel Yuri Sergevitch Nikolaev sat anxiously before a high-speed teleprinter linking the bunker with the Soviet Union's net of clandestine detection stations. The ventilator over his head brought in cool June night air, and he shivered. He had spent most of his waking hours for the

past two years in that bunker, and he had often had occasion to curse the ventilating system. Now, however, the tremor in his thick, muscular frame came more from excitement than chill. The payoff to all his plans, his hopes for advancement, must come soon, if it was to come at all. He found the waiting almost intolerable, and he pulled nervously at a thick, brown forelock.

The teletype chattered. At 300 words a minute, it could fill a page in 40 seconds. It clacked for much less than that time:

FROM: CENTRAL DETECTION

TO: SPECIAL GROUP PLESETSK

BEGIN. TELLING REPORT RECEIVED CALIFORNIA OFF-SHORE DETECTOR: "TWO APOLLOS LAUNCHED 271045Z and 271110Z. PRELIM INTERCEPT INDICATES ORBITAL PLANE 87.2 DEGREES. TRACKING." END.

Colonel Nikolaev whooped, tore the blue teletype paper from its spool, and ran to the closed door at one end of the bunker. He pounded and shouted. "General! Comrade General! We did it! They did it! They've launched two Apollos!"

The door opened, and General Koniev appeared, his tunic unbuttoned to free his ample belly, his eyes sleepy but joyful. He took the blue paper and read. His smile broadened across his plump cheeks, and he forgot rank long enough to throw one arm around the colonel's shoulder and to kiss him wetly on his left cheek. "Well, Yuri Sergevitch, you have done it! I congratulate you. Now we must send our little friend its destruct signal, inform Moscow, and pass our congratulations on to the linguists and the designers."

The general broke his embrace, backed off, and did a quick one-step of happiness. "This will mean the Order of Lenin, Yuri Sergevitch. For both of us." He danced into his room, pulled a bottle of slivovitz from the sideboard and garnered two glasses. As he poured, he asked: "How much time do you calculate, Yuri Sergevitch?"

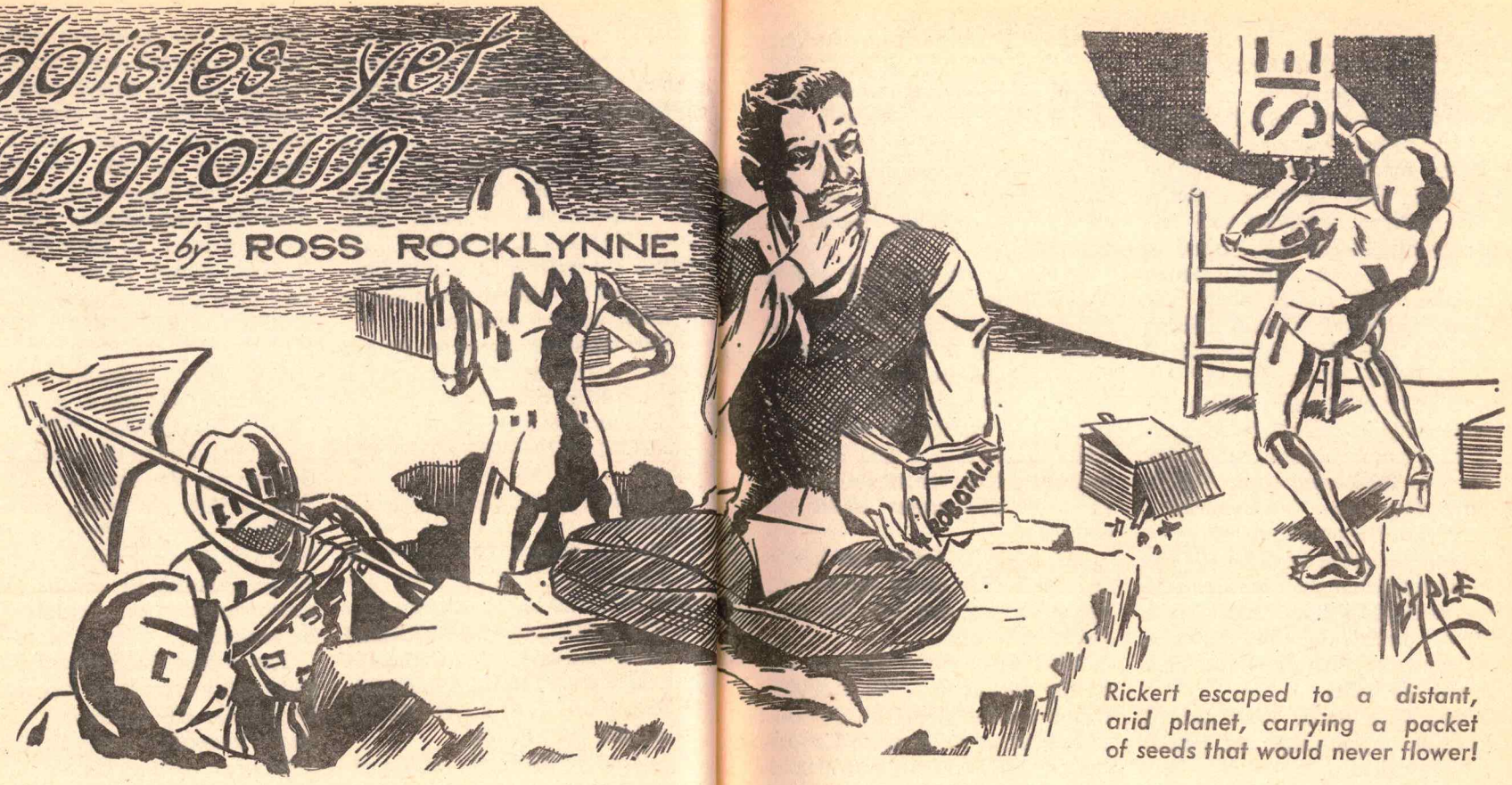
The colonel took the proffered glass and warmed it a moment in his hands. His black eyes sparkled beneath arched brows. "They lost at least six months on the first flight. With two more Apollos and moving all the launch gear to California, it's at least another year. At least a year and a half, Comrade General."

"Drink, Yuri Sergevitch," said the general. They touched glasses. "Drink," said the general, his voice pitched high with triumph, "to a Russian moon!"

— ROBIN SCOTT

daisies yet ungrown

by ROSS ROCKLYNNE



Rickert escaped to a distant, arid planet, carrying a packet of seeds that would never flower!

Holing up for a good long stay on a black planet buried deep in the Great Split is not the easiest of tasks. Rickert nonetheless anchored his ship, stolen from the bombed-out Sears-Roebuck lot, and then set about the business of unloading it, just as God told him to.

His mechano-helpers, a suborder of Robots, were not much help at first, because they didn't understand everything they should. Since he in turn didn't understand the rows of buttons which stuck out from their whitely glowing chests, everytime they were unable to complete a task, he had to learn to talk to them.

Laboriously, he leafed through the book of Robotalk. Laboriously, as he chewed on his beard, he studied the sounds that would convey his orders. The mechs were programmed for only seven sounds. Combining these endlessly would tell them each thing they were to understand.

Ee, ay, ai, o, oo, ll (y), and *w (oouh).* If the mechano-helpers had been a more expensive breed, they would have been able to understand 36 different sounds, which meant that one could talk to them in Indo-Martian, which was the flippant name philologists gave to New Mars English. Indo-Martian was not a difficult tongue, but was about as basic as any tongue could be. But these mechano-helpers would react only to this all-vowel lingo.

"Lleyawo," said Rickert in his first attempt to give the mechano-helpers a spoken order.

The mechano-helper, he spoke to, understood, but so did all the other mechano-helpers. They dropped what they were doing with various crashings and tinklings and booms and rushed to pick up the crate. They crashed together and reeled back into sitting positions, innards tinkling with the plaintive distress signal which meant, "I am nulled."

"Oh, dratted mechano-helpers," snarled Rickert and kicked them in their a-null buttons, which got them on their feet again. Obediently they went back to those tasks that they understood.

Looking in the manual, Rickert discovered that each of the mechs was assigned a consonental name. If he had said, for instance, "LleyawoV," only V would have heard the order.

The five mechs were named, in order of poundage and intelligence, *vrdmt*.

That was somebody's joke, but it was all right, because it was a relief to swear at these creatures. He had to have somebody to swear at, didn't he? Certainly he did, being all alone, with not a star in the sky, with no sun, no moon, *nothing* — he was all alone in the Great Split, 350,000 trillion light-years from home.

Yes, 350,000 trillion was the figure, if he'd heard God aright.

"Hey, you verdammt critters," yelled Rickert at a time later on when his house was set up and everything was unloaded from the ship and his mechs were standing around unoccupied.

It was an experiment, and it worked out well. The mechs plunged toward him, all three and a half tons of them. He stood his ground, wondering if the manual might be wrong and he would be crushed to death. No such luck. They ringed him, a wall of metal through which the slings and arrows of misfortune could not penetrate.

"That's all, verdammt beasties," and they stood against the house looking out into the dead darkness.

After three days, Rickert was pretty well settled. His Babbling Brook was installed; his Chemical Tree was growing well (or pretending to), and he had a mini-Sun flooding the grounds with Genuine Earth Daylight from sixty feet up. The Sears-Roebuck people were mighty good at this sort of thing and had even doubled up and given him Genuine Earth Moonlight; all he had to do was turn off the mini-Sun, and that was Moon enough in its afterglow, although not really genuine.

Rickert decided to explore his planet, which he named Rickert, and with plucky pride set off into the darkness, followed by his stalwart mechano-helpers.

"Eelloweo verdammt," he would cry, and all the mechs would turn on their floodlights.

"AiaiooooyaiweeD," and D would hurry up and help Rickert across a twenty-foot gorge.

It was an eerie procession across the surface of the planet Rickert. Seeing him ringed by his five metal men and bawling out orders like a white bwana on safari, these orders echoing and re-echoing against cliffsides and the whole eerie procession globed over with the glow of floodlights, one would have expected that a giant undertaking was afoot. Actually, nothing was happening.

That was the thing that finally got Rickert. *Nothing was happening.* The thought chilled him so that he slowed down from his giant stride like a machine running down, and he squatted to his haunches, looking at the dead metal ground and tracing a design on it with his finger.

There just wasn't anything here.

He looked up. You couldn't even call it a sky. Because it all ended exactly where the floodlights ended.

"Ailloweo verdammt," muttered Rickert.

The floodlights then went out. That's when Rickert felt it.

Until then, until this desolate moment came, away from his camp, he did not know what spiritual emptiness was. The divine spark did not occur in these wastes. The incredible fact was that God had not had time to get out here yet.

For Rickert was religious, give him credit for that. He had always felt the presence of the One. Whenever he could he had gone to church. But most often he couldn't — so what? Church was wherever you happened to be. You felt the Presence. You made your silent and almost unformulated prayer, in the dark closet of your mind, the way the Bible told you to. Then you relaxed and turned yourself over to some Higher Power.

For Rickert it worked. He felt that God would always be with him.

But here, on the planet Rickert, with the solid, the soaring, the endless chunks of dead darkness above him for 350,000 trillion light-years, a terrible fright took hold of him.

"Our Father, Who art in Heaven — "

What Heaven? Where was it?

"— hallowed be Thy Name —"

So what is Your name?

Rickert listened. One thing he

had discovered, God hummed inside you. Never had the hum sounded louder than when he had decided to plunge into the Great Split, that terrible rent in space that the rupture bombs made. Never had he listened harder. That was the rule, to listen hard to the hum. If you listened to the hum, you might hear almost anything.

"I Am the One," the hum might say. "I Am Yahweh."

If you listened. But you had to listen good.

"I Am," the hum might say.

But here, on the planet Rickert in dead night 350,000 trillion light-years from home, there was no hum.

Rickert listened and shook his head and beat his ears. He would beat his brains out, he thought. Just the thought of the word "home" made him want to weep and scream. Maybe he should tell himself what the word "home" meant.

He leaped from his squatting position, throwing his arms upward with his fingers clawed as if he would draw God to him from some immeasurable distance. He blubbered a little, and he remembered a little about the War.

Oh, God, the War!

He felt morally sure he was right. Hadn't he consulted with the Presence? Most certainly he had. And the Presence, call it God if you want to — the Presence had hummed inside his head and said plain as day,

"Go to the ends of the universe."

That's what Rickert did. God directed him through the Great Split, out of the War.

And God wasn't here!

What more frightening thing could happen to a man who was used to turning his life over to the Divine Force?

Rickert sat down on the planet Rickert, his head on his knees, and moaned within himself and tried to find some excuse for living. The planet Rickert wasn't going to kill him, that was for sure, because the planet Rickert had plenty of internal heat which it radiated out, and it had air and soft breezes. How fortunate this was. Yahweh had given him a planet that wouldn't kill him.

Rickert stumbled erect, his very wide eyes reflecting the tiny beams leaking from the interior mechanisms of his silent mechs. There was no place to go, nothing to do on this dead planet. He would go back to camp. Maybe Yahweh would get here pretty soon.

His mini-Sun appeared to be jumping toward him and his mechs; it looked like a real Sun pendant in spotless night. Its

benevolent glow fooled him for awhile; maybe, after all, God was already here. He got a blanket from stores and went out and sunned himself. But soon his giant, moveless lamp began to unsettle his nerves.

Rickert wanted to scream.

He arose and ran vigorously about the compound. He splashed with enforced glee through the Babbling Brook. He climbed halfway up the Chemical Tree. All this made no difference in his outlook. He plunged into the house, shaking and moaning and chewing at his beard. In the storeroom section, he stood before the shelves and racks containing the extensive gardening equipment stolen from the Sears-Roebuck Gardening Department.

His hands, trembling, were holding a yellow envelope.

SUMMER SQUASH
(Cucurbitaceae Pepo)

"No!" said Rickert, in anguish. "No!" He thrust the disturbing packet back onto its shelf. Summer squash wouldn't grow here. Carrots wouldn't grow here. Beautiful, glorious, dew-wet morning glories wouldn't grow here. Nothing would grow here, so he wouldn't even try. He would never have a garden, again. Again? He had never had a garden. He leaned weakly against the wall and choked.

At that moment, the all-wave receiver blared. It screeched. It wailed. Finally it calmed down, and a businesslike voice spoke:

"Now hear this. Now hear this. Let all who hear me know that in the name of the Collins Corporation of the United States of America I hereby take possession of this planet. Let this be attested to. Planet, I hereby name thee Dorothy!" There was a crash of splintering glass and a tinkling after-sound and a very liquid gurgle after that.

"Dorothy," thought Rickert. "Who would ever name a planet — "

"I, Dorothy L. Collins," the very businesslike and somehow very brave voice spoke again, "send greetings to all who may be in this sector of space and invite them to visit at my planet. Out here, we must start a new life. Over, out."

The receiver settled again into silence.

Rickert hardly believed his ears. Someone else had come through the Split, and that someone else was named Dorothy. Coolly, she had made her cut-and-dried declaration: she had taken possession of a planet that already belonged to him. Rickert tried to work up a spasm of indignation. Instead, he relaxed and began to grin.

Dorothy did have champagne.

Rickert chuckled. Trust him to think the evil thing. And why shouldn't he? God didn't exist out here, 350,000 trillion light-years from Earth, so, naturally, all his thoughts had to be evil.

Unless Lucifer hadn't had time to get out here either.

That gave him something to think about. He dragged a rocking chair from the house and took it out into the warm breezes of his planet and turned off the mini-Sun so that he now had a mini-Moon. He began rocking the chair quite fast and thought and worried about this new set of problems, philosophical and actual, for a number of hours. At the end of that time, he knew the facts: *Lucifer was already here!*

He simply had to be out here, for how else could Rickert think the evil thing? Namely, to confront Dorothy and her spurious claims to the planet, to make her his concubine and to steal her champagne? All this, of course, was evil, immoral and sickening in its hatefulness. Naturally. What else?

Rickert rose, a long shadow ominous and silent under the mini-Moon.

"Verdammt eellooeewee," he said softly. His mechs melted into the light of the mini-Moon, tall servants of whitely glowing metal who ringed him at respectful distances and awaited his further orders. Rickert surveyed them. So this was his army, his army with which he would conquer Dorothy.

"Okay," he muttered. "You wait here."

He went into his black metal house, which hummed with the low throb of a generator, and wandered vaguely through its rooms, trying to think, trying to plan, trying to ask himself vital questions, trying to find out Why why why! Why he was here; what had happened!

Of course, he knew. But he wasn't going to tell himself.

Mainly, he was sure of one thing, and that was that God had told him to steer his ship into the Great Split, and he'd find the planet Rickert. *His* planet.

Not Dorothy's.

Anyway, it was time to go. One little job. One little task. He stood again before the gardening equipment he'd taken from the bombed-out Sears-Roebuck store. There was everything here to start a garden, a lovely, beautiful garden for lovely children to play in. Rickert felt himself beginning to weep again as he riffled through the packets of flower seeds. Delphiniums. Asters. Marigolds. Chrysanthemums. Pansies. He finally selected daisies. The packet read:

ENGLISH DAISY
(Bellis Perennis)

He slipped the packet into the inside pocket of his leather jacket.

Then he rushed outside.

"Verdammt eewayoollai!" he shouted loudly. "We go to conquer Dorothy!"

On the dark planet Rickert two streaming globes of diffused and trembling light moved toward each other. The dark human solids at the core of these brilliant globes were, respectively, David S. Rickert and Dorothy L. Collins. Ten miles lay between them; but although Dorothy knew of Rickert's approach, he did not know of hers.

So Rickert, full of confidence in himself and his mechs, moved across the unpredictable surface of the planet Rickert with a hurrying, a bouncing, a swiftly rhythmic stride. He barked out his orders in a high-pitched, nervous voice. There was no pausing, no slacking here. The scarred, dead terrain, wrenched at and heaved out, twisted like black taffy into obscene shapes of unquestionably Luciferian origin, offered no real obstacle to the competent organism of man and machine.

Rickert's mechs obeyed him well. They carried him; they lifted him; they threw him from one to the other. They made chains across faults in this planet Rickert, in this evil planet of absolute darkness. The ease with which this was accomplished, the high nervous glaring purpose that drove Rickert, attested well to the fact that Lucifer himself was the supreme force here.

The known fact was that Earth was 350,000 trillion light-years away. Another known fact was that evil moves at speeds good can never hope to match. Yes, unquestionably Lucifer was king!

Probably God could not possibly arrive for another million years, if, indeed, he had not already abandoned the project of arriving at all.

While Rickert was involved with these laborious speculations, the darkness ahead suddenly was shattered.

It was shattered by the advent of a Talkie, looping in from a distance which was determined only by its own looming, growing girth. It was a brilliant, irregularly shaped object which whirred as it approached and with a sibilant hiss of its spring mechanism fell to the ground about ten feet away from Rickert.

A voice said out of the Talkie: "Talkie, move closer to the man." The Talkie moved closer to Rickert on its springy legs, but seemed warily poised for flight.

Rickert quite forgot to give his mechs orders to cover the situation. They slowed down and stopped, waiting. Rickert stared at the Talkie, and it stared back, keeping one bright beam centered directly on his chest.

Rickert wanted to say "Scat!" or "Shoo!" — but he found he couldn't say anything. He found himself fascinated with the situation and considerably alarmed.

It was obvious that not only was he out to conquer Dorothy, but that she was out to conquer him. And, to judge by the Talkie, an expensive model he had seen once before on the shelves of Montgomery Ward, she had superior equipment.

Now what?

The Talkie spoke again, in the voice of Dorothy. It was a very brave voice, a very soft voice; but it was an unmistakably determined and most competent voice.

"Metal, I speak."

The language Dorothy used was no less than Indo-Martian, the idiomatic name given New Mars English.

"Metal, attend me. The planet Dorothy is ours, but another party has arrived who poses some questions. He is now on the way to meet us. Enemy or friend? Let's have a vote, metal men."

"Enemy," said six metal voices like an accordion that's squeezed.

Rickert came to life.

"Enemy!" he shouted full into the watchful face of the Talkie. Triumphantly he added, "Verdammt!"

Instantly his mechano-helpers rushed for him, and he found himself enclosed in his metal cage, impervious to all harm. Somehow, however, the Talkie edged around a bit until his single intense beam angled through the mass of metal and again centered on Rickert's chest.

"He himself admits he is an enemy," said the voice of Dorothy out of the Talkie. She spoke very bravely. "But his heart is beating fast. Let's have a vote, metal men. Shall we capture him?"

Like somebody playing an accordian in and out six metal voices echoed in Indo-Martian, "Capture him."

"Very well," said the brave voice of Dorothy. "We shall not harm him. The Reader indicates that he is very emotional. Frightened. Angry. Anxious, perhaps sad. Bellicose. We do not know. very well. Billy Jack, you take over now."

"OollayweeaiV," said a metal voice respectfully. "WeeoT," the voice added.

Rickert, enclosed in his mass of protective metal, was shocked. Billy Jack was talking Robotalk.

Furthermore, he knew the consonental names of the mechano-helpers. As plain as day, Billy Jack had said,

"V, stay as you are. T, do not move."

"No!" bawled Rickert, beginning to writhe around in his cage. He saw one opening through the legs of R. He was halfway through when Billy Jack began speaking again, in a sad plaintive note of middle G. The legs of R came slowly together. Rickert was pinned. He began to weep.

The Talkie bounced nearer Rickert, aligning its beam ambitiously into his weeping eyes.

"You — you can't do this," said Rickert, weeping. "You can't come to the planet Rickert and take over my mechs. Just because you've got superior equipment. Just because they gave you a better break. You can't!"

"He says we can't come to his planet and take over his mechs," came the sad and miserable voice of Dorothy out of the Talkie. "But what else can we do? This planet belongs to us, and Rickert has avowed himself to be an enemy. This is the planet Dorothy, *not* the planet Rickert. Billy Jack, you make sure his mechs don't let him go until we get there."

"Verdammt eelloowee!" screamed Rickert. "Verdammt lloo!"

His mechs stirred, then quieted down as Billy Jack spoke. In Robotalk they answered Billy Jack: "Yes, Master."

The terrible silent night pressed in on Rickert more terrible and more silent because of the single incisive beam the Talkie shone in his wet eyes. Rickert closed his eyes and lay there weeping, scissored in between the metal legs of one of his own unfeeling mechs. Now he knew what Truth was. There was no doubt that Lucifer had been here a long time. And it was obvious that Dorothy was the Prince's instrument.

Evil dwelt here, not only in Rickert, but in Dorothy also. That was part of the equation he had overlooked, just as he had overlooked the simple and obvious fact that his mechs could cage him just as well as they could protect him.

Sluggishly, the night began to take over Rickert's brain. In his sluggishness, he only partly heard the approach of Dorothy's metal men, did not even feel the prick of the needle administered by Dorothy's doctor robot. He last remembered reaching into his jacket to reassure himself that the packet of English daisy seeds still was there.

Now Rickert lay in a white bed, under white sheets, fully dressed, staring at a white ceiling.

Ship's hospital. But also there

were whirring instruments in the room, banks of controls, communication tools. Above this whirring, a low voice was speaking from the background. It was the immeasurably soft and caressing voice of Dorothy, the tool of Lucifer who had captured him.

Rickert's tensed shoulders collapsed away from their brief conflict with his restraining straps. Uncaringly, the tears still were coming from his eyes, coming, coming, coming, as from an endless well of grief and humiliation. It made no sense of course. Why should he cry? Why? Why? Perhaps because he had failed to capture Dorothy's supply of champagne.

"Oh, we'll give you champagne," said Dorothy above his head. Her hand was on his pillow, the fingers barely touching his unkempt mass of hair. He opened his streaming eyes and looked through his tears at her face.

Dorothy was not beautiful. She was, in fact, plain. Her skin was very pale and splotched gently with enough freckles to make her look healthy. She was skinny around the shoulders. Her eyes were too big with sallow half-moons under them, and her lips were pulled severely down at the corners as if someone had been telling her a sad story all her life. Looking at her from under his lake of tears she shimmered and wavered in his vision until he closed his eyes to squeeze out the tears and then looked at her again.

"You're beautiful, Dorothy," he said.

"I'm not," she said, "and you're not. I need a better face, and you need a shave. But I'll settle for anything nice you have to say."

"You're beautiful," he repeated stubbornly, "but you're a tool of the devil, sent here to take away the planet that God gave me to live on. It was *my* planet, do you understand? Then you came along, after I was here, with that bottle of champagne and you named the planet Dorothy. No planet should ever be named Dorothy."

"Should one be named Rickert?"

"But *I* was already here! God sent me, perhaps you will try to understand. He sent me through the Great Split — "

"That the rupture bombs made — " she nodded. Her face was sickly pale now, and her lips were being pulled down so severely that they created frightening strains in her face.

" — and I went through! The hole in the sky that the bombs made when they blew up the planets! 'I Am Yahweh,' he said. 'I Am,' he said." He was straining convulsively against his restraining straps now, rocking

back and forth, and beginning to weep again. "But don't forget," he said. "You may be a tool of Lucifer, but so am I! Everything on this planet is of the devil, because God hasn't had time to arrive yet. It's too far away, you see. 350,000 trillion light-years. Figure that one out, Mistress Dorothy of the planet Rickert!"

She had not retreated an inch. Her hand still lay against his hairy temple with the trembling of a bird caught in a freezing wind.

She was permitting the tears to roll down her face unwiped.

"God is immanent in nature," she said. "You know that, don't you? That God is everywhere? That distance doesn't matter? But maybe you've forgotten, like you've forgotten other important things."

She leaned over him, so that her straight and stringy shoulder-length hair made a dark tunnel at the dark end of which he could see her pale blue anxious eyes.

"But *why* have you forgotten, Rickert? *What* went wrong? Don't you see that you're — that you're not talking right? And that you've forgotten something important?

"Rickert, what happened?"

The words meant nothing to Rickert. He was dull and unsharpened. His hairy mouth was half open. He only stared at her out of his staring eyes.

She laid a trembling hand on his forehead.

"It will be all right, Rickert," she whispered. We're not lost here. Maybe — maybe God will send others through the Split, away from the terror and the destruction. We have a dark planet, an unlighted planet, but there's heat coming out of the interior, and even the breezes are warm, and there's soil, I've felt it — there's soil. And if we need things, we can go back through the Split — I'm sure of it — and take things that we need from the burned worlds. Do you understand, Rickert?"

"God will send others?" said Rickert. "Yes. Yes. Perhaps. But I don't know. I can no longer hear God. I don't know."

"Rickert," she whispered, putting both hands over his wet eyes.

Rickert accepted this. He felt warm flutter of her fingers; he felt himself become markedly less evil. But he must nonetheless weep some more, perhaps much more. And why? Why?

Now the all-wave radio at the far end of the room awoke and sputtered with Billy Jack's sad middle G voice.

"We have the information, Mistress Dorothy," he began. "We have gone through Rickert's house, have found and studied

his tapes, his logs, his personal papers, his effects — "

"No, no, no!" Dorothy cried, whirling away from the unkempt man on the hospital bed. "No, Billy Jack, he can't take it — " Then she stopped, and the brave note crept back into her voice.

"Go on, Billy Jack," she said.

Billy Jack recited:

"Rickert is Captain David S. Rickert of the Space Arm of the Terrestrial Marine Force.

"His command died to the last man when the Rupture Bombs opened up the Split.

"Captain David S. Rickert, in the lead scout ship, was inside the enemy lines, but not in the line of fire. After the entire destruction of the Fleet, he returned to the Moon. It was here that he became aware of his other losses."

Behind Dorothy, the man on the bed made a choking sound. She listened, not turning toward him. "Go on, Billy Jack," she commanded.

Billy Jack recited:

"Captain David S. Rickert saw that Luna Town was gutted. Where Luna Town had been was another large crater. Captain David S. Rickert perceived that he had lost: 1) his under-Moon home, 2) one vegetable and flower garden which had been flourishing well, 3) one wife, whose name was Jean."

The man on the bed writhed and rocked against his straps. His breathing became wild and stertorous. In the corner of the room, the doctor robot stirred and lunged toward Rickert.

"No," said Dorothy sharply in Indo-Martian. The doctor robot became still. "Go on, Billy Jack," came the firm voice of Dorothy. "What else? And louder please."

Billy Jack tuned up more loudly against the sounds Rickert was making.

He recited: "Lost, also: 4) assorted pets, namely three cats, Siamese; one dog, Dalmation; one Moonkeet, a precocious cousin of the parakeet; and 5) one boy-child, age 8, and 6) one girl-child, age 11, and 7) one other girl-child, age 14. Upon apprehending these losses, Captain David S. Rickert discovered an unusual ability to communicate with God. God's first suggestion to him was that he return to Earth, where — "

"That's enough, Billy Jack," said Dorothy harshly.

The doctor robot stirred uncontrollably and again lunged toward the man on the bed. "No," said Dorothy. Behind her back, she heard Rickert fighting his straps and raving and cursing. Dorothy let this go on for a long, long time, still making no effort to wipe her sad face. Finally, when Rickert's throttled screams became more muted she turned around and stood by the bed. Rickert had fallen into a dull, hard-breathing stupor with his head canted to one side as if he had run into a wall. She loosened Rickert's hands and let him grab hers and maul them with his unkempt lips, while he muttered insane things through his beard. Then abruptly his eyes opened.

"Dorothy," he muttered. "I've got something for you."

He held both her hands with one paw while he searched through his jacket with the other. Not finding what he sought, he switched hands. He brought out the seed packet.

ENGLISH DAISY
(Bellis Perennis)

She freed one hand to hold the packet, to read what the envelope said, while her eyes grew monstrously bigger and her lips pulled down against her wet cheekbones and the skin of her cheekbones pulled against the sallow indentations under her eyes to create gullies for two fresh tears to run in.

"For me, Rickert?" she breathed. "You're giving these to me?"

"A bouquet of daisies," said Rickert. "As yet ungrown."

"For me?" said Dorothy shrilly.

"A bouquet of yellow daisies," said Rickert. "For you." He said. "I brought them along in case everything turned out all right."

His head eased back down onto the pillow, his eyes ebbing shut, and everything about his face relaxed. He sighed very deeply, and she saw his lips set into a smile.

She could not move if she wanted to, for he imprisoned her hand against his bearded cheek. In one hand she held the colorful little packet containing the seeds of the English daisy *(Bellis Perennis)*, and in the other she held the face of Rickert. She trembled and could not believe what was coming over her. She squeezed her eyes very tightly to close out any chance of losing what she had. And suddenly she seemed to be looking into the face of God.

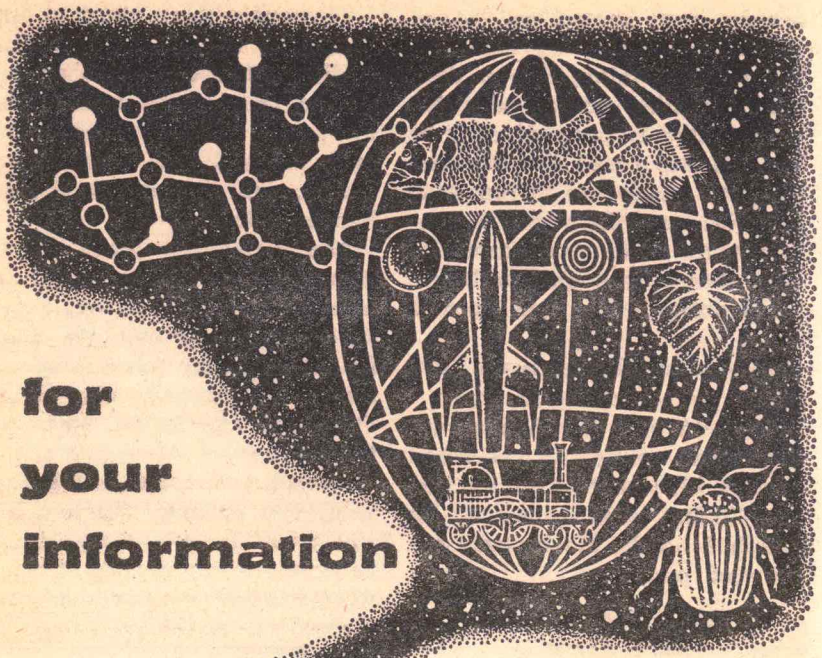
"My dear God," she thought. "Thou hast sent me this sweet darling man, as Thou hast sent me to him. O my dear God," she thought. "What else have I ever asked from Thee?"

Rickert's eyes opened sleepily.

"You feel it too, don't you?" he said. "God just now arrived."

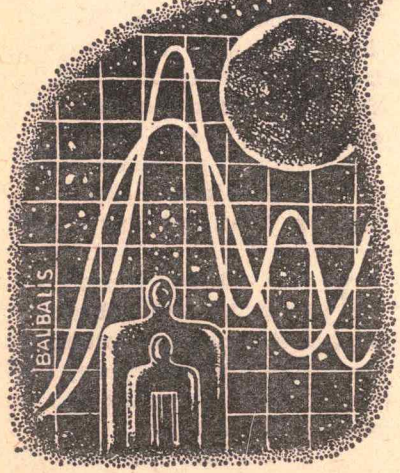
On the planet Doric, warm winds, rich old soil, and the rays of the mini-Sun brought up the daisies. One sunny day Rickert picked the bouquet and presented it to his love.

— ROSS ROCKLYNNE



for your information

BY WILLY LEY



Jules Verne, Busy Lizzy and Hitler

During the second World War there lived in Germany an inventor who must have read a book in which I have some personal interest because it was one of my early works. It appeared in 1928, and its title was *Die Moeglichkeit der Weltraumfahrt* (The Possibility of Space Travel); it was a symposium with contributions by Prof. Hermann Oberth, Dr. Walter Hohmann, Dr. Franz von Hoefft and Baron Guido von Pirquet. In the preliminary correspondence the theme had to be divided up; Oberth wrote on theory, Hohmann on orbits, von Hoefft on rocket applications in the atmosphere and von Pirquet (with faint complaints) on proposed methods that would *not* lead to space travel.

One of the things that were refuted by Baron von Pirquet — he died only a little over a year ago at the age of 90 — was Jules Verne's cannon shot to the moon. He realized, of course, that Verne was writing a story and not a treatise on ballistics. But he also knew that every reader of that story had wondered fleetingly whether such a gun might be built. Guido von Pirquet, professionally an engineer, had a favorite approach to everything — mathematics.

Here we have a gun barrel, drilled in solid rock. Its caliber is 9 feet, and it is 900 feet long, or rather, deep. The propelling charge is guncotton, filling 200 feet of the barrel length. Hence the projectile has 700 feet to travel in the barrel and while traveling that distance it is supposed to acquire a velocity of 54,000 feet per second. The acceleration would be incredible. But what else would happen? Well, there is a 9-foot-wide and 700-foot-tall column of air in the barrel above the projectile. Since the projectile moves faster than sound this air cannot escape but has to be compressed. Compression will heat it, and that will be enough to vaporize the projectile.

To most people the discussion would have been over at that point. But von Pirquet went on. The problem of air resistance in the barrel could be solved by pumping the air from the barrel and closing the muzzle with an airtight but comparatively light cover. What else was wrong in the reasoning? Well, the propelling charge at the bottom of the barrel was converted into a hot and expanding cloud of explosion gases, but would that cloud expand enough to produce the required muzzle velocity?

Most likely it would not. But that difficulty could be overcome if about half the propelling charge were attached to the bottom of the projectile. Then you would produce two clouds of explosion gases to fill the space in the barrel below the projectile. More calculation showed that that was not yet quite good enough. Then a solution occurred to him. Part of the charge must be at the bottom. Part of it must be attached to the projectile. And still another part must be distri-

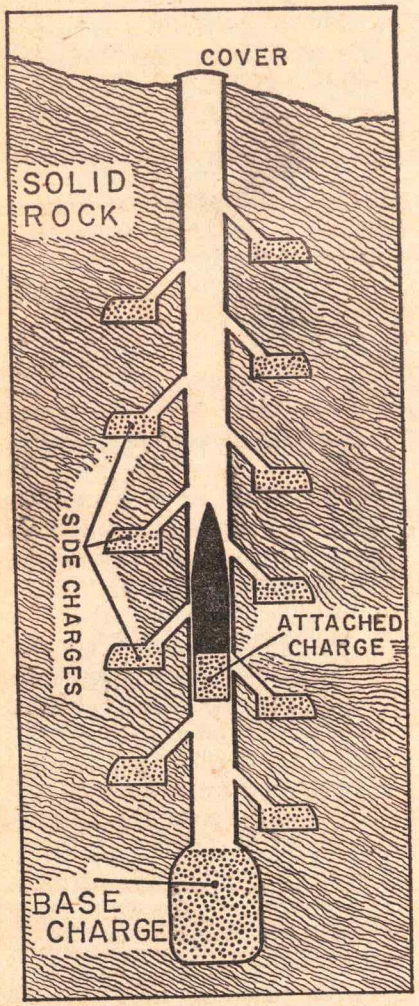


Fig. 1. Baron von Pirquet's "Moon Gun", published in 1928.

buted in a number of side chambers that fired their gases into the main barrel just after the projectile had passed such a side chamber. It seemed quite possible that the moving projectile, by closing electric contacts, would fire the side chambers. (Fig. 1.)

By then von Pirquet felt that he had done his job. He had proved the proposition wrong and had shown that even difficult and expensive improvements were not likely to help. Not for one second did he take his idea seriously. And he hardly toyed with the thought that somebody else might.

There follows an interval of fifteen years.

During those fifteen years Hitler came to power, von Pirquet's native Austria became part of the German Reich and the second World War started.

In May, 1943 — fifteen years to the month after the publication of von Pirquet's essay — the German Minister of Munitions and War Production, Alfred Speer, mentioned to Hitler during a routine briefing that an "Engineer Coenders" was at work on a "multiple charge gun." Hitler, who always wanted to know "everything," down to fine detail of construction, about new guns and tanks, replied that he wished to be kept informed. It is not known just how often Speer told

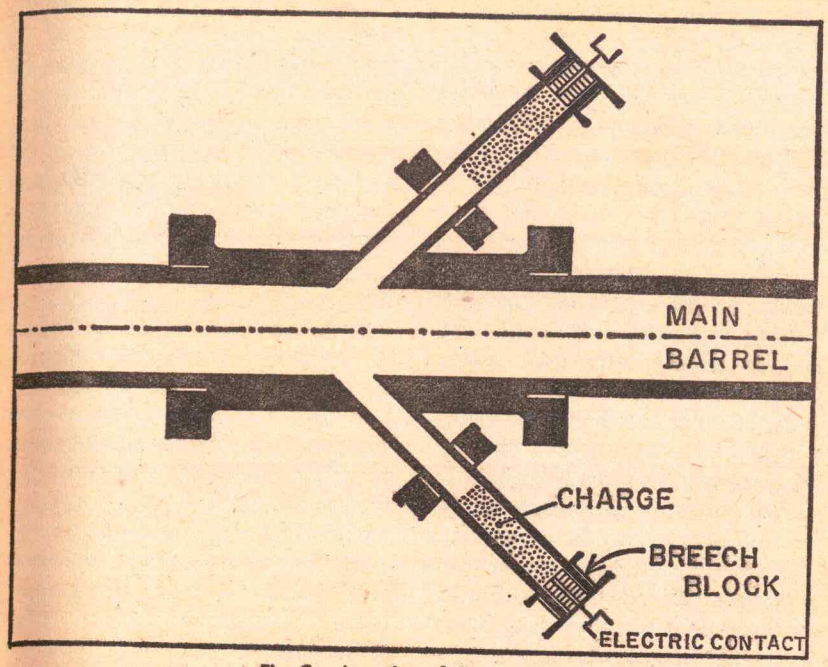


Fig. 2. A section of "Busy Lizzy".

Hitler about the new gun, but the subject came up again soon after the Royal Air Force heavily bombed the rocket research center at Peenemuende on August 17, 1943.

Presumably Hitler screamed for new weapons in quantity, and Speer suggested that contracts should be awarded for the new gun without waiting for the result of test firings! Hitler agreed, and work began on a weapon that at the moment consisted mainly of promises. The military men and research scientists who knew about the project had no less than three nicknames for it. The most common was *Fleissiges Lieschen* (Busy Lizzy), normally the name of a pretty garden flower. The second nickname was *Tausendfuss* (Millipede) and the third, *Hochdruckpumpe*, or High Pressure Pump.

There apparently were reams of calculations and very little practical experience. The calculations said that such a gun, with

an overall barrel length of 500 feet, should produce a muzzle velocity of 5,000 feet per second which, if the firing angle was between 45 and 50 degrees, would produce a range of 95-100 miles. The caliber of the gun was to be six inches, and the projectiles were to be very long, 12 to 20 times their diameter, or 6 to 10 feet in length! The barrel was to be fashioned of pieces of cast steel tubing, each 16 feet in length. Between these "straight" pieces there were others, each with a pair of side pieces, holding propulsive charges — just like von Pirquet's moon gun. (Fig. 2.)

No good engineering description of Busy Lizzy has ever been published; all I have to go on is a general description in Rudolf Lusar's book on German Secret Weapons and a photograph of a test specimen that blew up. Therefore I cannot tell how many side chambers were planned for the finished version — but assuming that they were 30 feet apart, there should have been a total of 16 pairs and there had to be, of course, a base charge to start the projectile going in the barrel. Anybody who has ever loaded and fired an artillery piece, or just watched a gun crew doing it at close range, will have some severe doubts right now. One base charge and a total of 32 side charges along the barrel means 33 breech blocks that must be opened, 33 empty cartridge cases that must be pulled out, 33 new cartridge cases that must be inserted and 33 breech blocks that must be closed again. Even if you have 3 men per side charge and, say, 6 men for projectile and base charge it would take some time to reload the gun, provided the men do not step on each other's feet!

The way the story was told to Hitler was somewhat different, mainly by leaving out all difficulties. Of course guns with such comparatively lightweight barrels of enormous length (for construction purposes the length was fixed at 416 feet) could not be elevated like shorter guns; their barrels had to rest on the ground for their entire length. This meant an incline, and to prevent interference by the Royal Air Force the inclines had to be tunnels, with only the muzzles showing. Preferably the tunnels were to be drilled through limestone, lined with concrete and closed at the muzzle end with armor plate having just a 6-inch round hole to permit passage of the projectile.

Of course the plan had to be grandiose to impress Hitler, hence the planners showed drawings with two adjacent gunsites. Each site held five batteries of five guns each, or fifty guns in all. Between them the two sites would fire 600 projectiles per hour, or 10 per minute, which means that the time between rounds for every gun was estimated to be 5 minutes. Every round would weigh about 250 pounds and carry 22 pounds of high explosive, making a total of 136,800 pounds of steel and 13,200 pounds of high explosive per hour — *if* all fifty guns fired their rounds every five minutes. Hitler, hearing the figures and not hearing the "if's" (if, indeed, they were pronounced in his presence) was pleased. That would be the answer to the British blockbusters. Of course a flight of RAF bombers dropped much more than that weight in bombs in an hour — but his "England guns" could keep it up for many hours per day.

But how far had the design of the gun actually progressed at the time?

Well, one Busy Lizzy with the reduced caliber of 2 centimeters (less than an inch) had been built, and it performed well enough to encourage the completion of a full-size (but not full length) experimental model. It was located on Misdroy, a small island in the Baltic Sea in the vicinity of Ruegen. The company that employed Mr. Coenders had developed a projectile that would fit the gun; it had a diameter of 4.5 inches but it had four flexible steel fins which, while the projectile was inside the barrel, were wrapped around it, bringing the overall diameter to 5.9 inches. Work began in many places at the same time.

The two firing sites of the original plan were to be near Calais, 95 miles from London. One was the hill named Mimoyecques, five miles inland from the shore. The other was called Piheu-les-Guines — but only Mimoyecques was to be constructed at first. Slanting tunnels for the barrels had to be drilled, ammunition storage dumps had to be excavated; underground living quarters, kitchens and power plants were also part of the plan. To Hitler's construction corps, the *Organisation Todt,* this was "Project No. 51" and it was a big project. It required 500 German specialists and close to 5,000 French workers. Needless to say they passed a summary of their activities on to British Intelligence via the French underground; but they did not know what it was they were building. Neither did British Intelligence.

Meanwhile 1,000 German soldiers underwent special training for firing the "England guns."

The gun on Misdroy made the first firing tests in October, 1943. Since it was not full length

the test shells seemed to do well. Hitler ordered that the monthly production of the shells be raised from 2,500 to 10,000 rounds. Some time later it turned out that these shells became unstable in flight if they traveled faster than sound, and production was stopped. By then 20,000 (unfinished) projectiles had been made.

All this time the gun gave trouble. As General Dr. Walter Dornberger of the Army Weapons Office recollects, one of the side chambers exploded after only five or six rounds had been fired.

The breechblocks of the side chambers had to be redesigned. The test projectiles had to be redesigned. But work at Mimoyecques continued. In spite of the high expenditures of man-hours the chief construction engineer estimated in July, 1944, that completion would take, at a minimum, four months, possibly twice as long. At that time a test shell from the Misdroy gun attained a range of 58 miles; after eight rounds a side chamber exploded.

Six weeks later the Allies conquered Mimoyecques and after a long delay (for study?) destroyed the main access tunnel in May, 1945. It took 25 tons of TNT.

But Coenders did get his gun to be fired on two occasions, though it was a "short" version, 197 feet in length, with a range of about 40 miles, firing shells weighing 143 pounds. One gun fired at Antwerp in January, 1945; the other "supported" the Ardennes offensive in February, 1945 (the "Battle of the Bulge") with about a dozen rounds. Both were then blown up.

Nobody seems to know what happened to the test specimens of Busy Lizzy that were built. Nobody knows what happened to all those projectiles that had been built prematurely. Or what happened to Mr. Coenders.

Since these questions cannot be answered, let us try another one. Could such a gun be built and made reliable at all? Probably yes, but not with pieces of standard tubing, even tubing of the best quality. It would probably need special alloys and precision-machining plus lots of money. Well, supposing such a gun were built as a leisurely project, would it be of any use?

The answer to that question is a definite "no." As a weapon it would be outranged by any modern tactical missile. And for high-altitude research the answer is about the same: any modern sounding rocket can do it better.

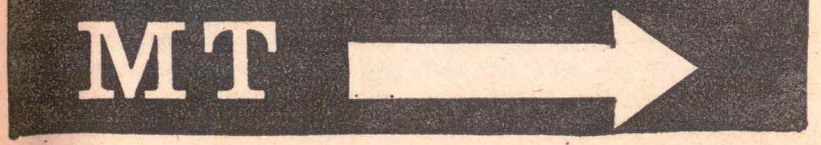
There is a final question on my mind which somebody may be able to answer. Did von Pirquet ever find out about Busy Lizzy? If so, what did he say?

— WILLY LEY

WAITING PLACE

by HARRY HARRISON

Jomfri was innocent! There could be no doubt of it — but why was he being punished?



As soon as Jomfri stepped out of the screen of the matter transmitter, he realized that there had been a terrible mistake. For one thing his head hurt with a pain that almost blinded him, a classic symptom of MT malfunction. For another this was not his destination, not this gray and dusty chamber. He had been on his way home. Staggering, his arm before his eyes, he felt his way to the hard bench that was secured to one wall. He sat, slumped, with his head on his hands, and waited for the pain to ooze away.

The worst was over, that was certain, and he should be thankful that he had survived. Jomfri knew all about MT failures from the 3V plays since, though rare in reality, these dramatic circumstances were natural material for the robot scripters. The failure of a single microscopic circuit would be enough to send the hapless traveler to a receiver that was not the one that he had punched for, while at the same time giving his nervous system a random twist that accounted for the headache. This was what the technicians called a minimal malfunction, and once the headache had faded the victim could punch for the local emergency station, report the malfunction, then go on. The worst that could happen was too horrifying to consider: people

who arrived turned inside out or stretched in one dimension into miles of tubular flesh. Or even worse. He was all right, Jomfri told himself, clutching his head with both hands, he had come through all right.

When he opened one eye a crack the light hurt, but was bearable. He could stand, shakily, and see, barely, so it was time to get help. They would have drugs in the emergency station that would fix his head. And he had to report the malfunctioning transmitter before anyone else was caught in the thing. His fingers groped over the featureless wall for clumsy seconds trying to find the punch panel.

"It is impossible!" Jomfri cried, his eyes wide open despite the pain. "There is always a panel."

There was none. This screen was for receiving only. It was theoretically possible that a MT screen could be one way, without a sending tuner, but he had never seen one before. "Outside," he said, turning from the blank screen in this blank room.

Leaning against the featureless wall for support Jomfri went out the door and down a barren hallway. The hall made a single right-angled turn and opened into a dust filled street. A scrap of dirty plastic blew by and there was the smell of warm decay.

"The sooner I'm away from this place the better. I'll find another transmitter." Then he moaned as the sunlight struck daggers of pain through his eyes and into his brain. He made his way into the street, stumbling, peering through the smallest crack between the fingers that he clamped tight over his eyes. Tears ran down his cheeks, and through his damp agony he searched the blank, gray walls for the familiar red double-headed MT arrow. It was nowhere to be seen. A man sat in a doorway, his face hidden in the shadows.

"Help me," Jomfri said. "I'm hurt. I must find the MT station — where is it." The man shuffled his feet but said nothing. "Can't you understand?" Jomfri was petulant. "I'm in pain. Your duty as a citizen . . . ."

Still in silence, the man caught his toe behind Jomfri's ankle, then slammed him in the knee with his other foot. Jomfri went down, and the stranger stood at the same time. "Dirty fangner," he said and kicked Jomfri hard in the groin, then stalked away.

It was a long time before Jomfri could do more than lie, curled up and moaning, afraid to move, as though he were a cracked egg that would burst and spill its contents if disturbed. When he did sit up finally, wiping feebly at the sour bile on his lips, he was

aware that people had passed him, yet none had stopped. He did not like this city, this planet, wherever he was. He wanted to leave. Standing was painful, and walking even more so, yet he did it. Find the MT station, get out, find a doctor. Leave.

In other circumstances Jomfri might have remarked on the barrenness of this place, with its lack of vehicular traffic, its scattering of pedestrians and its complete lack of signs and street names, as though illiteracy had been established by edict. But now the only concern he had for his surroundings was to leave them. Passing an arcaded opening he stopped and cautiously, for he had learned discretion with that single kick, he looked inside. It was a courtyard with rough tables scattered about, planks nailed to their legs in lieu of benches. Some of them were occupied. A small barrel rested on the central table, at which six men and a woman were filling a cup from it. All present were as drab as the walls about them, dressed for the most part in uniform gray, although some of them had parts of their costume made up of drab pastels.

Jomfri drew back quickly as the woman came towards him, then realized that she was lank haired and old and kept her eyes to the ground as she shuffled forward, carrying the plastic cup in both hands. She slid onto one of the benches close by and buried her face in her drink.

"Can you help me?" Jomfri asked, sitting at the far corner of the table where she could neither kick nor hit him and where he could flee if he had to.

She looked up, startled, and pulled the cup to her. When he made no further movements towards her, she blinked her red-rimmed eyes, and a mottled tip of tongue licked out at her cracked lips and withdrew.

"Will you help?" he asked again, feeling safe enough for the moment.

"New one here," she said, her words hissing and blurring over her toothless gums. "Don't like it, do you?"

"No, I certainly do not like it, and I'm going to leave. If you would direct me to the nearest MT station — "

The crone cackled hoarsely then sipped loudly from her cup. "One way only, fangner, you knew that before they sent you. The road to Fangnis has but one direction."

At the sound of this time-weary cliché he gasped and suddenly felt very cold. Memories of the priest with the raised, admonitory finger: the father to his errant daughter. Was there a Fangnis? "It cannot be," he said in a futile

effort to convince himself differently, while his eyes darted like trapped animals to the buildings, the street, the people and back again.

"It is," the woman said, and he had the feeling she would drop her head to the table and weep, but she only drank again.

"There has been a dreadful mistake. I should not be here."

"Everyone says that," she said with contempt, dismissing him with a palsied wave of her hand. "You'll stop soon. Criminals all, rejected from our own worlds, sentenced for life and eternity, forgotten. They used to kill us. It would have been kinder."

"I have heard of Fangnis," Jomfri said hurriedly. "A world no one knows where, eternal noon." He shot a frightened glance at the changeless light in the street outside, then away. "The unwanted, the condemned, the guilty, the incorrigible, the criminals are sent there. All right, *here* then," he added when he saw her twisted and humorless smile, "I'll not argue with you. Perhaps you are right. In any case there has been a grave mistake made, and it must be rectified. I am no criminal. I was on my way home from work. My wife will be waiting. I dialed my number and appeared . . . here."

She no longer looked at him, but stared numbly into her drink instead. He was suddenly aware of how dry his mouth was. "What are you drinking? Could I have some?"

The old woman roused at this, pulling the drink to her and cradling it against her ancient breasts. "Mine. I worked for it. You can drink water like all the other fangners. I cut the wood and watched the fire at the swamp-edge while it dripped. My share."

The cup was almost empty now, and he could smell the raw spirit on her breath when she talked. "Out there. Down the street. Go away. Food and water at the Warden. Go away." She had lost interest in him, and he rose painfully and left before there was any more trouble.

"The Warden, of course," he told himself with a sudden warm spurt of hope. "I'll explain and he'll take care of me."

Jomfri walked faster. The street ended in a dusty hillside, a smoothly rising, round-topped hill surrounded by the monotony of the low drab buildings. A structure clamped itself to the hilltop, a hemispherical and featureless dome of durcrete. Hard as diamond and as eternal. A thin man in rusty black and gray was trudging up the hill before him, and Jomfri followed furtively, ready to turn and run at any sign of hostility.

Water gushed continually from a durcrete spout and splashed into a drain below. The thin man secured a plastic bag over the spout, and when it filled he reached into a deep opening in the wall beside the spout and took out a blocky package of some kind. Jomfri waited until he had removed the filled bag and vanished around the curve of the dome before he went forward. The sibilance of the splashing water was the only sound in the hazy silence, and his throat was suddenly dry. He buried his head under the stream, let it run into his mouth and over his face and across his hands. When he pulled away, gasping for air, he felt much better. Wiping the water from his eyes, he pushed his head into the opening. It was almost featureless. A shiny, worn metal plate was inset to his right, and a hole, no bigger around than his arm, vanished upwards into darkness from the farther end of the pit. The word PRESS, almost completely rubbed away, was printed above the plate. The only letters he had seen since he arrived here. Hesitatingly, he put his thumb to the cool metal. There was a distant susurration and a rising, scraping sound. Jomfri pulled his hand out quickly as a plastic-wrapped package shot down out of the opening and plopped softly into the rear of the niche. He took it out and saw that it was a bag of mealpaste.

"Go ahead, eat, I won't bother you."

Jomfri spun about, almost dropping the bag, to face the thin man who had silently returned and stood close behind him. "You're new here, I could tell," the man said, and a wholly artificial smile passed over his lined and pock-marked face. "Say hello to Old Rurry, I can be your friend."

"Take this," Jomfri said, extended the mealpaste, trying to push away all connection with Fangnis. "There has been a mistake; this is someone else's ration; the machine gave it to me in error. I do not belong here."

"Of course not, young fangner," Old Rurry purred. "Many is the life ended by politicians, innocent men sent here. The machine doesn't care or know who is here or who you are or who I am. It has a five-hour memory and won't feed you again until that time has passed. It will feed anyone, every five hours, forever. That is the sort of horrible efficiency that makes one squirm, isn't it?"

Jomfri's fingers clutched spasmodically, digging deep into the flexible wrapping. "No, I am sincere. A mistake in the MT sent me here. If you really wish

to help me you will show me how to contact the authorities."

Old Rurry shrugged and looked bored. "Impossible. They're sealed inside this tomb and come and go with their own MT. They never contact us. We feed at this side of the Warden — and leave at the other."

"Leave? Then it is possible. Take me there."

Sniffing wetly, Old Rurry wiped his nose on the back of his finger then examined it carefully and wiped it on the side of his jacket before he spoke. "If you must be ghoulish, that can be easily enough arranged. Right there." He pointed the wiped finger at the foot of the hill where four men had appeared, one to each limb, carrying a woman face down. They plodded forward until they noticed the two men waiting above them, then the two men bearing the legs dropped them into the dirt, turned and left.

"A civic duty," Old Rurry said distastefully, "and the only one we perform. If we just leave them or dump them into the swamp they rot, and that is highly unpleasant." They walked down, and Old Rurry pointed silently to the left leg while he picked up the right. Jomfri hesitated, and all three fangners turned to stare coldly at him. He bent quickly — memory of that educatory boot — clutched the bare flesh of the ankle, almost dropping it again at the feel of its cold and firm, unfleshlike texture. They continued up the hill, and Jomfri turned away from the sight of the dirt-stained, blue-veined leg. Perhaps this was the woman he had talked to. He shuddered at the thought. No, the clothing was different, and this one was long dead.

A well traveled dirt track ran about the circumference of the Warden, and they shuffled along it until they reached a spot that appeared to be diametrically opposite the feeding station. A long narrow strip of metal was inset in the wall at knee-height, perhaps a foot wide and eight feet long. The leading man on the inside bent and pulled at a groove in the metal, which swung out, slowly, to reveal that it was the outer side of a V-shaped bin. It was constructed of three-inch-thick armor alloy, yet was still dented and scratched along the edge. How desperate could one become after a lifetime in this place? The body was unceremoniously dumped into the bin and the outer door kicked shut.

"Unrivaled efficiency," Old Rurry said, watching warily as the two other men departed without a word. "No communication, no contact. The end. Bodies and old clothes. Their bodies are taken away and new sackcloth issued for old rags. Remember that when your fine clothes grow worn."

"This cannot be all!" Jomfri shouted, tugging at the door which was now locked. "I must contact those inside and explain the error. I don't belong in this place."

There was a slight vibration, he could feel it in his fingertips; and the door yielded to his tugging. It opened, and the bin was empty. In a frenzy of haste Jomfri climbed in and stretched out full length. "Close it, please, I beg," he said to Old Rurry who bent over him. "This is all to no purpose." Still, when Jomfri pleaded, he pushed the door shut. The light narrowed to a crack and vanished. The darkness was absolute.

"I am not dead," Jomfri shouted in sudden panic. "Nor am I old clothes. Can you hear me? I wish to report a mistake. I was on my way home, you see, and — "

Soft bars, it felt like a dozen of them clamped tight against his body. He screamed feebly, then louder when something brushed against his head and face. There was a tiny humming in the darkness.

"An incorrectly dialed number, a malfunction in the MT. I am here in error. You must believe me."

As silently as they had come the arms were withdrawn. He felt about him, but there was solid metal on all sides as though he were sealed in a coffin. Then a crack and a slit of light appeared, and he closed his eyes against the sudden glare. When he opened them again he looked up at Old Rurry, who was sucking the last of the foodpaste from a container.

"Yours," he said. "I didn't think you wanted it. Climb out of there, it won't move again until you do."

"What happened? Something held me."

"Machines. See if you are dead or sick or old clothes. If you're sick they give you a shot before they toss you back. You can't fool them. Only the dead go on through."

"They wouldn't even listen to me," he said, climbing wearily out.

"That's the whole idea. Modern penology. Society no longer kills or punishes for trespassing its laws. The criminal is redeemed. Some cannot be. They are the ones who would have been hanged, burned, flayed, broken, electrocuted, beheaded, racked, speared or otherwise executed in more barbarous times. Now they are simply dismissed from civilized society to enjoy the company of their peers. Could anything be more just? The condemned are sent here on a one-way journey.



Away from the society they have offended, no longer a burden on it as they would be in a prison. A minimal contribution from all the worlds using this service supplies food and clothing and operating costs. Dismissed and forgotten for there is no escape. We are on a clouded and primitive world, forever facing the unseen sun, surrounded by nothing but swamps. That is the all of it. Some survive, some die quickly. There is room for a hundred times our number without crowding. We eat, we sleep, we kill each other. Our only joint effort is the operation of stills at the swamp's edge. The local fruit is inedible, but it ferments. And alcohol is alcohol. Since you are a newcomer I will give you one drink of hospitality and welcome you into our drinking band. We've had too many deaths of late, and more wood is needed."

"No. I won't join your convict alcoholics. I'm different, I was sent here by mistake. Not like you."

Old Rurry smiled and, with a swiftness that denied his years, produced a shining blade that he pricked into Jomfri's throat.

"Learn this rule quickly. Never ask a man why he is here nor mention it to him. It is a messy form of suicide. I will tell you, because I am not ashamed. I was a chemist. I knew all the formulas. I made tasteless poison and killed my wife and 83 of her family. That makes 84. Few here can match that number." He slid the knife back into his sleeve, and Jomfri backed away, rubbing the red mark on his neck.

"You're armed," he said, shocked.

"This is a world, not a prison. We do our best. Through the years bits of metal have accumulated, weapons have been manufactured. This knife must be generations old. The myth has it that it was made from an iron meteorite. All things are possible. I killed its former owner by thrusting a sharpened length of wire through his eardrum and into his brain."

"I do feel like that drink now. Thank you for offering. Very kind." Jomfri worked hard to give no offense. The old man started down the hill with Jomfri trailing after. The building they went to was like all the others.

"Very good," Jomfri said, choking over a beaker of the acid and acrid drink.

"Filthy stuff," Old Rurry told him. "I could improve it. Add natural flavoring. But the others won't let me. They know my record."

Jomfri took a deeper drink. He knew the record too. When he

finished the beaker his head was fuzzy and his stomach sickened. He felt no better. He knew that if he had to stay on Fangnis he would be one of the men who died swiftly. This life was worse than no life.

"Sick! You said they would see me if I were sick," he shouted, jumping to his feet. Old Rurry ignored him, and he was drunk enough to clutch the man by his clothing. None of the others paid particular attention until the wicked length of blade appeared again. Jomfri let go and staggered backward, his eyes on the foot of steel. "I want you to cut me with your knife," he said.

Old Rurry stopped and thought; he had never received an invitation from a prospective victim before. "Cut you where?" He scanned the other for a suitable spot.

"Where?" Where indeed. What part of one's body do you invite violence upon? What member that you have borne a lifetime do you discard? "A finger . . ." he suggested hesitantly.

"Two fingers — or none," Old Rurry told him, a natural merchant of destruction.

"Here then." Jomfri dropped into the chair and spread his hands before him. "Two, the littlest." He clenched his fists with the little fingers on the table edge. They were too far apart. He crossed his wrists so that the two little fingers hooked over the wooden edge, side by side. "Both at once. Can you do that?"

"Of course. Right at the second joint."

Old Rurry hummed happily to himself, noticing that the entire room was watching him now. He pretended to examine the edge of his blade while the newcomer looked up at him with watery rabbit's eyes. Fast, without warning, the knife came down and bit deep into the wood. The fingers flew, blood spurted, the newcomer shrieked. Everyone laughed uproariously as he ran out the door still screaming.

"Good Old Rurry," someone shouted, and he permitted himself a smile while he picked up one of the fingers from the floor.

"I'm hurt — now you must help me!" Jomfri shouted as he staggered up the hill in the endless noon. I did not think it would feel like this. I'll bleed to death. I need your aid. It hurts so."

When he tugged at the metal the pain bit deep. The bin gaped open, and he dropped into it. "I'm injured," he wailed as the light narrowed and vanished. The bars clamped down in the darkness, and he could feel the warm blood running down his wrists. "That's blood. You must stop it, or I will die."

The mechanism believed. There was a sharp nip of pain in his neck, then instant numbness. The pain was gone from his body — as was all sensation. He could move his head, hear and talk, but was completely paralyzed from the neck down. There were no escapes from Fangnis.

Something rumbled, and from the sensation on the back of his head he knew he was being slid sideways by the mechanism. It was too dark to see — if he could still see at all — but from the movement of the air and the sounds, he felt that he was being moved through door after door, like a multi-chambered airlock. Thick metal doors, that would be certain. The last one slid open, and he was ejected into a well lit room.

"Torture again," the man in white said, bending over to look. "They're going back to their old games." Behind him were three guards with thick clubs.

"Initiation, maybe, doctor. This one must be a newcomer, I've never seen him before."

"And new clothes too," the doctor said, working with swabs and instruments.

"I'm here by mistake. I'm not a prisoner!"

"If we get one, Doctor, we can look forward to a lot more amputations. They always do things in cycles."

"A mistake on the matter transmitter — "

"You're right about that. I have some graphs that prove it in the book I am preparing."

"Listen, you must listen. I was going home, I dialed my home, I went into the MT — and arrived here. There has been a ghastly mistake. I had the fingers removed so that I could reach you. Look at the records, they'll prove I'm right."

"We have records," the doctor admitted, recognizing Jomfri's humanity for the first time. "But there has never been a mistake yet, though many have claimed their innocence."

"Doctor, please find out. I am begging you. In the name of decency simply consult the records. The computer will tell you instantly."

The doctor hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "In the name of decency then. I will do it while the dressings set. Your name and citizen's number."

He punched Jomfri's data into the computer, then looked expressionless at the screen.

"You see," Jomfri shouted happily. "It was a mistake. I'll file no complaints. Free me now, it is all I ask."

"You are guilty," the doctor said quietly. "You were sent here."

"Impossible!" Jomfri was justifiably angry. "Some trick. I demand you tell me what I have been charged with."

The doctors looked at his instruments. "Blood pressure, brain waves, normal for this situation. These instruments are as good as any lie detector. You are telling the truth. Traumatic amnesia, very possible in this situation. A good footnote for my book."

"Tell me what I have been accused of!" Jomfri was shouting and trying to move.

"It would be better if you did not know. I'll return you now."

"You must tell me first. I cannot believe you otherwise. I was on my way home to my wife — "

"You killed your wife," the doctor said, and actuated the return mechanism. The closing of the thick door cut off the hideous, wailing scream.

A single sharp memory of a blue face, staring eyes, blood blood blood . . . .

The metal coffin lid opened, and Jomfri sat up, dizzy. They had drugged him; he was hazy; they had tended his wounds.

"But they wouldn't help me. They wouldn't even look in the records to prove my innocence. A mistake. A fault in the matter transmitter, and I am condemned because of it."

He looked at the bloodstained bandages, and something hurt in his head.

"Now I'll never get home to my wife," he sobbed.

HARRY HARRISON

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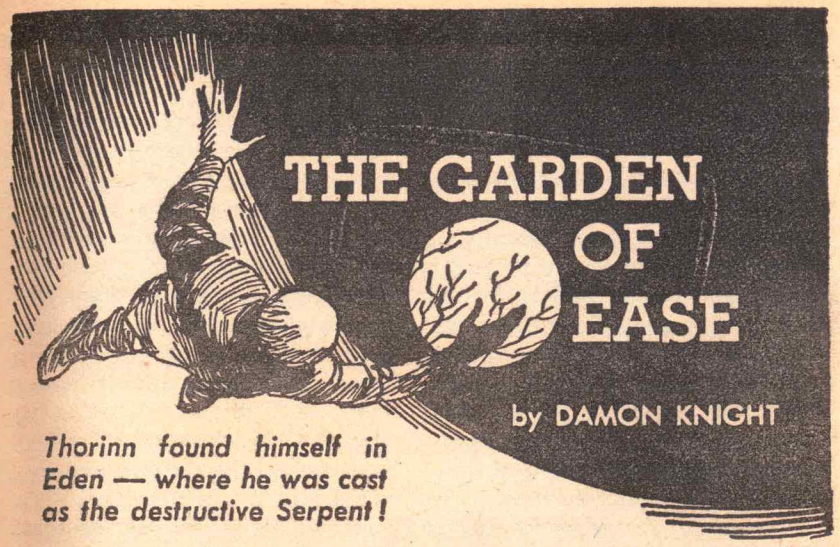
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THE GARDEN OF EASE

by DAMON KNIGHT

Thorinn found himself in Eden — where he was cast as the destructive Serpent!

I

In the spring, when the pleasure pods were ripe, everybody in Pink Circle went on a picnic into the wildgreen along the river Wend. Grasshopper men went, two by two, arms linked as they soared through the air; dough women with their fancymen went, panting and wallowing; the gray-bearded Knowers went, hobbling, leaning together, and sat on the grass in order to watch the young people.

First the unsexed little girls and boys would collect food from the foodvines that grew in the wildgreen, spicy orapples and sweet nanaberries, meatlets in clusters, hamsaniges from the hamsanige bushes.

Meanwhile the young men and women would be gathering cushions from the cushion-leaf trees and arranging them in circles on the cool sloping lawns, near enough to hear the pleasant gurgle of the Wend. The song-girls would tune up their vine-strung rebecks, and there would be singing; then the food gathered by the unsexed little boys and girls would be heaped up and eaten; then there would be jumping and running contests, games for the children, jokes and argument for the elders. And finally, one by one, the people would wander off into the wildgreen until each had found a ripe pleasure pod gaping invitingly, with its

soft watermelon-pink lining like a doughgirl's youknow.

Each one would search until he found a pleasure pod that just fitted: long thin ones for the grasshopper men, round fat ones for the dough women, short stunted ones for the children and fancymen. The pleasure pods for the dough women had to be almost on the ground, because the dough women were clumsy and could not jump; but the fancymen could scramble up the tall curled vines, and the grasshopper men could jump, twist as they jumped, and land gently on their backs inside the pleasure pods. The pods would dip a little lower with the weight of the people, hanging down from their long, strong flexible vines, and the lip of each pod would slowly close until the pod was shut tight, with the happy person inside like a worm in a flossweed. What dreams they had then, what pleasures, twitching and moaning with their pleasures so that the hanging pods trembled, first one, then another, then a whole row at once!

When the skylight dwindled and the shadows turned greener in the wildgreen, the pods would begin to open and the people would climb out, their limbs soft, their faces shining with remembered joy, eyes soft and faraway, their movements slow. But some of the pods remained shut as the people wandered back toward Pink Circle.

And then there were some who liked the pleasure pods so much that they would not come out for a day, or two days, or a week or a week-week sometimes; and in fact, every spring when the pleasure pods ripened, there were always some dark old pods from the previous year that hung, heavy and shriveled, on the dead vines, until the wind, or a boy climbing, or a heavy bird alighting knocked them down and they rolled into the carpetvines. These were old people mostly, who had nothing to gain by coming out of the pleasure pods. But there were young ones too, some every year, and even a child occasionally, who stayed in the pods and never came out.

What more can be said of Pink Circle, that long-gone place, than that it was perfect, an Elysium, without discord or bad food? Thus it was, thus it had always been, until that black day unforetold by Knowers, when a nonperson climbed down into the wildgreen.

Yes, he had come from the sky, for a doughgirl saw him. He opened a door like a yawn in the sky and fell and caught himself in the trees of the wildgreen. And thus he came into the world of men.

II

Thorinn Goryatsson knelt on the dusty stone, looking down through the hole in the sky. In this underground passage he had come upon a metal shield, which turned on some hidden pivot when he touched it, to reveal a hole pierced in the stone; and down there, against all reason, lay the Midworld he had come from. Somehow in his wanderings he had got above it, for there it lay far below, dazzling bright, with the dark columns of tree trunks rising on every side.

Putting his head through the hole, he saw that the nearest tree ended in a crown of tangled branches, some green, most brown and dead, that spread out in a cone-shape against the sky two ells away. The glare of the skylight, so close to his face, dazzled him and made dark spots float in front of his eyes.

He drew back, rubbed his eyes. The shield had swung closed again. In the darkness, he sat perplexed. It would be no great matter to lower himself by his hands through the hole, then swing and let go, landing in the treetop. But unless he could somehow prop the shield open meanwhile, it would be moving while he hung from it, and he might miss his aim. If he hesitated too long, it would close on him.

In the end, he made a cord from his leg-thongs and belt and tied his sword securely to the end of it. Holding the shield open, he dropped the sword and let it dangle, then swung it in a slow arc, farther each time, until it caught in the treetop. The first time it was only lightly tangled, and came free again. The second time it caught fast. When he tugged on it, a branch of the treetop nodded toward him but would not release the sword.

Whether it would bear his weight, when he swung at the end of the thong, was another matter. Thorinn looked down with a sinking heart into that gulf of air, the bright, half-seen ground far below . . . . But he had no choice now. The cord was caught. He must follow it or let it go.

Thorinn wiped his palms carefully on his breeks, took a careful grip on the belt where it was knotted to the first of the leg-thongs. Holding the shield open with one hand, he leaned down head-foremost. The dazzle, the warm breeze on his face, the rustling of treetops distracted him. The cord had gone slack when he leaned forward. He wanted to pull it tight, but if he took his other hand away, the shield would begin to turn . . . . He thrust himself upright again. His heart was thudding. He could not do it — not head downward.

He sat back on his heels. The shield slowly turned, closed. The warm wind died, and he was in darkness. After a moment he opened the shield again. Taking a firm grip on the belt, he reached down, set his fist against the smooth stone rim of the opening under the shield. Holding the shield open in this way, he put all his weight on his hands, doubled his legs and swung them down through the hole.

Panic struck him again as he felt his fist slipping against the stone, and he nearly let go the belt to clutch at it. He tightened his grip just in time, felt the shield turning above him, felt his body lurch as he hung by one hand. The sky above his head was one bright dazzle. The cord in his hand led nowhere; he no longer knew which way the tree was. What if the sword had come loose from the branch? The shield was turning, it would close on his fingers . . . .

He let go, reached convulsively for the cord as he felt himself afloat, falling. He pulled it in, hand over hand; at last it tightened, and now he could see the tree like a great green hill tilting, leaning toward him. He hung on desperately. Twigs lashed him, then the tree struck him like a giant club, and he was clinging somehow to a branch, safe, dizzy, and triumphant, in the wind.

The skylight was screened by leaves above him, turning the world into a shimmer of silver and green. All the leaves were in faint constant motion; the tree itself swayed slightly, rocking Thorinn back and forth as he clung to the branch. Faint and dizzy, he clambered into a more secure position atop the branch, then worked his way down along it until he could brace his back against the trunk. The thong had grown taut in his hand; he tugged at it, trying to release it, but it held firm. The treetrunk was reassuringly rough against his back; he was safe, warm; he was back in the Midworld . . . he had no wish to move, so he merely sat foolishly holding the thong, like a man fishing in a tree.

Some bright insect, of a kind Thorinn had never seen before, drifted by, hovered for a moment and was gone. He saw now that there were golden fruits among the leaves. A trickle of sweat ran down his ribs. Indeed it was warm here. And no wonder, so close under the sky.

He squirmed around and stood up cautiously, with one arm on the trunk for balance. He squinted up into the glare. The thong ran away slanting, disappeared among the bright leaves. He tugged again, saw a responding movement above.

After a moment's thought, he wrapped the free end of the belt loosely around a branch, left it there and began to climb. He followed the thong easily enough, found the sword snugged up against a fork in the branch and freed it. He tugged at the thong, and after a moment it came up loosely. He buckled the sword-belt around his waist, put the thongs away in his wallet.

He had hoped to get a better view of the countryside from here, but the dazzle was so great that he could see nothing. His leather shirt was stuck to his back; sweat stung his eyes. He began backing down the branch.

Farther down, where the limbs were bigger and closer together, he was able to drop from one to another. The glare lessened rapidly, but he felt as warm as ever. He was stifling inside his leather garments. He stopped where a broad limb made a convenient perch, peeled off his shirt and felt better at once. A breeze fingered his bare chest and back. How good it felt.

The shirt was too bulky to go into his wallet, so he tied the sleeves together and hung it around his neck. Then his legs began to feel all the stiffer and hotter because his body was so cool and free, so he took the breeks off too and tied them around his waist.

As he descended again, he began to catch glimpses of the ground through the branches. It was carpeted with vines and grass, only less green than the leaves around him. Now he began to realize for the first time how incredibly tall the tree was. After all, a tree that reached the sky! He dropped from one branch to another, then the next, and the next, and still the ground receded below him.

As he paused for breath, he heard a distant shrilling of voices below. He crouched, listening. There they came again, nearer. Two piping notes, poot-toot, then a chorus that echoed them. Then a deeper voice, boom, boom, boom; then the high voices again. He could not make out the words.

From where he stood, he could see a little patch of greensward between the branches. As he watched, a flash of color crossed a corner of this patch and was gone. He was not sure what he had seen — something flame-colored and moving, and an impression of a face tilted toward him.

Thorinn flattened himself against the trunk. The flash of color came again, and stopped. Down there on the grass, something round and bright was looking up at him.

He could not make it out. It was more like a flower than a man, but it had eyes and a face. It made no threatening gesture, but simply stood and gazed up at him. He saw its mouth open; the lips were red. Poot-toot!

The leaves of a nearby branch threshed violently. Turning, Thorinn saw something gray and agile clinging to the branch, swinging itself up, coming upright. Another thrashing sound, and another, and another. The things were all around him, and now there were more of the bright-colored ones below, all standing and gazing up, while the gray things, booming, sprang toward him among the branches. They were men or demons, gray-skinned and impossibly thin, with arms, legs and torsos like sticks. Boom, boom from one side and the other, echoing among the leaves; and from below, poot-toot, twitter-twitter.

Thorinn stood with his back against the tree, sword in hand, trying to see all ways at once. But the gray things, in a half-circles around him, came no nearer. Hairless and naked, they had no weapons. They smiled and gestured, showing their empty hands.

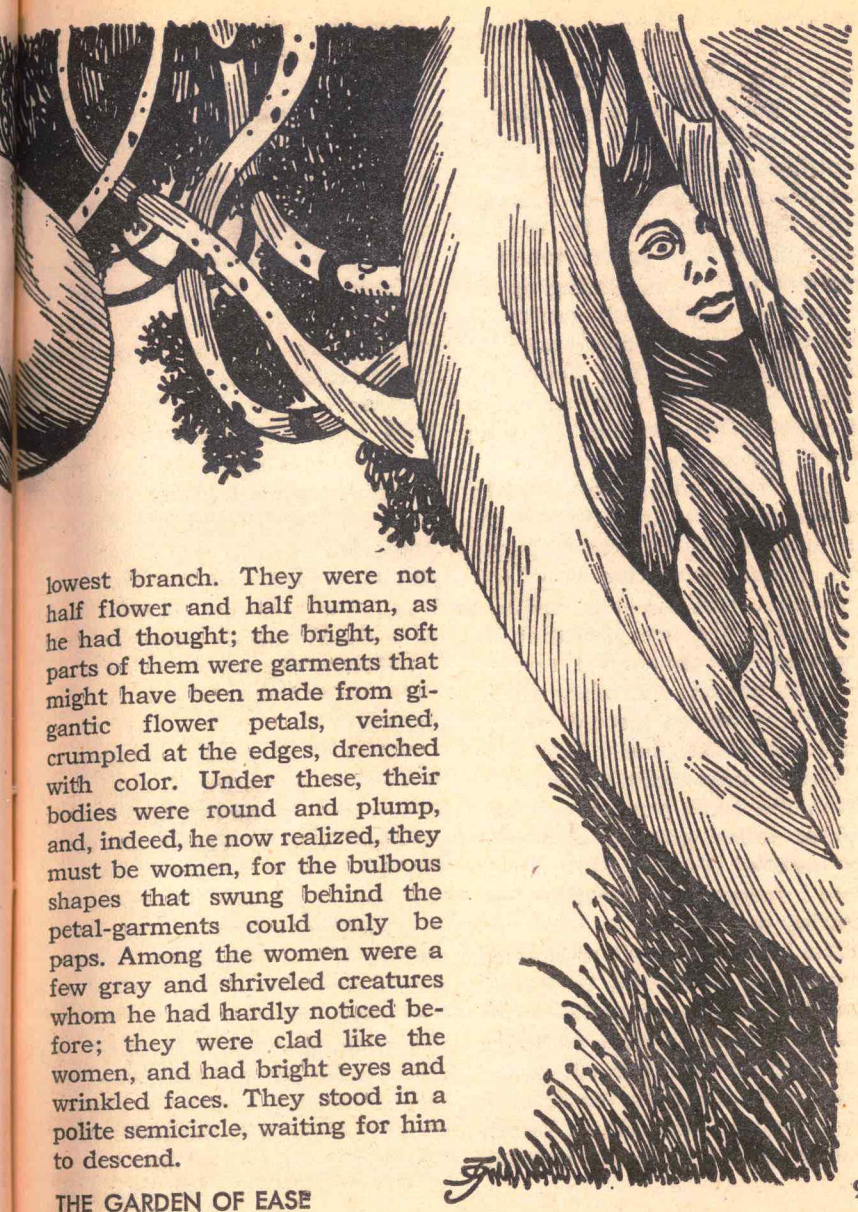
Cautiously, Thorinn put his sword away; this set off another volley of boomings around him, twitterings below.



Now other agile bodies came swarming up the tree. These were children, half the size of the gray men, some pink-skinned and to all appearances human, some sticklike and gray. All of them were chattering, piping, booming at once, those in the tree and those below. It was impossible to tell what they wanted, but at least they seemed to bear him no malice.

Doubtfully, Thorinn swung himself down to the next branch, then the next. The children and the stickmen followed him, keeping their distance. Below, as the branches thinned, the bright ones drew back.

He inspected them from the



lowest branch. They were not half flower and half human, as he had thought; the bright, soft parts of them were garments that might have been made from gigantic flower petals, veined, crumpled at the edges, drenched with color. Under these, their bodies were round and plump, and, indeed, he now realized, they must be women, for the bulbous shapes that swung behind the petal-garments could only be paps. Among the women were a few gray and shriveled creatures whom he had hardly noticed before; they were clad like the women, and had bright eyes and wrinkled faces. They stood in a polite semicircle, waiting for him to descend.

III

When he dropped to the ground, another clamor went up; the circle moved inward, while all around him stickmen were dropping like overripe fruit. In a moment the women surrounded him, gently touching his face and chest, staring up into his face with such awestruck expressions that he could not help but laugh. Cries ran back and forth through the crowd; then they were all moving, carrying Thorinn with them.

The bright alien faces bobbed around him, the trees turned the skylight into a rich green gloom, the grass was seductively soft underfoot, and the slope led him irresistibly downward, so that everything that happened seemed to have become curiously ordinary. They passed through an explosion of bushes, waist high, with thick soft masses of white flowers. From the trees hung green and golden fruits, gourds, seed-pods like twisted ribbons. Fallen trees were everywhere, with vines growing over them.

The bushes thinned to isolated clumps, the trees drew back, and now, he saw, he was at the edge of a clear place, a slope of bright green grass that curved gently down to the marshy bank of a river. Beyond the silver water, another green bank arose, another stand of trees; beyond them were mountains that met the sky. The air from the river was cool and fresh. On the near bank, scattered in little groups, the people were sitting, lying; children squatting, leaping up, running. Someone threw a ball of bright orange into the air. A stickman leaped after it, straight up, higher incredibly still rising; he caught it in his mouth and dropped back, to shouts of applause.

Nearby the shrubbery drew back into a little bay, in which giant vines hung looping and twisting from a tree, higher than Thorinn's head; from these vines depended soft green pods or shells, curved and fat, two ells long. Some swung lightly and were open to show a tender pink interior, while others were shut tight and hung heavy to the ground.

While Thorinn watched, one of the closed pods stirred, split, began to open. A glint of pink showed within. A plump woman emerged, rosy-faced, with dreaming eyes. She was like someone just awakened from a long sweet sleep. With languorous movements, she stepped out, picked up her petal garments discarded on the grass, slowly put them on. A faint smile curved her lips. She wandered away across the greensward; behind her, the pod swayed empty.

Now the whole flock of them set off down the slope, drawing Thorinn along. They led him into a circle of people gathered around a heap of fruits on the grass. Some of the people got up to make room while others sat down, and when the confusion ended Thorinn found himself seated with a plump woman on either side.

A child scrambled into the circle, plucked a pale greenish ovoid from the heap and handed it to one of the women, who offered it to Thorinn.

He took it dubiously. It was cool in his hands and had a strange fragrance, but he was hungry and bit into it boldly. It was soft and pungent, the flavor sweet and acid at the same time; the cool juice ran down his chin. The exposed meat was a startling emerald green. Thorinn instinctively spat out what was in his mouth. He was thinking better of it and about to take a second bite, when one of the women took the fruit away from him gently and offered him another sort. This was flattish and pale brown, with a texture almost like bread; inside was something firmer. Thorinn bit through the soft outer layer into a salty, fibrous substance. It was deep pink in color and tasted almost like cooked flesh of an unfamiliar sort; yet the thing was a fruit, for it had a stem and what seemed to be the remnants of a husk.

It was clear that he had somehow got into the Highlands; for the trees were no more than twenty or thirty ells in height, yet they touched the sky; and even here, at the bottom of the slope, the sky seemed close overhead. But these people in their dress and appearance were nothing at all like Highlanders; nor had Thorinn ever heard of any place of such warmth and brilliance. The very grass hurt the eyes with its greenness.

The people were all friendly, but not one could understand him when he spoke or utter any but their own outlandish noises. He questioned one after another, but all he got in return was a new outburst of their twittering and piping.

The more he observed them, the more puzzled and uneasy he grew. There were at least five sorts of them, the plump wobbling women, the stickmen, the oldsters, the children of all sizes, and another sort of men. These he had taken for children at first because of their small stature, but they were wide-shouldered and well thewed and walked with a swagger, and Thorinn saw them here and there disporting themselves in curious ways with the women.

Most of the women, the oldsters and some of the little men wore petal garments, but the others were as naked as Thorinn himself now that he had laid aside his sweaty leather shirt and breeks. They had no weapons of any kind, nor, indeed, any thing made with hands. They must be persons of quality, if one were to judge by their soft hands and feet and their merry expressions. Yet there were no servants or bond-slaves among them, so far as Thorinn could see. They came and went, as aimless as children. They seemed as curious about Thorinn as he about them. There were always some few about him, fingering his skin and hair, staring with wonder into his eyes, but they all lost interest quickly and went off to join some game, or wandered into the trees.

When he had eaten his fill, he picked up his bundle of garments, not liking to leave it behind, and went to ease himself in a patch of low groundvines at the edge of the trees, where he had seen others doing the same. The place had a rank smell, yet not so much as might have been expected. The broad brownish-green leaves were curled up and clasped into lumpy bundles here and there, and when he had accomplished his needs, he saw them crawling slowly, like crippled snakes, to cover what he had left.

Thorinn watched them for a moment, marveling, then turned back down the slope. After a few paces he stopped and spread out his bundle of garments, meaning to use the leg-thongs to tie it together more compactly. At once he was surrounded by children with alert and curious faces; they squatted to watch him as he worked, reached out now and then to finger the leather of breeks or wallet, chattered and piped among themselves. Thorinn did not hinder them, except to keep them from prying into his wallet; but one boy, bolder than the rest, plucked up the sword before Thorinn could stop him and drew it half out of the scabbard. Alarmed and angered, Thorinn sprang at him, pushed him roughly and snatched the sword back.

The boy lay sprawled on the grass, his head half lifted, his mouth an O. The other children had fallen silent and were staring at Thorinn. The boy's eyes slowly filled with tears. While the others made mournful noises and wrung their hands, he got to his feet. With dragging steps, he moved away toward the shrubbery. Thorinn called after him, but he did not turn. He went to the pod-vines, stood a moment with hanging head before an empty pod, then climbed in and lay down inside it. The pod slowly closed.

IV

Thorinn noticed that the other children had backed away, leaving a clear circle around him. Their faces were pale, their eyes big. A questioning call came up the slope; one of the children answered briefly. Another question, another reply. Other voices boomed, piped.

Thorinn buckled the sword-belt around his waist, quickly finished wrapping the shirt, breeks and wallet into a bundle and tied them with the thongs. Carrying the bundle in one hand, he moved down toward the river. To either side, up and down the long green meadow, he could see dots of faces turned to watch him. All the people seemed to have stopped what they were doing; they were motionless and silent.

Thorinn kept walking, turning now and then to look back; but no one followed him.

The meadow sloped down into weedy grass and sedge, became a marsh. Thorinn waded out between heavy clumps of grass, in cool water up to his knees. Little yellow birds burst out of the marsh-grass before him, fluttered erratically for a moment around his head, then dropped out of sight. Up the river on his right hand, where the stream made a gentle bend, he could see larger birds standing in the water, their long necks looping; they had red breasts and iridescent wing-feathers. Skylight sparkled from the droplets that fell from their beaks.

He stopped where the marsh-grass ended and the muddy bottom grew deeper. To his left, he could see down the river a matter of half a league or so before it disappeared between two gentle hills. To the right, the river curved only a few hundred ells away. Beyond that, over the treetops, he could see distant mountains and a faint bright thread that might have been a waterfall. The river ran silver-smooth before him.

On the opposite bank there was another green slope, narrower and weedier than this one, then trees, then mountains. The sky was bright and blank overhead. He had hoped to see some landmark, but there was none; he would have to wait until nightfall.

He trudged back through the shallow water. Above him on the slope, a few of the people were standing watching him. Others had gone back to their games, but the little circles around the heaps of food seemed to have broken up. He could see groups of children who seemed to be carrying something toward the shrubbery, passing other groups coming back.

As he approached, he saw that the people were making ready to leave. It was the remains of their meal that the children were carrying. They dropped their armloads in the vines, went back for more. Nearby, he could see a few pods opening, people climbing out. The people were drifting slowly together, all moving in the same direction, forming little moving groups, some with arms linked. Their voices were cheerful. None approached him as he walked up the slope, but a few smiled.

One of the children, a half-grown girl, stood by the pod-vines and waited for him. She gestured toward one of the pods and said something. There was a questioning note in her voice, and she stared earnestly into his eyes.

Thorinn looked at the pod, which still hung heavy to the ground. All the others were open and empty, except one or two, farther back in the tangle, which looked brown and old. One had fallen from its brittle stalk and lay dark on the ground; the broad-leafed vines had crawled over it, almost hiding it from view.

Thorinn turned to the pod again, thinking of the boy. "Is he still inside?" he asked. She looked at him blankly. He made a pushing motion, then touched his sword, gestured toward the pod. After a moment she seemed to understand. She repeated his gestures, then asked him something else in her piping voice.

Thorinn looked around. The people were drifting away upriver; they two were the last ones left. "Isn't he coming out?" Thorinn asked. He thought a moment, then crouched and laid his hands beside his face, closed his eyes as if in sleep. He straightened, pointed to the pod again.

The girl looked puzzled, but repeated his gestures. She came closer, looking into his face, and said something twice over, with great earnest.

Surely he could make her understand. He crouched again, imitating the boy asleep in the pod, then mimed coming awake, the pod opening, the boy stepping out.

The girl stared at him, arms hanging at her sides. She spoke in a falling cadence; her eyes and mouth were sad. With one hand she made a gesture Thorinn did not understand. They looked at each other for a moment, then the girl turned away to join the others, who were already distant down the long strip of green.

The pod hung motionless on the vine. Thorinn prodded it with his foot experimentally, moved it a hand's breadth, but there was no answering move-

ment within. He considered whether he should cut the pod open. Did she mean he was never going to come out?

The girl, moving listlessly, was nevertheless slowly catching up to the others. Thorinn hesitated a moment, then decided to leave well enough alone and followed her.

Scattered along the grassy bank, the people drifted away ahead of him in twos and threes. The children and stickmen, for the most part, had gone on ahead; the old people, the women and the women's men strolled behind. Their voices were muted and gentle. In a few paces Thorinn had caught up with the girl. He slowed down to keep pace with her, but although she glanced at him once, she did not speak, and after a moment, losing patience, Thorinn went on ahead.

Where the long green meadow narrowed and the trees curved toward the river, the people were filing into an opening in the forest. He could glimpse their bright petals bobbing between the trees. The trail wound gently upward, never growing steep or difficult, between shrubs with unblemished bright leaves, flowers, vines, trees with hanging clusters of fruit; here and there it curved to avoid a fallen tree. The ground was softly carpeted everywhere. The bushes had no thorns.

Thorinn slipped past the ambling women and old people where he could without rudeness on the narrow trail and eventually had passed all but the stickmen and children, who were now out of sight. The trail was still plain.

He followed it for half a league until it emerged in a wide green meadow, which at first appeared sickle-shaped, curving away from him. Then, blinking in the skylight, he saw that in fact it formed an oval ring around a clump of slender trees.

People were moving at random around the bases of these trees, where Thorinn saw a huddle of curious round structures of withy and vines. Up in the branches, a flash of movement caught his eye, and he saw platforms there with people on them.

As he approached, he found that some of the bulbous structures around the trees were little bowers. What he had taken for withies were simply the stalks of plants that had been bent together and secured with interlaced vines that still bore their leaves and blossoms. Children were squatting in a few of these. Others, somewhat larger, were covered almost to the ground by a solid green skin which, on examination, he found to be composed of broad leaves, overlapped

and somehow sealed tightly together at their edges. Peering into the doorway of one of these, he saw heaped flowers and a few gourds; otherwise it was empty.

Voices piped behind him. The rest of the people were emerging from the trees. They crossed the meadow, a few glancing at him but making no sign. They gathered around the base of the trees in little groups. A few disappeared into the green huts or climbed to the platforms above, then a few more. Thorinn, who had waited in vain for any invitation to follow them, withdrew a little and watched.

Now only two of the people remained, a woman and her little man. Arm in arm, they entered one of the green huts.

The birds in the treetops had fallen silent. Thorinn looked up. Silent and swift, an edge of darkness was sweeping across the sky. In two heartbeats it had passed and the sky was dark.

The air grew steadily cooler. When his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness and he could see again in the faint green night-glow from the sky, he unwrapped his bundle and put on his clothing again. A faint pattering began around him; a cool drop struck his nose. With the aid of his light-box, he found a sheltered place under a tree and stretched himself out. Rain rattled in the leaves high overhead; beyond the lower branches, in the glow of the light-box, he saw it streaming silvery against the black air.

V

Thorinn sat perched on a rock, chin in his hands, staring at the smooth glassy curve of the water where it disappeared under the overhang. The rocks below were black and glistening with spray; the water made a subdued rushing sound, so constant and pervasive that it was like the sound of blood in his own veins. Twigs, then a broad leaf, rode smoothly down the shining back of the river, curved over and shot abruptly out of sight.

In three days he had followed the river from the western end of the valley, where it fell in a graceful cataract straight down the sheer face of the mountain, to its exit here at the eastern end. He had crossed the river at the shallows, half a league above, and had followed the wall of mountains all the way around the valley. They were the same everywhere: sheer gray rock, unbroken, without a fissure, a ledge, a handhold. The mountains pierced the sky, or else the sky had severed the mountains. There was no exit from the valley except for the cavern.

The sky was dimming; it was time to think of dinner, and then a place to sleep.

He saw now that all his tomorrows were to be made up of such things only: food, sleep, perhaps a walk in the forest or along the river, in a valley so small that he could span it in a day . . . like an imprisoned man pacing his tiny room. No doubt in time the villagers would accept him again. He would learn to speak their tongue, or teach them his. The days would be alike, the years would slip away; then he would die and the vines would pick his bones, and no one would ever know what had become of him.

He now knew what he had tried so long to keep from knowing: the mountains were not mountains, but walls of rock; the sky not a sky, but the roof of a cavern. A fool might have known as much . . . but who could have believed that there were trees, a river, a sky underground?

He got to his feet and turned westward again, moving slowly.

Drawn by the need of human company, he forded the river again and walked upstream to the villagers' playground, but with melancholy perversity did not approach them but hung back, watching from a distance until they had drifted away and disappeared into the forest. He walked across the greensward, looking gloomily at the signs they had left behind them, the grass trampled here, a forgotten rind of fruit there. He wandered up to the pod-vines and looked at them. The one full pod still hung heavy to the ground.

He went into the forest and picked fruit, but the sight and smell of it made his stomach knot, and he threw it into the bushes. Thinking of the water-fowl that nested along the riverbank, he turned with sudden resolution. If nothing else, he could at least hunt his own food and have a meal fit for a man.

The river was witchily green with reflected skylight among the dark tussocks. Wading, he moved with caution, stopping at every step to listen. A rustle from the clump ahead; as he plunged toward it, he heard a sleepy note and saw a crested head appear. He got his hands on the warm feathered neck and wrung it, cutting off the bird's sudden squawk. Another body thrashed up from the grass, wings flapping; he lunged, got that one too. With the plump bodies slung over his shoulder, he waded ashore. Just as he reached the bank, the night raced overhead and the world fell into breathing blackness.

He searched the forest for fallen limbs, tore them loose from

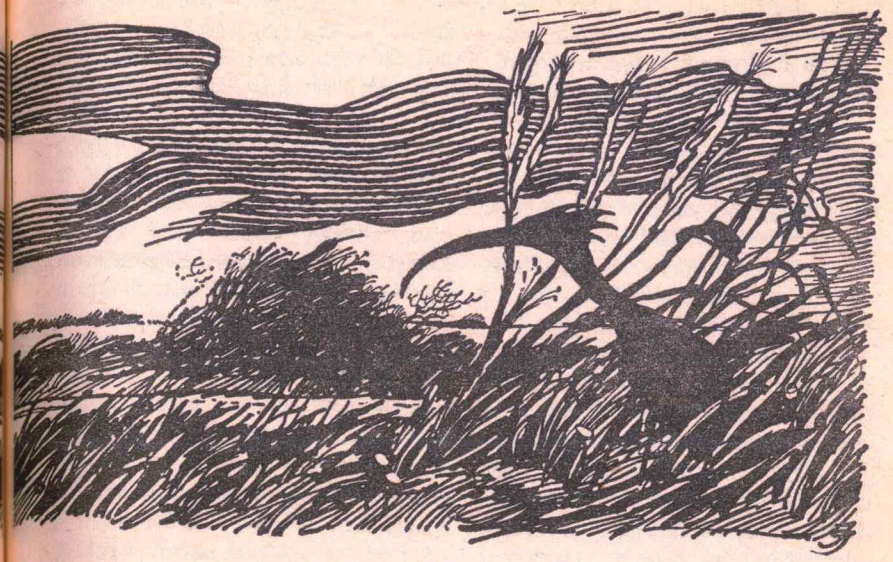


the vines that clung to them with a thousand suckers and kindled a fire on the greensward, not far from the pod-vines. He plucked and cleaned his two fowl — one was a cock, the other a young hen — then contrived a spit between two forked branches thrust into the ground, skewered his birds on it and roasted them over the fire.

In the ruddy light, the greensward was another place, walled in by darkness; the grass a pale ghost of itself. The crisp skin curled, wept grease that sizzled in the flames; the smell that came from it made his mouth fill with water, and he ate the first fowl with raging appetite before it was properly cool enough to handle. He ate a leg and a breast of the second bird; then weariness overcame him and he cast the rest aside and crawled under a tree.

He was up at the first light, washed in the river, then breakfasted on the remains of the second bird. Lazy and replete, he lay down and dozed again.

Some time later, he woke with a start. Half a dozen of the older children were staring at him across the ashes of his fire and the little heap of feathers, bones and offal. Among them was the girl he had spoken to before, or one like her. Their faces were white and dismayed.



Questioning voices came from behind them; the rest of the people were emerging from the forest. The children turned and ran toward them, screaming as they went. A crowd formed around the children; it grew momentarily larger and noisier. Thorinn saw faces turned toward him, staring eyes, open mouths.

Bewildered and alarmed, he got up and stood with bundle in hand, ready to retreat. But the people were turning away. Their voices dwindled; the whole crowd was moving back into the forest. The last of them disappeared.

Nor did they return that day, or the next.

It was beyond imagining how he had offended them so deeply, and yet there could be no doubt. They no longer came to the clearing by the river, or even into the forest above it. At dusk on the third day, stealing down the path to the village, he had spied on them from the trees and had seen them coming back from the opposite direction, from upriver, where they must have found a new playground. He dared not show himself, for fear they would think he had polluted their village as well by his presence.

The forest was changing. For half a league around the playground, leaves hung limp and shabby from the trees. The

fruits still grew in all their senseless profusion, but now the unripe ones were withered and hard, the rest had a bloom of corruption and gave off a nauseous smell. He began to detect the same changes in other places where he had slept and cooked his meals. He spent more and more of his time at the mouth of the river, staring at the smooth curve of water as it fell over the lip.

If he were ever to get out of the valley, it must be by way of the river. He began to think of a boat, something made perhaps of the huge leaves the people used to build their huts. In his mind he saw himself floating down the current in such a boat, faster and faster . . . the cavern opens its mouth, the boat dives into darkness, then capsizes, and he struggles for breath in the roaring water . . . .

No, a boat would not protect him. But what if he made two boats and sealed them together like two halves of a nut, with himself inside? The idea excited him, and he went into the forest for leaves of the necessary size. He found them in plenty and carried an armful down to the riverbank, but as he squatted turning them over, planning in his mind a framework of saplings over which the leaves would be stretched and gummed in place, he saw himself once more drifting down the current in his green shell . . . the boat strikes a rock, bursts open; the water floods in, and he is struggling, drowning . . . .

He cast the leaves aside, angry with himself and the fates, for it seemed to him that the answer was almost within his reach. Deep in thought as he wandered upriver, he found himself again at the deserted playground. He paused, looking up the slope, and his skin grew cold. He went half-unwillingly up to the forest's edge and stood before the pod-vine. Here like green thoughts hung the very things he had been imagining. They had been here all the time, yet he had not really seen them until now. The vine was still green and fresh; one pod still hung heavy; the rest were invitingly open.

He tested an empty one by striking it repeatedly, first with a stick, then with a heavy stone. It resisted his blows; the outer shell of the pod was thick and resilient. He slashed it with his sword; even then, the tough fibers within held it together, and he was content.

He imagined himself cutting a pod, taking it to the river where the current was swift, lying down inside it . . . . But would it close then, when he had cut it from its vine? And if it did, how was he to get the pod into the river?

Another, equally alarming

thought: what if the water made the pod open?

This, at least, he could find out by trial. He grasped the vine above the closed pod, chopped at it with his sword. The blade rebounded at the first blow, then bit in; a milky sap oozed from the wound. Thorinn smote again, slashed the vine through.

The pod remained closed. Thorinn dragged it down the slope into the water, where it floated sluggishly among the reeds. He sat on a tussock and watched it. For a long time nothing happened. Bored and hungry, Thorinn got up and began to forage among the tufts of grass, coming back frequently to look at the floating pod. At last he found a nest of four speckled greenish eggs in one of the tussocks. He punctured one and sniffed it: it was strong-smelling but fresh. As he was tilting his head to drink the egg out of its shell, he heard a distant splash.

He turned. Nothing was to be seen, but from the direction of the pod came a thrashing sound in the water, then a choked cry. Thorinn dropped the egg and hurried. Before he could reach the spot, he saw a human form flounder upright among the reeds.

It was a boy. He stared wildly at Thorinn, then whirled and tried to run. He fell almost at once in the shallows, but was up again and struggling to the shore. Thorinn saw him reeling up the slope; at the forest's edge, he turned a white face for an instant. Then he was gone.

Thorinn found the pod awash among the reeds. It was open and full of water; the soft pink inner surface was already swelling and slimy to the touch.

VI

Thorinn's first idea had been to place the pod on an incline above the river, so that it would roll or slide into the water once he was in it, but he saw that the thing was impossible. He needed some way to hold the pod motionless until it had closed around him. But if motionless before, it would be motionless after; and if it moved after, what was to prevent it from moving before?

Except for this, his plans were complete. He had found the place, a steep grassy bank on the far side of the river, where the water was deep and swift. Nearby in the forest was a healthy pod-vine. When he was ready, he had only to cut a pod, take it to the bank . . . and then what? He saw himself getting in, the pod sliding as it slowly closed around him; the pod splashes into the river, not yet fully closed; water enters it, then it closes. And the man inside, as the pod

darts down the current — is he drowning, helpless?

Or, on a gentler slope: the pod moves more slowly, closes before it reaches the brink, then catches, halts. It lies there on the bank above the river. If it does not go into the river, will it ever open?

Another day passed while he turned the problem over, again and again, always coming to the same end. The rotting forest was turning black and sending out clouds of stench for half a league around the deserted playground. The waterfowl had abandoned that stretch of the river.

Returning to the place he had chosen, he found that the sickness had started there. The grass was turning yellow, brown at the tips. His hesitation ended. He went to the vine in the forest, found it still healthy. He cut a pod, taking care to get a good length of vine with it. Still without knowing what he would do, he dragged it back to the riverbank and laid it on the slope. Below, the water rushed smoothly by. He tossed in a dry twig, watched it dart away out of sight.

He was lightheaded with fasting. He thought, if water flowed here on the ground, it would wash the pod down into the river. But water ran in its own fashion. The river raced below him, deadly and swift.

Or fire: if he could tie the vine to a tree, perhaps by a smaller vine, then build a fire under it to burn through the vine . . . . But what if the fire went out? Or what if it spread in the dry grass and reached the pod before it burned through the vine?

In desperation he went into the forest again, cut down a tough, thin creeper and trimmed it to a single length of half a dozen ells. The creeper was strong. He could not break it in his hands.

Some dry yellow gourds caught his eye. One was nearly two ells long. He cut it from the vine, and it was light and hollow and seeds rattled inside it. He imagined the gourd tied to one end of the creeper, the pod to the other, the creeper passing from one to the other around a stake or sapling. The pod, with himself inside it, would be heavier. It would pull the gourd around the stake and both would fall into the river. But if the gourd were full of water . . . .

Kneeling on the riverbank, he cut a large hole near the stem of the gourd, then thrust it underwater and held it until the last of the air bubbled out. He raised the slippery thing with difficulty. It weighed as much as he did.

His heart was thudding. He laid the gourd down, careful not to spill it, and traced with his eye

the way the line would run, from the gourd to a stake driven into the ground, then down to the pod. He saw himself puncturing the gourd, the water dribbling out. He lies down in the pod, which closes over him. At length the gourd, growing lighter, slides up the slope; the pod, moving down, keeps the line taut; the gourd reaches the stake . . . .

But the stake should not be there. It might catch the curved neck of the gourd, the creeper knotted around it, the knobby surface of the gourd itself. But the stake must be there to hold the pod in the first place.

Dissatisfied, he thought of a moveable peg, a wooden hook. He searched among the dead branches in the forest, found a forked limb with a projecting stub. He held the limb this way and that. Tilted up, the stub would hold the loop of cord. Tilt it down, and the cord would slide off freely. But how to make it tilt? Suddenly, in his mind, gourd, forked limb, cord all came together and he saw how it could be done.

He dropped the forked limb near the gourd and went back into the forest. Half-buried in the undergrowth was a bigger limb, three ells long and as thick as his thigh. With much toil he dragged it out and set it crossways on the slope, wedging the ends behind a shrub and a stone. The smaller limb he set with its stem on the log, the forked ends on the slope above it. The projecting stub stood straight up. Now he carried the heavy gourd up behind the log and laid it down, with care, in the embrace of the forked branch. With a length of creeper he lashed the gourd securely to the branch. He picked up the rest of the creeper, made a loop in one end, slipped it over the smooth projecting stub and leaned back with all his weight. The gourd did not move.

He tied the other end of the creeper to the pod-vine, then placed the pod directly below the log, within an ell of the bank over the river. He tested his work again and saw it was good. The water would run out of the punctured gourd, its weight would lessen; the greater weight of the pod would drag it forward, the forked limb would tilt, the cord would slip off the stub.

All that remained was to do it. Thorinn slowly put on his garments, made sure that all his possessions were in the wallet, sheathed his sword. The pink, soft pod-halves gaped invitingly. Below him, he could hear the rush of the water.

Once more he examined every part of the engine he had made. He knelt behind the log, looked

at the heavy-bellied curve of the gourd between the forks of the limb. He drew his sword, set the point against the bottom of the gourd, then hesitated. He found himself thinking of other ways, of somehow ascending the cataract at the other end of the valley, or finding the doorway in the sky . . . .

A rage at his own weakness took him, and he thrust the sword in.

Water spurted. When he withdrew the blade, a thin stream ran from the gash, twisting as it went, rebounding in lazy droplets from the turf below.

Thorinn got up and went down the slope to the waiting pod. Its pink halves gaped in invitation. In fear and sick disgust, he stepped into it, felt it loathsomely soft under his feet. His muscles jumped with desire to get away, but he made himself sit down, then lie back in the pod's fleshy embrace. He saw a narrowing strip of sky, then the podflesh came slowly and smotheringly against his face.

The rush of the water below faded to silence.

He struggled to get out and found it was quite easy. The pod turned to mist. He was free under a curious twilit sky, walking without fear in a land where interesting things were happening, and where friendly people, whose faces he could not quite see, were speaking to him in words he almost seemed to understand.

He realized that he had lost his sword. That alarmed him faintly, but when he looked again, it was there, bright and shining at his waist. Then he realized it was gone again, but it did not seem to matter. The things that were happening and the things said to him were so interesting and pleasant that years went by in this way without any weariness, and it seemed to him that he could well congratulate himself on having attained this mode of life, so much better in every way than the other, and he pitied those who were still groaning with toil in that former life. He mentioned this to one or two of his companions. They agreed entirely. He knew this by their voices, although their words never became entirely clear.

Then something unpleasant began to happen.

It came to him from a direction in which he could not defend himself, nor could the others help him. It had no face or meaning, but he could not ignore it; it receded, then it came back again, more brutally demanding than ever. He saw that something could be done, but it would mean giving up all his ease and pleasure to the end of time.

He tried to invoke the help of his companions. Then he tried merely to complain to them. But they were gone, and strange delusions intruded themselves, that he was afloat in some sort of vegetable womb, even that he was a man once more, and mortal.

And while he hesitated, the unpleasant thing came back once more, and now it had a sound: the roar of water.

VII

The nonperson did such things that they cannot be told about; he offended both men and their small brothers. In the end even the wildgreen turned its face from him, and the trees denied him their fruits.

Then he raged and destroyed for three days in the wildgreen, and on the fourth day the wildgreen took him and carried him away. For a pleasure pod closed around him while he slept and threw itself into the river Wend, and the river carried him down out of the world of men, into the lake of cold and darkness under the world. That was the end of the nonperson. But the people never went back to Pink Circle, no, never, never, never again.

— DAMON KNIGHT

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

FORECAST

Next month in *Galaxy* — by which we mean one month from now; in case you missed getting The Word, we're on a monthly publishing schedule once more — we have a number of stories worth calling to your attention. There's John Brunner's *Factsheet Six*, Larry Niven's *There Is a Tide*, a Brian W. Aldiss story, *Dreamer, Schemer* . . . and many more.

However, the *lead* story deserves a special word. The name of it is *A Specter Is Haunting Texas*. What it is is satire.

The rules of satire are such that it must do more than make you laugh. No matter how amusing it is, it doesn't count unless you find yourself wincing a little even as you chuckle. *A Specter Is Haunting Texas* fully lives up to the rules; the wince factor is high. We don't care who you are — Texan or Mexican; Democrat, Republican, Communist or member of the Y.A.F., white or black; Christian, pagan or anywhere in between — there is plenty for everybody, and you'll find a wince or two just marked for you.

The author is Fritz Leiber; and our opinion is that this will be one of the most talked-about science-fiction stories of this or any year.

BOOTH 13

by JOHN LUTZ

Tired of living? Here's the easy way out — if you don't mind a one-way trip!

Thin wisps of early morning vapor shredded as the steel-gray, triple-decker hearse sped smoothly through the deserted city streets. The turbine engine was silent; the only sound was the whir of the rubber tires on the pavement.

Lorden Manwill sat with his back to the glass partition that separated the rear compartment of the hearse from the driver. Dr. Reel sat on the small upholstered seat opposite him.

"How do you explain it?" Dr. Reel asked. He was a thin, frown-etched man who thought too much about too many things.

Lorden shrugged his shoulders beneath his black clergyman's robe and said nothing. He didn't like the idea of admitting to Dr. Reel that he too had given the subject a lot of thought lately.

"You can't tell me it doesn't worry you," Dr. Reel said frankly. "You're not an insensitive fool like most of the protectorates." Lorden could be just as frank. There was almost a smile in his blue eyes. "No, I'm not." He was well aware that, though only the safest security risks could become protectorates, the job didn't require a particularly keen mind, nor for that matter a particularly moral one. The ancient clergyman's robes were only a matter of tradition, plus the idea that the sight of them still invoked trust in the public despite the fact that organized religion had long ago declined to nothingness. For a protectorate, dedication to the job was all the government really required.

"We've seen the death total double — triple — in the last two weeks," Dr. Reel said wonderingly.

"A lot of it stems from the trouble with the East," Lorden said. "Life isn't quite as bountiful as it used to be."

Dr. Reel shrugged. "War is an accepted thing. The people should know they'll be affected somewhat at home. It's only temporary."

"But there hasn't been a major war since lysogene," Lorden pointed out. "At least not a major enough war to create a major shortage of lysogene."

The hearse took a sharp corner, and Dr. Reel braced himself. "I suppose that has to enter into it," he said thoughtfully. "No one can really remember what society was like without it. You start taking the stuff when you're in short pants and then you take it for granted. Still, it's not that potent a drug, and it's not addictive."

A slight smile formed on Lorden's even features. "People can get along fine without it until they need it. That's why our troops are getting the major portion produced. They need it more often than civilians."

Dr. Reel picked up his medical bag, set it on his lap and leaned back in his seat as the huge hearse accelerated up a hill. "Do you think we'll win the war, Lorden?"

"I'm not sure it really matters. Eventually the East and West Security Councils will meet to work out a truce. But the real purpose of both will already have been accomplished: the population growth will have been temporarily checked; new troop movements and weapons will have been tested, and the military will have again proven a reason for its existence."

Dr. Reel's lined face creased in a friendly but almost satanic grin. "That's treason you've just talked," he said, running his fingers over the grained leather of his medical bag.

With precise smoothness, the hearse braked to a stop.

"Time to go to work," Dr. Reel said, as he and Lorden opened the side door and stepped down into the street.

The sun, not yet risen to the horizon, was still casting its even gray light among the tall buildings. Though everyone vigorously supported the Self-Erasure Bureau at the polls, it was

still good public relations to conduct this particular part of the operation before the big cities awoke and the streets thronged with people. Among the gaudy advertisements that lined the street, the plain white sign that marked the presence of self-erasure booths stood out in vivid contrast.

Lorden and Dr. Reel walked around back of the hearse and stepped up on the curb. Lorden looked at the row of four dull steel booths, like ordinary telephone booths, only slightly larger and with solid doors that locked from the inside. As he suspected they would be, all four doors were closed.

He got to work quickly, reaching through the slits in his black robe to get his ring of small, numbered keys from his pants pocket. He inserted key number twelve in the lock on the door of the first booth, glancing unthinkingly at the words engraved above the steel door: SANS EVERYTHING. He twisted the key to the left, and an exhaust fan hummed, ridding the booth of deadly vapors. Lorden twisted the key to the right and opened the steel door.

This one was a girl, a young blonde. She'd slipped off the stool that projected from the wall of the booth and slumped against Lorden's legs when the door opened. She had the usual expression of complete peace on her waxlike features.

Lorden reached inside the booth to the shelf that contained a pad of writing paper and envelopes. There was a sealed envelope laying on the shelf. He picked it up and slipped it into the leather pouch he wore strapped about his waist. Then he inserted the key into the coin box, twisted, and caught the three quarters in his right hand. The coins, too, went into the leather pouch. Lorden signaled for Dr. Reel.

After a brief examination, Dr. Reel said matter-of-factly, "Dead." The hearse driver and his assistant wrapped the girl's body in a rubberized sheet and slid it into the top tier in the back compartment of the hearse. Lorden left the door of Booth 12 open (without a key it could be locked or unlocked only from the inside) and stepped over to Booth 13.

There were two bodies in Booth 13, an occurence that was becoming much more frequent. They were young, red-haired, almost surely brother and sister. Lorden glanced at their sealed envelope and suddenly felt a great curiosity about its contents, but his job was security, and so he resisted and slid the envelope into the leather pouch.

"A bargain," Dr. Reel said as he examined them.

Lorden twisted the key and caught the three quarters. Seventy-five cents, he thought. Cheap enough for perfumed, peaceful escape. The government could have charged more, but that way the self-erasure booths would lose their spur-of-the-moment appeal, for suicide was not a rational thing to many people, even though since the official death of religion they no longer feared any hellish after-life. Oblivion was what the booths promised, and oblivion they delivered. Step in, close the door, put in your change and push the pink button.

"Both dead," Dr. Reel said. Then to the driver, "I hope one of the booths is empty, or we'll have to cramp them in to make room."

Lorden smiled to himself as he moved on to Booth 14. In the last few months it had become a rarity to find an empty booth. That was what the government was upset about. Their pat and humane answer to the population problem showed signs of getting out of hand.

Lorden and his crew finished their work at the row of booths and drove on to the second of their four stops.

All the booths had been full. With the sun rising behind it, the hearse sped onto the winding exit ramp off the outer belt highway. Its turbine engine became perceptible to the ear, then whined to a steady low pitch as it braked and coasted through the entrance of Self-Erasure Bureau Station Four.

Lorden supervised the unloading of the hearse as the bodies were placed on the conveyor belt to be processed and cremated. Already a slender finger of black smoke was curling itself into the morning sky from the smokestack of the main building. He had the driver wait while he turned in his keys and locked leather pouch, then he was driven to the station's exit gate before the hearse was parked among hundreds of similar streamlined vehicles. Dr. Reel stood alongside him as they waited at the helo pickup.

"You saw the notice on the bulletin screen?" Dr. Reel asked.

Lorden shook his head, squinting up into the brightening sunlight for a sign of the South helo.

"Tomorrow all lysogene supplies will stop for civilian government employees." Dr. Reel watched Lorden closely as he said this, waiting for a reaction.

"My family and I can get along nicely without it," Lorden said. "As you mentioned, Doctor, it's not a very potent or addictive drug."

Dr. Reel smiled. "And as you mentioned, Lorden, that special feeling of well-being isn't really missed until it's needed." Reel stopped talking for a moment as three men and a woman walked past them to stop and wait in a small knot about ten feet away. Reel looked up at the sky and then down at Lorden. "I wonder," he said, "what do you think about the brother and sister we found today? So young . . . what could make them do something like that together?"

"Only one reason that I can think of," Lorden said.

There was a high-pitched whine, a growing shadow, and Lorden and two of the men moved toward the ramp of the helo pickup. Lorden boarded and looked down through curved plexiglass at Dr. Reel's swiftly receding figure. He watched until the doctor disappeared altogether.

Gloria greeted Lorden at the door with a wifely kiss, an affectionate look from cool blue eyes. "Usual day?" she asked.

"Usual."

Lorden took a needlepoint shower, then he slumped on the sofa cushions and waited while Gloria prepared the mid-morning meal. He glanced around and saw Bobby's school books on the table by the front door. Bobby would be off to the government sponsored Sports Training Camp by now. Lorden looked with amusement at the stack of books. His eyes picked out a title: *Brave New World, Revised Edition.* He remembered an old professor he'd had years ago when in school who claimed that the original edition of the book had been meant as a satire. Or on reflection, had he merely been playing a wry joke on the class, trying to provoke discussion? Lorden tried to recall, but the years clouded his memory.

After dinner Lorden and Gloria sat before the telescreen and watched the Western Security Council in session. The government had decided that the citizens had to understand this problem thoroughly, for it was the citizens' as well as the government's dilemma.

The representative of the Canadian Complex had just suggested the possibility of eliminating the self-erasure booths, and the North European representative was in heated reply. "And what of the people's reaction to this?" he asked in the metallic voice of the auto-interpreter.

"They will not stand for it, and who can blame them! And where does the distinguished representative of the Canadian Complex suggest the government make up the revenue? Shall we increase

taxes on the working class and create more members of the already problem-stricken consumer class? And could we continue to fight the war without funds? We are led to understand that the East faces this same curious problem, but would they agree to destroy all of *their* self-erasure booths? This solution is entirely infeasible."

"What *is* the real issue?" Gloria asked. "All they seem to do is talk in circles."

Lorden sipped his after-meal coffee and grinned. "They talk in circles because they've exhausted most possibilities and they're stymied. The problem is that the war is putting an unexpected burden on the consumer class. Their only income is their government stipend. They're not workers, builders, like we are. What they have depended upon in the past is their steadily increasing allotment to buy goods. But now it's decreasing. There's simply no reason for them to go on. Who can prefer seemingly endless monotony to death?"

"But why all the discussion about lysogene?"

"Because," Lorden explained, "it's the shortage of lysogene that's intensifying the consumer class's monotony. There's no escape, and they're no longer able to cope with the problems of a mandatory life." He pressed his lips together and frowned, realizing that he was beginning to sound exactly like Dr. Reel. Well, perhaps the man made sense.

"It's not as serious as they make it out to be," Lorden said. "And the consumer class will be the most affected."

"What about us?" asked Gloria, a note of fine anxiety in her voice.

"I think we can survive without lysogene's escape for a few months, even if we've never done without it in our lives. It's not an addictive drug, you know."

But now the representative of the Canadian Complex was talking about the "chain reaction," as friends and family, left rootless and aimless by the thousands of deaths daily in the cities, were drifting in steadily increasing numbers to the sweet-smelling escape of the booths. It was not that they had reason to die, but that they had insufficient reason to live. This was not considered a problem by the North European representative, but Lorden was remembering the two red-headed children in Booth 13, and the red-haired man who had died in that same booth two weeks earlier.

He shrugged. Perhaps they weren't even related.

"Let's go to the beach today," he said to Gloria, "and let the Security Council solve all these grave problems."

She assented with a smile.

As they splashed hand in hand into the warm water Lorden knew in his heart that they and millions like them could find the necessary reason for living.

A month later, on the hearse's stop nearest Lorden's home, he found Gloria dead in Booth 17.

Lorden masked his emotions and stepped back out of the booth. He told the hearse driver that there were complications, ordering him to deliver what cargo he had to the station and return to pick him up later. As the hearse pulled away Lorden saw Dr. Reel looking at him curiously from behind the gray-tinted glass of a side window.

His fingers trembling, Lorden opened the sealed envelope he'd found in the booth.

It was a culmination of things — little things, really. She had felt depressed that morning; Bobby had left for Government Camp late; she had argued on the phone-viewer with her mother; the telescreen had broken and a repairman couldn't be reached.

Of course things could be patched up with her mother, just as the telescreen could be repaired, but she had found herself wondering if it were all really worthwhile. She wasn't really *needed*. The luster if not the love had gone from their marriage, and Bobby would actually have more benefits at a government child care center. The monotony of her existence had suddenly imposed itself on her.

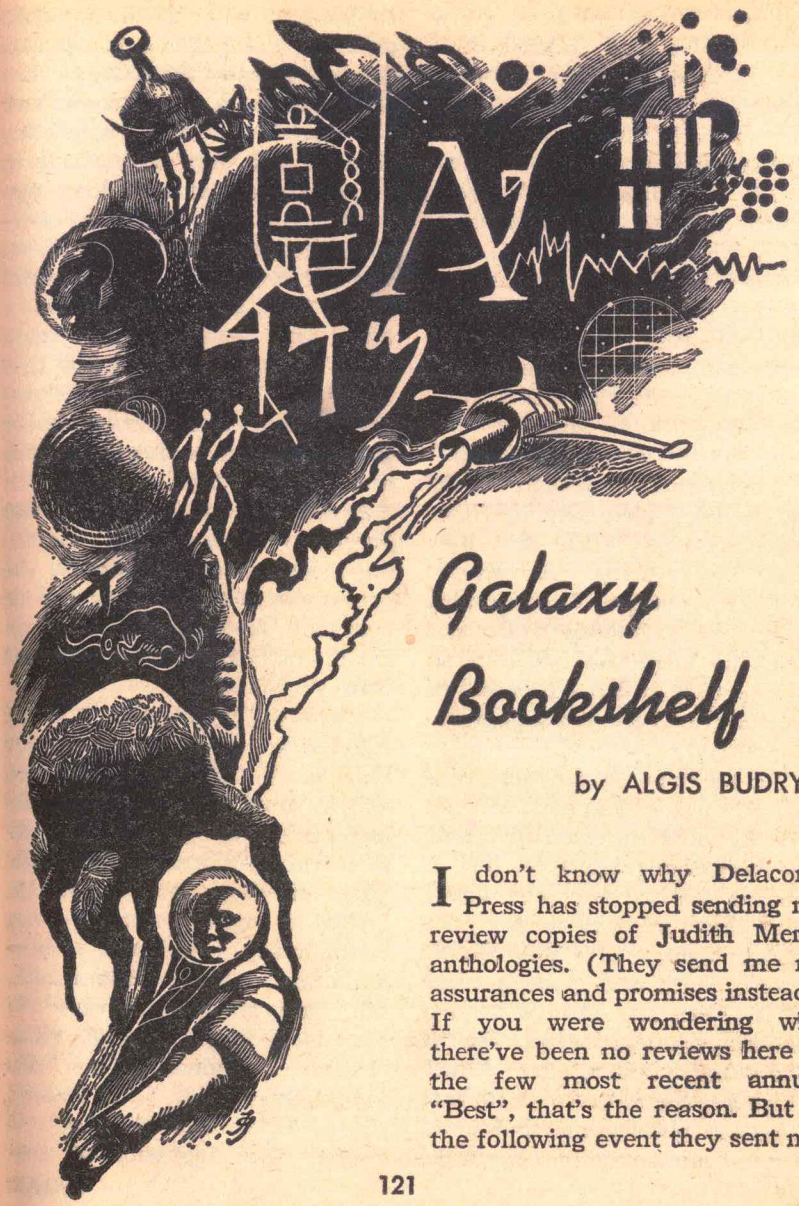
Lorden looked down at his dead wife's peaceful features. It had all been so casual. like the decision to dye her hair. She'd even ended the note with a short P. S., saying that she was sorry, that she was sure Lorden would understand.

He did understand. He understood perfectly.

"Letting the envelope and note slip from between his fingers, he stepped back out of the booth and closed the door. He reached through the dark slashes in his clergyman's robe and dug his hands deep into his pockets. Then he walked across the street to get change for a dollar.

— JOHN LUTZ

REMEMBER: ▪ New subscriptions and changes of address require 5 weeks to process!



Galaxy Bookshelf

by ALGIS BUDRYS

I don't know why Delacorte Press has stopped sending me review copies of Judith Merril anthologies. (They send me reassurances and promises instead). If you were wondering why there've been no reviews here of the few most recent annual "Best", that's the reason. But in the following event they sent me,

besides a promise of a review copy, an actual contributor's copy. And so, making a minor exception in a reasonably firm rule, we shall indulge ourselves in my herewith spontaneous review of *SF: The Best of The Best,* Judith Merril, ed., Delacorte, $6.50.

This anthology of 29 stories distilled from the first five annuals contains, among more worthwhile items, "Sense From Thought Divide," by Mark Clifton; "The Public Hating," by Steve Allen; "You Know Willie," by Theodore R. Cogswell; "Hickory, Dockory, Kerouac," by Richard Gehman; "The Anything Box," by Zenna Henderson; Mack Reynolds's "Compounded Interest," "Nobody Bothers Gus," by Algis Budrys, and an introduction by the editor, all of which have a common sophomoric quality.

Yet all these stories were considered more or less good in their day. Zenna Henderson of course had her serious detractors just as soon as she had any fans, and I would have liked to see the publishing history of "The Public Hating" with Sam Jones's name on it; Allen has always been a pleasant, shallow talent. But if you take something like "Gus," which got the top rate on its first magazine publication, and a lot of nice comment from respectable critics, and which I was not only proud of doing but employed as the beginning of an entire pocket career under a pseudonym, and you read it now, with its glib inclusions like "his calculations in sociomathematics had long ago predicted . . . ," and its ponderous, posturing narrative technique straight out of a commercial about "Sue, it's my job to know what fixes hard-to-whiten teeth . . . ," you begin to realize that the best of 1955, or even 1960, reflected some criteria which are as the Moon removed from standards we use today.

I don't know if this is what Judy was out to show, by including these pieces, or whether she actually still thinks they are fit company for some of the top-flight work which is also included here.

Richard McKenna's "Casey Agonistes," as well as Avram Davidson's "The Golem" were, and in some ways still are, seminal works. Along with being demonstrably influential on subsequent sf, they also signaled the arrival of major talents — and continuously imitated ones. Something of the same can be said for Cordwainer Smith's "No, No, Not Rogov!," and either "Prima Belladonna" or "The Sound Sweep" by J. G. Ballard, or for Brian Aldiss's "Let's be Frank," although each of these

latter two writers went on experimenting past these stages and each later evolved what is now his characteristic approach, which may even be a pity.

There are two Fritz Leiber stories, as well as "Bulkhead" by Theodore Sturgeon, "The Hoofer" by Walter M. Miller, Jr., "A Death in The House" by Clifford D. Simak, two Carol Emshwiller stories, two Damon Knight stories including "The Handler," and stories by Sheckley, Theodore L. Thomas, Robert Abernathy, and Isaac Asimov — very especially, the Asimov, "Dreaming Is a Private Thing" — which are written either as well or nearly as well as anything these people have ever done. Furthermore, each of these stories is markedly individual and firmly part of the particular contribution made to sf by each of these uncommon people. To top things off, the book closes with Shirley Jackson's "One Ordinary Day, With Peanuts," which is an excellent story and, when first published, represented a brilliant, useful glimpse into a new way of looking at things.

Miss Merril, as you know, is fond of making each collection fit some hypothesis anent the progress and destiny of sf. As you also know, I have consistently found these hypotheses to be quite labored, with the result that her blurbs and introductions often seem rather far-fetched. (This time, she let the individual contributors check the blurbs, which makes a difference. So does a policy of making the blurbs mostly biographical, rather than polemical. As a victim of three previous "Best" exercises of that sort, I found this a refreshing departure, and hope it represents a permanent change rather than an exception created by this volume's unique nature).

The introduction is still no prize, though this time it's sufficiently disconnected from the seasonal migration so that one can see Judy's objective is to foster an impression of evolution *whether or not* it can be shown to have some encapsulable objective. Maybe Judy and I are both mellowing, but I think I see that, and can even understand why it would be important to do that. Furthermost, as I've said earlier, this book demonstrates that something marked and remarkable has, indeed, happened to sf since the first days of this century's second half. I don't think any of us has come within a mile of putting his or her finger on what that might really be, but this bag of lusty prototypes, peaks of evolution, and flies in amber, does indicate that we weren't all born yesterday, and on the other hand may not die tomorrow.

John Brunner doesn't know his heroes are callous, egotistical sociopaths who interpret their environment strictly with reference to the benefit of Number One. No other view explains his writings. Take that view, and you can see how his books might have been powerful, compelling, and at times even beautiful, if it weren't for him.

Quicksand, (Doubleday, $4.50), comes closer than any Brunner I've ever read to being a noteworthy, major piece of sf. In it are all the clues to the weaknesses and the unexpected strengths of this infuriating man.

Brunner infuriates because he nearly always undermines, rather than undertakes, a major situation. Clearly, he has the wit to know what's important and what isn't. Then he proceeds to whine and swagger his way through a melange of self-imposed obstacles, and to arrive somewhere to one side of his announced destination, having enroute made sure the reader doesn't give a damn anymore.

The hero of *Quicksand* is a staff doctor at a hospital for the insane. Like many such institutions, Chent Hospital is subject to the various administrative, architectural and social compulsions which insure that it functions as a dumping ground for social failures and a grab-bag for medico-political hacks. Brunner captures both circumstance and mood in describing this place, from the physical plant's typical origin as somebody's unwanted estate on through the various incompetences of the attending and supervising personnel.

Into this example of 20th Century obliterative reform comes a creature innocent by Biblical definition — naked, childlike, incapable of human speech — or else hopelessly corrupt by the same definition; "Urchin" is very much a functioning woman and is as skilled as Modesty Blaise as well in lockpicking and Judo. Naturally, nobody — not the hospital staff, not the police who agree to her incarceration and "treatment" there, and not even the protaganist, makes the mental step the reader makes immediately: "Urchin" is from some other world, and since there's no trace of a transportation device, it's very likely a world either in Earth's own past or future or else on some parallel plane of existence.

Time travel and parallel-world stories are *ab initio* more powerful than space travel stories. All other things being equal, the latter device involves only the crew of a container that must be less large than the culture which produced it; the former promises eventual point-to-point contact

with everything in the world.

It's at first enough that the reader be led into grasping the situation. Quite properly at first, Brunner gives his hero, Paul Fidler, a certain amount of additional time.

Fidler's wife can be taken one of two ways. She is a pushing, promiscuous, psychically frigid woman — in fact, by intention she is very much like Brunner's heroes are by inadvertence — and she is either Lilith or Eve, a patsy for displacement by the God-given rival. (If you don't happen to like this critical construct, you're free to develop your own. Mrs. Fidler's still a bitch either because she likes it that way or because you like it.)

Fidler, who sincerely believes himself to be a decent man, now finds himself forced to deal with this situation as a prime mover, since it was he who first found Urchin naked in the rainy woods shortly after the salesman with the open fly got his arm broken. So Fidler undertakes to "cure" something which may be the only well thing in his world.

Now what we have here is material that goes deep into the human situation and human experience, and a situation that offers a number of experimental models of emotional reality. All that remains for Brunner to do now is to set one or more of these models in motion and either something valid or something clearly and thus usefully invalid will result.

But this is not what Brunner does. He begins immediately to introduce a plenteous catalogue of complications, among which these technically questionable inclusions:

(1) The hero is idiotically concealing a nervous breakdown which, in his youth, made it seem to him that he was trapped in an unfamiliar world. (2) Even though there are one or two sympathetic and/or intelligent people at Chent, not one of them comes any closer to the most elementary deductions about Urchin than Fidler himself does. (3) The lies Urchin tells Fidler are more believable, and have fewer holes in them, than the "truth" he finally pries out of her by using standard police interrogative techniques — that is, techniques Urchin could be expected to encounter, and therefore should have been proofed against if she was indeed what Fidler eventually "proves" her to be just before he goes out and resolves his entire situation . . . and closes the book . . . by committing suicide.

(1) Is a red herring, because nothing sensible comes of it, or else a plant for the incredible ending, in which case it doesn't

help a bit, or else the thread of what was intended to be a different (and less attractive) pattern of plot development. Whatever it is, it's equivocal as hell, and typical of Brunner's methods. (2) Knowing the reader was outrunning his hero — he must have known — Brunner waits too long to have the hero catch up. Page after page goes lurching by; event after event is noted, described (sometimes indifferently, or not at all), and registered . . . and *still* this 20th-century man refuses to make the mental step, even in jest. This is either soap-opera technique — Brunner often mixes techniques; it's all the same bag of toys to him — or else it's a case of being trapped in his own dither. (3) The events of the final third of the book are so telescoped, and Urchin's sudden shift of personality is so blatant, that it's difficult to evaluate this portion as a story at all; rather, it's an outline. But there are clearly two Urchin's — which may account for the two hypotheses on her origin, because the wanton of the payoff is not the continent postulant of the beginning, nor is the wanton of the payoff the prostitute of the "explanation."

Continually in this book are the elements of an uncommonly fine, lovely and either quite happy or fittingly tragic story. A story which Brunner as a reader or as a critic would appreciate. But as a writer he fails to carry out the responsibilities he imposes on himself, and this sits poorly with the attitudes he strikes.

The Secret Visitors by James White (Ace) is resurrected early White. Those of us who are looking for the book after *The Watch Below* are still looking.

Science Fiction Inventions, edited by Damon Knight (Lancer), is an excellent book. Besides containing Asimov's "Dreaming is a Private Thing" and Cordwainer Smith's "No, No, Not Rogov!" in common with Judy's *Best of The Best,* it includes Harry Harrison's "Rock Diver," Kuttner-Moore's "Private Eye," de Camp's "Employment," and Katherine MacLean's "The Snowball Effect" as well as Ted Sturgeon's "The Chromium Helmet" — each of them a real landmark sf story, in the especial sense that each of them either originated or first fruited a basic technological idea in such a happy combination with story values that it is impossible to touch that idea again without having to find some totally new framework for it.

Let me let you in on the test I personally use for this sort of thing. Also in this book is John R. Pierce's neglected, perfect short story about immortality, "Invariant." From it, I eventually worked my brain around to the point where I was able to write a story called "The End of Summer." On the other hand, when I wrote another story called "The Burning World," I wasn't going 180 degrees against Frank Herbert's "Committee of The Whole." I was going 90 degrees away from Jack Williamson's earlier "The Equalizer."

Say there are maybe a hundred sf stories altogether which really, fully, meet the strictest test for science fiction. "Committee of The Whole," Carol Emshwiller's "Hunting Machine," and "No, No, Not Rogov!" are not among them. But the other seven stories in this book are, and that's a remarkable percentage. Furthermore, publishing them here, when a more conventional anthologist — and a more conventional editor than Larry Shaw — would have thought twice about a book of "old standards," proves a rather important thing. No matter who wrote it, or when, a really good sf story is inexhaustible.

Apparently, gigantism is inexhaustible, too, and I don't mean that exclusively as a smart remark. There's something about sheer immensity, in space or in time, which fascinates people. So a story about a really huge spaceship, constructed over a span of many generations by people who have to devote themselves heart and soul to the task, has got a lot going for it. So much that this dominating image will overshadow grievous defects in plotting, characterization, and simple logic. So there's quite a bit of enjoyment to be gotten out of Mark S. Geston's *Lords of the Starship* (Ace). Nevertheless, it's a bad and disappointing book on it's own terms.

However, a writer who can sustain a story over generations of characters is a writer who can play on Asimov's team. A writer who can respond emotionally to these elements has a little bit of Arthur Clarke in him, and a man who could initiate it has a touch of Heinlein. C. L. Moore wouldn't have written any part of this book the way Geston does, but some passages might appeal to her. There are places Poul Anderson would appreciate. None of these people would have been as clumsy as Geston is . . . but my point is that there was a time when they were.

— ALGIS BUDRYS

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

CONCLUSION



Goblin Reservation

by
CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

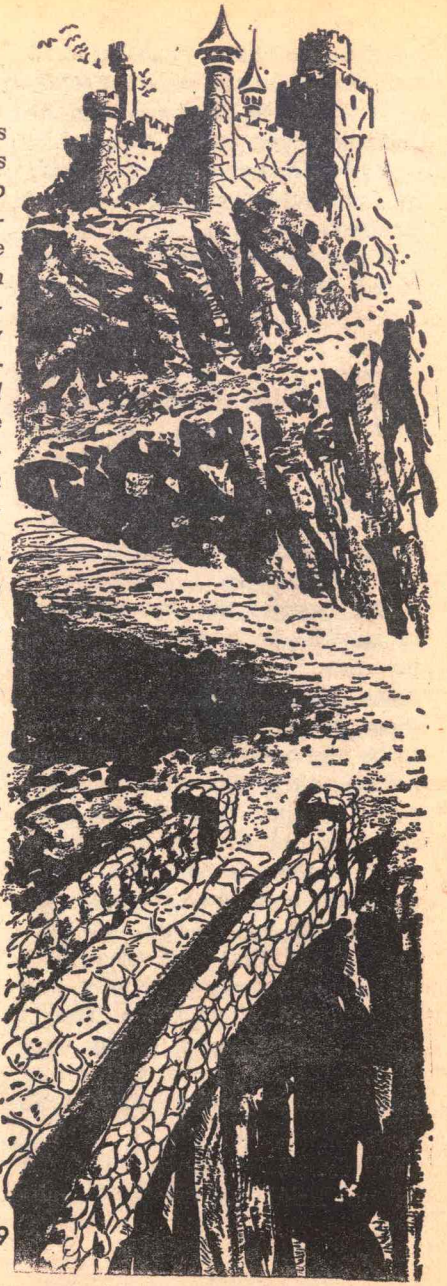
Illustrated by
MORROW

The goblins and banshees had survived endless ages. Would Man be able to outlast them?

What has gone before -

PETER MAXWELL returns to Earth and finds that he has died. It was the result of a slipup in the matter-transmitting machines, that had somehow gone wrong on a routine jump from Earth to another planet, elsewhere in the Galaxy. Somehow he had reached his destination — and at the same time, he had been "received" on a strange crystal planet where a race of beings had welcomed him, taken care of him and ultimately returned him to Earth — where, meanwhile, his other "copy" had already returned and been killed in an accident. So Maxwell is without home, job or belongings — everything was lost when he "died."

Maxwell's work had been with the Supernatural faculty of his university, specializing in dealings with ghosts, banshees, revived prehistoric men and other fauna associated with the Goblin Reservation. His closest friends, Ghost and Alley Oop, try to help him, as does a girl, Carol Hampton, who has moved into what used to be his apartment, with her pet, a saber-toothed tiger. Somehow Maxwell feels, his troubles and the reason for his diversion to the crystal planet have something to do with that strange



machinelike object that Time had retrieved from the remote prehistoric ages, the Artifact. And he becomes even more sure of it when he finds, in a painting made by a 20th-century man, that same Artifact.

How had the artist known about it?

XVII

Maxwell found a secluded corner, a couple of chairs screened by a huge flowering plant of some sort, planted in a marble tub of generous proportions. There was no one there, and he sat down.

Out beyond the corner where he sat, the party was drawing to its close, beginning to dwindle down. Some people had left, and those who still were there seemed to be less noisy. And if one more person asked him what had happened to him, Maxwell told himself, he'd belt them in the jaw.

I'll explain, he had told Carol when she had asked the night before — I'll explain over and over again. And that was what he'd done, not entirely truthfully, and no one had believed him. They'd looked at him with glassy eyes and they had figured that either he was drunk or was making fools of them.

And he, he realized, had really been the one who had been made a fool. He had been invited to the party, but not by Nancy Clayton. Nancy had not sent him clothes to wear and had not sent the car that had let him out at the back door to walk down the hall, past the door where the Wheeler waited. And ten to one, the dogs had not been Nancy's either, although he had not thought to ask her.

Someone, he realized, had gone to a lot of trouble in a very awkward and involved manner to make sure the Wheeler had a chance to talk with him. It was all so melodramatic, stinking so of cloak and dagger, that it was ridiculous. Except that, somehow, he couldn't quite bring himself to think of it as ridiculous.

He coddled his drink with both hands and listened to the clatter of the dying party.

He peered out around the greenery of the plant roosting in the tub and he could not see the Wheeler, although the Wheeler had been around for a good part of the evening.

He passed the drink, absentmindedly, from one hand to the other, and he knew he didn't want it, that he'd had a touch too much to drink — not so much, perhaps, too much to drink, as the wrong place to be drinking it, not with a warm, tight group of friends in a friendly room, but with too many people who were either strangers or only slightly

known, and in a room that was too large and too impersonal. He was tired, more weary than he'd known. In just a little while, he'd get up on his feet and say good night to Nancy, if she were around, and stumble back to Oop's shack, the best way that he could.

And tomorrow? he asked himself. Tomorrow there were things that he should do. But he'd not think of them tonight; he'd wait until tomorrow.

He lifted the drink over the the rim of the marble tub and poured it on the soil.

"Cheers," he told the plant.

Carefully, bending slowly so as not to lose his balance, he set the glass upon the floor.

"Sylvester," asked a voice, "do you see what we have here?"

He twisted around, and there, on the reverse side of the plant, stood Carol with Sylvester close beside her.

"Come on in," he invited them. "It's a hideaway I found. If the two of you stay very quiet — "

"I've been trying to get you by yourself all evening," Carol told him, "but there never was a chance. I want to know what was this routine of you and Sylvester hunting down the Wheeler?"

She came farther back into the corner and stood waiting for his answer.

"You were no more surprised than I was," he said. "Sylvester showing up fairly left me gasping. I had no idea — "

"I get invited around a lot," said Carol, coldly. "Not for myself, of course, since I suppose you're wondering, but because of Sylvester. He makes a good conversation piece."

"Well, good for you," said Maxwell. "You're one up on me. I was not invited."

"But you got here just the same."

"But don't ask me how. I would be somewhat pressed for an explanation."

"Sylvester has always been a decent cat," she said, accusingly. "Perhaps a little greedy sometimes, but a gentleman."

"Oh, I know," said Maxwell. "I'm a bad influence on almost everyone."

She came all the way around the plant and sat down in the other chair. "Are you going to tell me what I asked?"

He shook his head. "I don't know if I can. It was somewhat confusing."

"I don't know," she said, "that I've met a more exasperating man. I don't think you're being fair."

"By the way," he said, "you saw the painting, didn't you?"

"Why, of course I did. That was what the party was all about.

The painting and that funny Wheeler."

"Did you notice anything unusual?"

"Unusual?"

"Yes, about the painting."

"I don't think I did."

"Up on the hill there was a tiny cube. Black, sitting on the hill. It looked like the Artifact."

"I missed it. I didn't look that closely at it."

"You saw the gnomes, I presume."

"Yes, I noticed them. Or, at least, they looked like gnomes."

"And those other creatures," Maxwell said. "They looked different, somehow."

"Different from what?"

"Different from the other creatures Lambert usually painted."

She said, "I didn't know you were a Lambert expert."

"I'm not," he said. "I went to the library this morning, after I learned about this party and the painting Nancy had and hunted up a book that had plates of his paintings."

"But what if they were different?" Carol asked. "A painter surely has a right to paint anything he wants to."

"Of course he has," said Maxwell. "There's no question of that. But this painting was of Earth. Or, at least, if that was the Artifact, and I think it was, then it was of Earth. But not this Earth, not the Earth we know today. Perhaps the Jurassic Earth."

"And you don't think his other paintings were of Earth? They'd have to be of Earth. When Lambert lived, there was no other place to paint. There wasn't any space travel — not any real space travel, just out to the Moon and Mars."

"There was the space travel of imagination," Maxwell told her. "Space travel and time travel of the mind. No painter ever has been circumscribed by the here and now. And that's what everyone had thought, of course — that Lambert painted in the realm of imagination. But after tonight I wonder if he might not have been painting actual scenes and actual creatures — places where he'd been."

"You might be right," said Carol, "but how could he have gotten there? This business of the Artifact is exciting, but —"

"It's something that Oop is always talking about," he explained. "He remembers the goblins and the trolls and all the rest of the Little Folk from Neanderthaler days. But there were others then, he said. Others that were worse. They were more malicious and mischievous, and the Neanderthal people were scared to death of them."

"And you think some of these things in the painting may be the creatures Oop remembers."

"It was in my mind," he admitted. "I wonder if Nancy would mind if I brought Oop here tomorrow so he could see the painting."

"I don't imagine that she would," said Carol, "but, actually, it's not necessary. I took pictures of the painting."

"But you —"

"I know, of course," she said, "that it's not the proper thing to do. But I asked Nancy and she didn't mind. What else could she say? I didn't take the pictures to sell or anything like that. I just took them to have them for my own, for my personal enjoyment. A sort of pay, perhaps, for bringing Sylvester with me so people could have a look at him. Nancy knows what the score is, and there wasn't anything that she could do about the picture taking. If you want Oop to have a look at them —"

"You mean you would?" he asked.

"Why, of course I would. And please don't blame me for taking the pictures. It's a way of getting even."

"Getting even? With Nancy?"

"Not her, particularly. With all these other people who invite me to their parties. They don't really want me; it's Sylvester they invite. As if he were a trained bear or a clown of some sort. And, of course, to get him to their parties, they must invite me, too. But I know why they're inviting me, and they know that I know and they keep on inviting me."

"I think I understand," he said.

"I think," she said, "it's very patronizing of them."

"So do I," he said.

"If we're going to show Oop the pictures," she said, "perhaps we'd best get going. This party is dying on its feet. You are positive you won't tell me what happened with the Wheeler."

"Later on," he said. "Not right now. Maybe later on."

They left their place behind the potted plant and walked across the floor, heading for the door, threading their way through the thinning clusters of guests.

"We should hunt up Nancy," Carol suggested, "and say goodbye to her."

"Some other time," said Maxwell. "We can write a note or phone her to say we couldn't find her and thank her for the evening, say how much we enjoyed it, how her parties are the ones we try to never miss, how much we liked the painting and how clever it was of her to get hold of it and —"

"Cut out the clowning," Carol said. "You're forcing too much."

"I know it," Maxwell said, "but I always try."

They came to the door and started down the long flight of wide, curving stone stairs which led down to the roadway.

"Professor Maxwell!" cried a voice.

Maxwell turned. Coming down the stairs was Churchill.

"Just a moment, Maxwell, if you please," he said.

"Yes, what is it, Churchill?"

"A word. Alone, if the lady doesn't mind."

"I'll wait for you at the road," Carol said to Maxwell.

"Don't bother," Maxwell said. "I'll settle him real fast."

"No," said Carol, "I'll wait. I don't want any trouble."

Maxwell waited while Churchill came swiftly down the stairs. The man was slightly out of breath, and he reached out a hand to grab Maxwell by the arm.

"I've been trying to get to you all evening long," he said, "but you were always with a crowd."

"What is it that you want?" Maxwell asked him sharply.

"The Wheeler," Churchill said. "You must pay no attention to him. He doesn't know our ways. I didn't know what he intended to do. In fact, I told him not to — "

"You mean you knew the Wheeler might be laying for me?"

"I told him not to," Churchill protested. "I told him to leave you alone. I'm very sorry, Professor Maxwell. Believe me, I did my very best."

Maxwell's hand shot out and grabbed Churchill by the shirt front, twisting the fabric and pulling the man close to him.

"So you're the Wheeler's man!" he shouted. "You're fronting for him. It was you who made the offer for the Artifact and you made it for the Wheeler."

"What I did," declared Churchill. angrily, "was my own damn business. I make my living representing people."

"The Wheeler isn't people," Maxwell said. "God knows what a Wheeler is. A hive of insects, for one thing. What else we do not know."

"He has his rights," said Churchill. "He's entitled to do business."

"And you're entitled to help him," Maxwell said. "Entitled to take his wages. But be careful how you earn them. And don't get in my way."

He straightened his arm and flung Churchill from him. The man staggered, lost his balance, fell and rolled down several steps before he could catch himself. He lay there, sprawled, not trying to get up.

"By right," said Maxwell, "I should have thrown you down the stairs and broken your filthy neck."

He glanced up toward the house and saw that a small crowd of people had collected at the door and were staring down at him. Staring and muttering among themselves.

He turned on his heel and went stalking down the stairs.

At the bottom Carol was clinging desperately to a frantic cat.

"I thought he was going to get away and go up there and tear that man to pieces," she gasped.

She looked at Maxwell with disgust written on her face.

"Can't you get along with anyone?" she asked.

XVIII

Maxwell got off the roadway at the point where it crossed the mouth of Hound Dog Hollow and stood for a moment, staring at the rocky cliffs and bold headlands of the autumn bluffs. A short distance up the hollow, he caught a glimpse, through the red and yellow of the tinted leaves, of the bare rock face of Cat Den Point and up there, high against the sky, standing just back of the most prominent of the headlands, he knew he'd find the castle of the goblins, with one O'Toole in residence. And somewhere in that wilderness lay the mossy ridge that served as a den for trolls.

It was still early in the morning, since he had started out well before the dawn. A frosty dew lay upon the grass and twinkled on clumps of weeds the sun had not yet found. The air had a winy flavor to it and the sky was so faint and delicate a blue that it seemed to have no color and over all of it, over the entire landscape, hung a sense of strange expectancy.

Maxwell walked across the high-arched foot bridge that spanned the double roadway. On the other side he found a path that led him up the hollow.

The trees closed in around him, and he walked through a fairyland that held its breath. He found himself moving slowly and very carefully so that no quick movement or noise would break the forest hush. Leaves came planing down from the canopy above, fluttering wings of color falling gently to earth. Ahead of him a mouse ran, humping in its haste, moving through and over the fallen leaves, but making scarcely a rustle in its fleeing. Far up the hollow a bluejay screeched, but among the trees the screech was muted and robbed of its customary harshness.

The path forked, with the left-hand fork continuing up the hollow, while the right-hand fork angled up the bluff. Maxwell took the right-hand path. Ahead of him lay a long and wearying

climb, but he would take it easy and stop to rest at frequent intervals. It would be a shame on a day like this, he told himself, not to stop to rest as often as he could, begrudging the time that eventually would take him out of this place of color and of silence.

The path was steep, with many turnings to dodge the massive boulders crouched upon the ground, anchored in the soil, graybearded with their crops of lichens. The tree trunks crowded close, the rough, dark bark of ancient oak, the satin whiteness of the birches, showing little tan blotches where the thin bark had peeled off but still clung, fluttering in the wind. In the cluttered trash of the surface rose the fat red pyramid of the jack-in-the-pulpit fruit, the shriveled hood drooping like a tattered purple robe.

Maxwell climbed slowly, saving his breath, stopping often to stop and look, to soak in the feel of autumn that lay all about. He reached, finally, the fairy green where Churchill's flier, with himself as passenger, had come crashing down under the spell of the trolls' enchantment. Just up the hill lay the goblin castle.

He stood for a moment on the green, resting, then took up the climb again. Dobbin, or another horse very similar to him, was cropping at the scanty grass which grew in ragged bunches in a pole-fenced pasture. A few doves fluttered about the castle's turrets, but there were no other signs of life.

Sudden shouts shattered the morning's peace. Out of the open castle gate came a gang of trolls, moving rapidly and in curious formation.

They were in three lines and each line of them had a rope across their shoulders — exactly, Maxwell told himself, like the old painting he had seen of the Volga boatmen. As they charged out onto the drawbridge Maxwell could see that the three ropes were attached to a block of hewn stone which bounced along behind them, raising a hollow, booming racket when it hit the drawbridge.

Old Dobbin was neighing wildly, kicking up his heels and galloping madly around the inside perimeter of the fence.

The trolls, their fangs gleaming against the brown, wrinkled viciousness of their faces, their roached hair seeming to bristle more stiffly than was the usual case, came pounding down the path, with the massive stone along behind them, raising puffs of dust as it gouged into the ground.

Boiling out of the gate behind them came a cloud of goblins, armed with clubs, with hoes, with pitchforks, apparently with anything they could lay their hands upon.

Maxwell leaped out of the path as the trolls bore down upon him. They were running silently and with vast determination, their weight bent against the ropes, while the goblin horde pursued them with wild warhoops and shrieks. In the foreground of the goblin band, Mr. O'Toole ran heavily, his face and neck violet with his anger, a short length of two-by-four brandished in his fist.

At the point where Maxwell had leaped out of the way, the path took a sudden dip, tobogganning downward in a rocky slide to the fairy green. At the top of the dip the block of stone took a mighty leap as its forward edge struck a rocky ledge. The ropes hung slack, and the block came down and bounced and then, with the ropes flying, started pinwheeling down the hill.

One of the trolls looked behind him and shouted a frantic warning. The trolls dropped the ropes and scattered. The block of stone went tearing down the slope, gaining speed with every revolution. It struck the fairy green and gashed a great hole in it, made one last bounce into the air, mushed down into the grass and skidded, ripping up the sod, tearing an ugly gash across the place of dancing. Crashing into a large white oak at the far end of the green, it finally came to rest.

The goblins went roaring down the hill in pursuit of the trolls, scattering out into the trees to hunt down the stealers of the stone. Hoots of fear and yelps of rage floated up the hill, intermingled with the sound of many bodies threshing through the underbrush.

Maxwell crossed the path and walked over to the pole fence. Old Dobbin now had quieted down and stood with his lower jaw resting on one of the topmost poles, as if he needed it to prop him up. He was staring down the hill.

Maxwell reached out a hand and stroked Dobbin's neck, pulled gently at one ear. Dobbin slanted a gentle eye toward him and whuffled his upper lip.

"I hope," Maxwell said to him, "that they won't expect you to drag back that stone. It's a long, steep pull."

Dobbin flicked one ear, languidly.

"If I know O'Toole," Maxwell said, "I don't expect you'll have to. If he can round up the trolls, they'll be the ones who'll do it."

The uproar down the hill had quieted now and in a little while Mr. O'Toole came puffing up the path, carrying the two-by-four

across one shoulder. He still was purple of face, but apparently from exhaustion rather than rage. He hurried from the path toward the fence, and Maxwell walked out to meet him.

"My great apology," said Mr. O'Toole, in as stately a voice as he could manage with the shortness of his breath. "I glimpsed you and was happy of your presence, but engaged most earnestly and very urgently. You witnessed, I suspect, the lowdown happening."

Maxwell nodded.

"My mounting stone they took," raged Mr. O'Toole, "with malicious intent of putting me afoot."

"Afoot?" asked Maxwell.

"You comprehend most feebly, I see. My mounting stone, up which I must scramble to get astride Old Dobbin. Without a mounting stone there gets no horseback riding and I must trudge afoot unhappily, with much pain and puffing."

"I see," said Maxwell. "As you say, at first I did not comprehend."

"Them dirty trolls," said Mr. O'Toole, grinding his teeth in fury, "at nothing will they stop. After the mounting stone it would have come the castle, piece by piece, stone by stone, until there be no more than the bareness of the rock upon which it once had roosted. It is necessary, in such circumstance, the bud to nip with quick determination."

Maxwell jerked his head in a downhill direction. "How did it come out?" he asked.

"We root them out," said the goblin with some satisfaction. "They scatter like the quail. We dig them out from under rocks and from hiding in the thickets and then we harness them, like so many mules, of which, indeed, they bear a striking likeness, and they drag the mounting stone, most laboriously, I think, back to where they found it."

"They're getting back at you," said Maxwell, "for tearing down their bridge."

Mr. O'Toole jigged in exasperation. "You are wrong!" he cried. "Out of great and misplaced compassion, we refrained from the tearing of it down. Just two little stones is all. Two tiny little stones, and much effective roaring at them. And then they betook the enchantments off the broomstick and also off the sweet October ale and, being simple souls much given to good nature, we let it go at that."

"They took the enchantment off the ale? I would have thought that impossible once certain chemical changes —"

Mr. O'Toole fixed Maxwell with a look of contempt. "You

prate," he said, "in scientific lingo, which brings no more than errant nonsense. I fail to fathom your engagement in this science when magic you could have for the asking from us and the willingness to learn. Although I must confess the disenchantment of the ale left something for desire. It has a faintly musty touch about the tasting of it.

"Although," he said, "it is a notch or two improved upon no ale at all. If you would only join me, we could do a sample of it."

"There has been nothing all day long," said Maxwell, "that sounds as good as that."

"Then leave us retire," cried Mr. O'Toole, "to the drafty halls built so inexpertly by you crazy humans who thought we doted upon ruins, and regale ourselves with foaming mugs of cheer."

In the drafty great hall of the castle, Mr. O'Toole drew the foaming mugs from a mighty cask set upon two sawhorses and carried them to the rough-hewn table before the large stone fireplace in which a smouldering and reluctant fire was smoking rather badly.

"The blasphemy of it," said Mr. O'Toole, as he lifted his mug, "is that this preposterous outrage of the mounting stone was commited at a time when we goblins were embarked upon a wake."

"I'm sorry," Maxwell said. "A wake, you say. I had not been aware —"

"Oh, not one of us," Mr. O'Toole said quickly. "With the possible exception of myself, in disgusting good health is all the goblin tribe. We were in observance of it for the Banshee."

"But the Banshee is not dead."

"Not dead," said Mr. O'Toole, "but dying. And, oh, the pity of it. He be the last of a great and noble race in this reservation and the ones still left elsewhere in the world can be counted upon less than the fingers of one hand."

XIX

He lifted the mug and buried his muzzle in it, drinking deep and gustily. When he put it down there was foam upon his whiskers, and he left it there, not bothering to wipe it off.

"We die out most notably," he said, in somber tones. "The planet has been changed. All of us Little Folks and some who are not so little walk down into the valley, where shadows hang so densely, and we are gone from the ken of all living things and that is the end of us. And the very shame of it makes one tremble when he thinks upon it, for we were a goodly people despite our many faults. Even the trolls, before degradation fell upon them, still had a few weak vir-

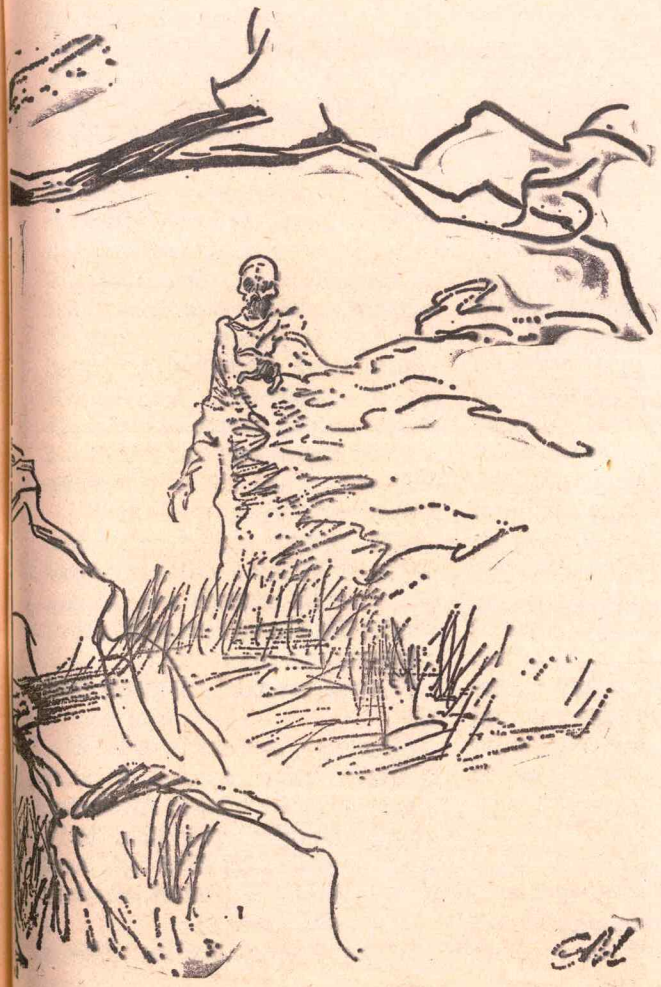
tues all intact. Although I would proclaim that at the moment they are destitute of virtue. For surely the stealing of a mounting stone is a very lowdown trick and one which clearly demonstrates they are bereft of all nobility of spirit."

He put his mug to his mouth again and emptied it in several lusty gulps. He slammed it down on the table and looked at Maxwell's mug, still full.

"Drink up," he urged. "Drink up, then I fill them yet again for a further wetting of the whistle."

"You go ahead," Maxwell told him. "It's a shame to drink ale the way you do. It should be tasted and appreciated."





Mr. O'Toole shrugged. "A pig I am, no doubt. But this be disenchanted ale and not one to linger over."

Nevertheless he got to his feet and shuffled over to the cask to refill his mug. Maxwell lifted his mug and took a drink. There was a mustiness, as Mr. O'Toole had said, in the flavor of the ale — a tang that tasted not unlike the the way that leaf smoke smelled.

"Well?" the goblin asked.

"It has a strange taste to it, but it is palatable."

"Some day that troll bridge I will take down," said Mr. O'Toole, with a surge of sudden wrath. "Stone by stone, with the moss most carefully scraped off to rob the stones of magic, and with a hammer break them in many smallish bits and transport the bits to some high cliff and there fling them far and wide so that in all eternity there can be no harvesting of them. Except," he said, letting his shoulders droop, "so much hard labor it would be. But one is tempted. This be the smoothest and sweetest ale that was ever brewed and now look at it — scarcely fit for hogs. But it be a terrible sin to waste even such foul-tasting slop if it should be ale."

He grabbed the mug and jerked it to his face. His Adam's apple bobbed, and he did not take down the mug until all the ale was gone.

"And if I wreak too great a damage to that most foul bridge," he said, "and should those craven trolls go snivelling to authority, you humans will jerk me on the rug to explain that my thinking is not the way it should be. There is no dignity in the living by the rule. And no joy, either. It was a rotten day when the human race arose."

"My friend," said Maxwell, shaken, "you have not said anything like this to me before."

"Nor to any other human," said the goblin, "and to all the humans in the world, only to you could I display my feeling. But I, perchance, have run off at the mouth exceedingly."

"You know well enough," said Maxwell, "that I'll not breathe a word of it."

"Of course not," said Mr. O'Toole. "That I did not worry on. You be almost one of us. You're the closest to a goblin that a human can approach."

"I am honored," Maxwell told him.

"We are ancient," said Mr. O'Toole, "more ancient, I must think, than the human mind can wonder. You're sure you don't want to polish off that foul and terrible drink and start another one afresh?"

Maxwell shook his head. "You go ahead and fill your mug up again. I'll sit here and enjoy mine instead of gulping it."

Mr. O'Toole made another trip to the cask and came back with a brimming mug, slapped it on the table and settled himself elaborately and comfortably.

"Long years gone," he said, shaking his head in sadness. "So awful long ago. And then a filthy little primate comes along and spoils it all for us."

"Long ago," said Maxwell. "As long as the Jurassic?"

"You speak conundrums. I do not catch the term. But there were many of us, and many different kinds. And today there be few of us and not all the different kinds. We die out very slowly, but inexorably. A further day will dawn to find no one of us. Then you humans will have it to yourselves."

"You are overwrought," Maxwell cautioned him. "You know that's not what we want. We have gone to much effort — "

"Loving effort?" asked the goblin.

"Yes, I'd even say to much loving effort."

Weak tears ran down the goblin's cheeks and he lifted a hairy, calloused hand to wipe them.

"You must pay me slight attention," he told Maxwell. "I deep am in the dumps. It's this business of the Banshee."

"The Banshee is your friend?" Maxwell asked in some surprise.

"No friend of mine," said Mr. O'Toole. "He stands on one side of the pale, I upon the other. An ancient enemy, but still one of us. One of the really old ones. He hung on better than the others. He dies more stubbornly. The others all are dead. And in days like this, differences go swiftly down the drain. We could not sit with him, as conscience would decree, but in the absence of this we pay him the small honor of a wake for him. And then these low-crawling trolls without a flake of honor in them . . . ."

"You mean no one, no one here on the reservation, could sit the death-watch with the Banshee?"

Mr. O'Toole shook his head wearily. "No single one of us. It is to the law contrary, to the old custom in violation. I cannot make you understand — he is outside the pale."

"But he is all alone."

"In a thorn bush," agreed the goblin. "Close beside the hut that was his domicile."

"A thorn bush?"

The goblin said, "In the thorns dwell magic, and in the tree itself."

He choked and grabbed hastily at the mug and raised it to his mouth. His Adam's apple bobbed.

Maxwell reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out the photo of the lost Lambert that hung on Nancy Clayton's wall.

"Mr. O'Toole," he said, "there's something I must show you."

The goblin set down the mug.

"Let me see it, then," he said. "All this beating amongst the bushes, when there was something that you had."

He reached for the photo, bending his head to puzzle over it.

"The trolls," he said, "of course. But these others I do not recognize. As if I should, but fail. There be old, old stories . . . ."

"Oop saw the picture. You know of Oop, of course."

"The great barbarian who claims to be your friend."

"He is my friend," said Maxwell. "And Oop recalls these things. They are old ones from the ancient days."

"But what magic is called upon to get a picture of them?"

"That I don't know. That's a picture of a painting, painted by a man many years ago."

"By what means?"

"I do not know," said Maxwell. "I think that he was there."

Mr. O'Toole picked up his mug and saw that it was empty. He tottered to the cask and filled it. He came back with his drink and picked up the photo, looking at it carefully, although somewhat blearily.

"I know not," he finally said. "There were others of us. Many different ones no longer present. We here are the tail end of a noble population."

He pushed the photo back across the table.

"Maybe the Banshee," he suggested. "The Banshee's years are beyond all telling."

"But the Banshee's dying."

"That he is," said Mr. O'Toole, "and an evil day it is and a bitter day for him, with no one to keep the death watch."

He lifted his mug. "Drink up," he said. "Drink up. Can one drink enough it may not be so bad."

XX

Maxwell came around the corner of the tumbledown shack and saw the thorn tree standing to one side of it. There was something strange about the tree. It looked as if a cloud of darkness had settled along its vertical axis, making it appear to have a massive bole, out of which emerged short and slender thorn-armed twigs. And if what O'Toole had said was true, Maxwell told himself, that dark cloud clustered in the tree must be the dying Banshee.

He walked slowly across the intervening space and stopped a

few feet from the tree. The black cloud moved restlessly, like a cloud of slowly roiling smoke.

"You are the Banshee?" Maxwell asked the tree.

The Banshee said, "You've come too late if you wish to talk with me."

"I did not come to talk," said Maxwell. "I came to sit with you."

"Sit then. It will not be for long."

Maxwell sat down upon the ground and pulled his knees up close against his chest. He put his hands down beside him, palms flat against the mat of dry and browning grass. Below him the autumn valley stretched to the far horizon of the hills north of the river — unlike the hills of this southern shore, but gentle, rolling hills that went toward the sky in slanted, staircase fashion.

A flurry of wings swept across the ridge behind him, and a flock of blackbirds went careening through the blue haze that hung against the steep ravine that went plunging downward from the ridge. But except for that single instant of wings beating in the air, there was soft and gentle silence. It held no violence and no threat, a dreaming silence in which the hills stood quiet.

"The others did not come," the Banshee said. "I thought, at first, they might. For a moment I thought they might forget and come. There need be no distinction among us now. We stand as one, all beaten to the self-same level. But the old conventions are not broken yet. The old-time customs hold."

"I talked with the goblins," Maxwell told him. "They hold a wake for you. The O'Toole is grieving and drinking to blunt the edge of grief."

"You are not of my people," the Banshee said. "You intrude upon me. Yet you say you come to sit with me. How does it happen that you do this?"

Maxwell lied. He could do nothing else. He could not, he told himself, tell this dying thing he had come for information.

"I have worked with your people," he said, "and I've become much concerned with them."

"You are the Maxwell," said the Banshee. "I have heard of you."

"How do you feel?" asked Maxwell. "Is there anything I can do for you? Something that you need?"

"No," the Banshee said. "I am beyond all needing. I feel almost nothing. That is the trouble, that I feel nothing. My dying is different than your dying. It is scarcely physical. Energy drains out from me and there's finally

nothing left. Like a flickering light that finally gutters out."

"I am sorry," Maxwell said. "If talking hastens . . . ."

"Talking might hasten it a little, but I no longer mind. And I am not sorry. I have no regret. I am almost the last of us. There are three of us left, if you count me, and I am not worth the counting. Out of the thousands of us, only two are left."

"But there are the goblins and the trolls and fairies . . . ."

"You do not understand," the Banshee said. "No one has ever told you, and you never thought to ask. Those you name are the later ones, the ones that came after us, when the planet was no longer young. We were colonists, surely you know that."

"I had thought so," Maxwell said. "In just the last few hours."

"You should have known," the Banshee said. "You were on the elder planet."

Maxwell gasped. "How did you know that?"

"How do you breathe air?" the Banshee asked. "How do you see? With me, communicating with that ancient planet is as natural as is breath and sight with you. I am not told; I know."

So that was it, thought Maxwell. The Banshee had been the source of the Wheeler's knowledge, and it must have been Churchill, who had tipped the Wheeler to the fact that the Banshee had the information, who had guessed the Banshee might have knowledge no one else suspected.

"And the others? The trolls, the — "

"No," the Banshee said. "The Banshees were the only ones to whom the road was open. That was our job and our only purpose. We were the links with the elder planet. We were communicators. When the elder planet sent out colonies, it was necessary that some means of communicating should be established. We all were specialists, although the specialties have little meaning now, and nearly all of the specialists are gone. The first ones were the specialists. The ones who came later simply were settlers meant to fill the land."

"You mean the trolls and goblins?"

"The trolls and goblins and the rest of them. With abilities, of course, but not specialized. We were the engineers, they the workers. There was a gulf between us. That is why they will not come to sit with me. The old gulf still exists."

"You tire yourself," said Maxwell. "You should conserve your strength."

"It does not matter. Energy drains out of me and; when the energy is gone, life is gone as well. This dying I am doing has no concern with matter or with body, for I never really had a body. I was all energy. And it does not matter. For the elder planet dies as well; you have seen my planet and you know."

"Yes, I know," said Maxwell.

"It would have been so different if there had been no humans. When we first came here there were scarcely any mammals, let alone a primate. We could have prevented it — this rising of the primates. We could have pinched them in the bud. There was some discussion of it, for this planet had proved promising, and we were reluctant at the thought that we must give it up. But there was the ancient rule. Intelligence is too seldom found for one to stand in the way of its development. It is a precious thing. Even when we stepped aside for it most reluctantly, we still had to recognize that it was a precious thing."

"But you stayed on," said Maxwell. "You may have stepped aside, but you still stayed on."

"It was too late," the Banshee told him. "There was no place for us to go. The elder planet was dying even then. There was no point in going back. And this planet, strange as it may seem, had become home for us."

"You must hate us humans."

"At one time we did. But hate can burn out in time. Almost. And perhaps even in our hatred we held some pride in you. Otherwise, why should the elder planet have offered you its knowledge?"

"But you offered it to the Wheeler, too."

"The Wheeler? Oh, yes, I know who you mean. But we did not really offer it. The Wheeler had heard about the elder planet, apparently from some rumor heard far in space. And that the planet had something that it wished to sell. It came to me and asked one question only — what was the price of this commodity. I don't know if it knew what might be for sale. It only said commodity."

"And you told it the price was the Artifact."

"Of course I told it that. For at the time I did not know of you. It was only later I knew I should communicate the price to you."

"And, of course," said Maxwell, "you were about to do this?"

"Yes," said the Banshee, "I was about to do it. And now I've done it, and the matter's closed."

"You can tell me one thing more. What is the Artifact?"

"That," the Banshee said, "I cannot do."

"Can't or won't?"

"Won't," the Banshee said.

Sold out, Maxwell told himself. The human race sold out by this dying thing which, despite what

it might say, had never meant to communicate the price to him. This thing which through long millenia had nursed cold hatred against the human race. And now that it was gone beyond all reaching, telling him and mocking him so that he might know how the humans had been sold out, so that the human race might know, now that it was too late, exactly what had happened.

"And you told the Wheeler about me as well," he said. "That's how Churchill happened to be waiting at the station when I returned to Earth. He said he'd been on a trip, but there had been no trip."

He surged angrily to his feet. "And what about the one of me who died?"

He swung upon the tree, and the tree was empty. The dark cloud that had seethed around its trunk was gone. The branches stood out in sharp and natural relief against the western sky.

Gone, Maxwell thought. Not dead, but gone. The substance of an elemental creature gone back to the elements, the unimaginable bonds that had held it together in strange semblance of life, finally weakening to let the last of it slip away, blowing off into the air and sunlight like a pinch of thrown dust.

Alive the Banshee had been a hard thing to get along with. Dead it was no easier. For a short space of time he had felt compassion for it, as a man must feel for anything that dies. But he knew the compassion had been wasted, for the Banshee must have died in silent laughter at the human race.

There was just one hope, to persuade Time to hold up the sale of the Artifact so he could have the time to contact Arnold and tell his story to him, persuade him, somehow, that what he told was true. A story, Maxwell realized, that now became even more fantastic than it had been before.

He turned about and started down the ravine. Before he reached the wood, he stopped and looked back up the slope. The thorn tree stood squat against the sky, sturdy and solid, braced solid in the soil.

When he passed the fairy dancing green a gang of trolls were grumpily at work, raking and smoothing out the ground, laying new sod to replace that which had been gouged out by the bouncing stone. Of the stone there was no sign.

XXI

Maxwell was halfway back to Wisconsin Campus when Ghost materialized and took the seat next to him.

"I have a message from Oop," he said, ignoring any preliminary approach to conversation. "You are not to return to the shack. The newspaper people seem to have sniffed you out. When they came to inquire, Oop went into action, without, I would guess, too much thought or judgment. He put the bum's rush on them, but they're still hanging around, on the lookout for you."

"Thanks," said Maxwell. "I appreciate being told. Although as a matter of fact, I don't imagine it makes too much difference now."

"Events," asked Ghost, "do not march too well?"

"They barely march at all," Maxwell told him. He hesitated, then said, "I suppose Oop has told you what is going on."

"Oop and I are as one," said Ghost. "Yes, of course he's told me. He seemed to take it for granted that you knew he would. But you may be rest assured . . . ."

"It's not that," said Maxwell. "I was only wondering if I had to recite it all again for you. You know, then, that I went to the reservation to check on the Lambert painting."

"Yes," said Ghost. "The one that Nancy Clayton has."

"I have a feeling," Maxwell told him, "that I may have found out more than I had expected to. I did find out one thing that doesn't help at all. It was the Banshee who tipped off the Wheeler about the price the crystal planet wanted. The Banshee was supposed to tell me, but he told the Wheeler instead. He claims he told the Wheeler before he knew about me, but I have some doubt of that. The Banshee was dying when he told me, but that doesn't mean that he told the truth. He always was a slippery customer."

"The Banshee dying?"

"He's dead now. I sat with him until he died. I didn't show him the photo of the painting. I didn't have the heart to intrude."

"But despite this he told you about the Wheeler."

"Only to let me know that he had hated the human race since it first began its evolutionary climb. And to let me know that he was finally getting even. He would have liked to have said that the goblins and the rest of the Little Folk hated us as well, but he never quite got around to that. Knowing, perhaps, that I would not believe it. Although something that the O'Toole had said earlier made me realize that there is some ancestral resentment. Resentment, but probably not any real hatred. But the Banshee did confirm that a deal is being made for the Artifact and that the Artifact actually is the price for the crystal planet."

"It looks fairly hopeless, then," Ghost observed. "My good friend, I am very sorry for this. Is there anything that we can do to help? Oop, me, and perhaps even that girl who drank with you and Oop so staunchly. The one who has the cat."

"It looks hopeless," Maxwell told him, "but there are a couple of things that I still can do — go to Harlow Sharp at Time and try to convince him to hold up the deal, then crash in a door or two up at Administration and back Arnold into a corner. If I can talk Arnold into duplicating the Wheeler's offer in funding for Harlow's Time projects, I am sure that Harlow will turn down the Wheeler."

"You will make a noble effort, I am sure," said Ghost. "But I fear for the results. Not from Harlow Sharp, for he's a friend of yours. But President Arnold is a friend of no one. And he will not relish the breaking of doors."

"You know what I think?" said Maxwell. "I think you are right. But you can't tell until you try. It may be that Arnold will have a lapse of moral fiber and will, for once, set prejudice and stuffshirtedness aside."

"I must warn you," said Ghost. "Harlow Sharp may have little time for you or for anyone. He has worries. Shakespeare arrived this morning."

"Shakespeare!" yelled Maxwell. "For the love of God, I'd forgotten about him coming. But I do remember he speaks tomorrow night. Of all the lousy breaks. It would have to be at a time like this."

"It would seem," said Ghost, "that William Shakespeare is not any easy man to handle. He wanted at once to go out and have a look at this new age of which he'd been told so much. Time had a rough time persuading him to change his Elizabethan dress for what we wear today, but they positively refused to let him go until he agreed to it. And now Time is sweating out what might happen to him. They have to keep him in tow, but they can't do anything that will get his back up. They have sold the hall down to the last inch of standing room and they can't take a chance that anything will happen."

"How did you hear all this?" asked Maxwell. "Seems to me you manage to come up with campus gossip ahead of anyone."

Ghost said modestly, "I get around a lot."

"Well, it's not good," said Maxwell, "but I have to take the chance. Time is running out for me. Harlow will see me if he'll see anyone."

"It seems incredible," said Ghost sadly, "that such a dire

combination of circumstances should have arisen to block what you try to do. Impossible that through sheer stupidity, the University and Earth should fail to obtain the knowledge of two universes."

"It was the Wheeler," Maxwell said.

"His offer puts the pressure on, sets up a time limit. If I only had more time, I could work it out. I could talk to Harlow, could finally get a hearing from Arnold. And if nothing else, I probably could talk Harlow into a deal with Time, rather than the University, buying the planet's library. But there isn't any time. Ghost, what do you know about the Wheelers? Anything the rest of us don't know?"

"I doubt it. Just that they could be that hypothetical enemy we've always figured we would finally meet in space. Their actions argue that they, at least potentially, are that enemy. And their motives, their moves, their ethics, their entire outlook on life, must be different than ours. We probably have less in common with them than a man would with a spider or a wasp. Although they are clever — and that is the worst of it.

They have by now absorbed enough of our viewpoints and manners that they can mix with us, can pass with us, can do business with us — as they have demonstrated in the deal they are trying to make for the Artifact. My friend, it is this cleverness of theirs, this flexibility, that I fear above all. I doubt if the positions were reversed that man could do as well."

"You are right, I think," said Maxwell. "And that is why we can't afford to let them have what the crystal planet has to offer. God knows what's to be found in that library. I had a whack at it, but I could do no more than sample it, could barely touch the edge of it. And there was material that I couldn't come within ten light-years of understanding. Which doesn't mean that given time and skills that I haven't got, that perhaps I've not even heard of, man wouldn't be able to understand it. I think man could. I think the Wheelers can. Vast areas of new knowledge that we haven't any inkling of. That knowledge might just be the margin between us and the Wheelers. If man and the Wheelers ever come into collision, the crystal planet's knowledge just possibly could be the difference between our victory or defeat. And it might mean as well that the Wheelers, knowing that we had this knowledge, might never allow that collision to happen. It might spell the difference between peace and war."

He sat crouched in the seat and through the warmth of the autumn afternoon felt a chill that blew from somewhere other than the colorful land and the sky of China-silk that enclosed this portion of the earth.

"You talked with the Banshee," said Ghost. "Just before he died. He mentioned the Artifact. Did he give you any clue as to what it really is? If we knew what it really was . . . ."

"No, Ghost. Not in so many words. But I got the impression — no, the hunch — that the Artifact is something from that other universe, the one before this one, from the earlier universe in which the crystal planet was formed. A precious thing, preserved through all the eons since that other universe. And maybe the Banshee and the other Old Ones that Oop remembers were natives of that other universe as well, related somehow to the creatures on the crystal planet. Life forms that rose and developed and evolved in that past universe and came here, and to other planets as well, as colonists. in an attempt to establish a new civilization which could follow in the crystal planet's tracks. But something happened. All of those colonization attempts failed. Here on earth because man developed. For other reasons, perhaps, on the other planets. And I think that I know why some of those other attempts failed. Maybe races just die out."

"It sounds reasonable," said Ghost. "That the colonies died out, I mean. If there had been a successful colony anywhere in the universe, it would seem likely the crystal planet would pass on its heritage to it instead of offering it to us or the Wheelers, to some race that had no connection with the crystal planet."

"What bothers me," said Maxwell, "is why the people of the crystal planet, so close to death that they are no more than shadows, should want the Artifact. What good will it do them? What use can they make of it?"

"Maybe if we knew what it was," said Ghost. "You're sure that you have no idea? Nothing that you heard or saw or — "

"No," said Maxwell.

XXII

Harlow Sharp had a harried look about him.

"Sorry you had to wait so long," he told Maxwell. "This is a hectic day."

"I was glad to get in any way at all," said Maxwell. "That watchdog of yours out at the desk was not about to let me."

"I've been expecting you," said Sharp. "Figured you'd turn up soon or late. Been hearing some strange stories."

"Most of them are true," said Maxwell. "But that's not what I'm here for. This is business, not a social visit. I won't take much time.

"Okay, then," said Sharp, "what can I do for you?"

"You're selling the Artifact," said Maxwell.

Sharp nodded. "I'm sorry about that, Pete. I know you and a few others had an interest in it. But it's been out there in the museum for years and, except as a curiosity to be stared at by visitors and tourists, it's done no one any good. And Time needs money. Surely you know that. The University holds the purse strings fast. The other colleges just feed us tiny driblets for specific programs and —"

"Harlow, I know all that. I suppose it's yours to sell. I recall the University, at the time you brought it forward, would have no part of it. The cost of moving it was yours — "

"We've had to scrape and beg and borrow," said Sharp. "We've worked up project after project — good sound, solid projects that would pay off in knowledge and new data — and submitted them and no one's buying them. Can you imagine it! With all the past to dig around in and no one interested. Afraid, perhaps that we'll upset some of their pet theories they have worked out so nicely. But we have to get money somehow to carry on our work. Do you think I've liked some of the things we've done to get some extra money? Like this Shakespeare circus. It's degraded our image. Pete, you can't imagine the trouble that we have. This Shakespeare's out there somewhere, like a God-damned tourist, casing the joint, and me sitting back here with my nails chewed to the elbow imagining all the things that could happen to him. Can you envision the ruckus there would be if a man like Shakespeare should not be returned to his proper age?"

Maxwell broke in to head him off. "I'm not arguing with you, Harlow. I didn't come to — "

"And then, suddenly," said Sharp, interrupting him, "there was this chance to sell the Artifact. For more money than we'll ever get from this crummy University in a hundred years. You must realize what this sale meant to us. A chance to do the job we've not been able to do because of the lack of finance. Sure, I know about the Wheelers. When Churchill came sucking around to sound us out, I knew he was working for someone behind the scenes, but I wasn't dealing with anyone behind the scenes. I nailed Churchill hard and refused to talk business until I knew who it was he was fronting for. And

when he told me, I gagged a bit, but I went ahead, because I knew it was our only chance to set up a decent fund. I'd have done business with the Devil, Pete, to get that kind of money."

"Harlow, all I want is for you to hold up the deal, to give me a little time."

"Time? Time for what?"

"I need the Artifact."

"You need the Artifact! For the love of Christ, what for?"

"I can trade it," Maxwell told him, "for a planet. For a planet crammed with knowledge. With recorded knowledge not from one universe, but from two. Knowledge that may span fifty billion years."

Sharp leaned forward, then sank back into his chair.

"You mean this, Pete? You aren't kidding me? There are some funny stories that I've heard. There were two of you, and one of you was killed. And you've been ducking the newsmen, perhaps the cops as well. You've gotten into some sort of hassle with Administration."

"Harlow, I could tell you all of it, but it wouldn't help. You probably wouldn't believe me. But what I say is true. I can buy a planet."

"You? For yourself, you mean?"

"No, not for myself. The University. That's why I need time. To get in to see Arnold —"

"And sell him on it? Pete, you haven't got a chance. You had a row of some sort with Longfellow, and Longfellow runs the joint. Even if you had a legitimate proposition . . . ."

"It is legitimate. I talked to the people on the planet, I saw some of the records."

Sharp shook his head. "We've been friends for a long, long time," he said. "I'd do almost anything for you. But I can't go along with this. I can't throw away this opportunity for Time. Besides, I'm afraid you came too late."

"Too late?"

"The purchase price was paid this afternoon. The Wheeler takes possession of the Artifact tomorrow morning. He wanted to take it immediately, but there was a hitch or two in arranging transportation."

Maxwell sat silent, stunned by what he'd heard.

"So I guess that's it," said Sharp. "There's not much I can do about it."

Maxwell started to get up, then sat back in the chair.

"Harlow, if I could see Arnold tonight — if I could talk him into duplicating the price —"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Sharp. "He'd faint when you

even would mention the price to him."

"It was that much?"

"It was that much," said Sharp.

Maxwell got slowly to his feet, about to leave.

"One thing I will say, however," Sharp told him. "You must, somehow or other, have thrown a scare into the Wheeler. Churchill was here this morning, nervous as a cat, frothing at the mouth, to close the deal at once. I wish you could have seen me earlier. We might have been able to work something out, although I can't imagine what it might have been."

About to turn away, Maxwell hesitated, turned back to the desk behind which Sharp was sitting.

"One thing more. About time travel. Nancy Clayton has a Lambert painting —"

"I heard she had," said Sharp.

"In the background there's a hill and a stone upon it. I could swear that stone is the Artifact. Oop says the creatures in the painting are like the ones he remembers from Neanderthal days. And you did find the Artifact on a Jurassic hilltop. How could Lambert have known about it being on that hilltop? The Artifact wasn't found until centuries after he had died. I think Lambert saw the Artifact and the creatures that he painted. I think he traveled back to the Mesozoic. There is an argument, isn't there, about a man named Simonson?"

"I see what you're getting at," said Sharp. "It's just barely possible. Simonson did some temporal investigation back in the twenty-first century and claimed some measure of success, but admitted he had problems in control. There is a legend that he lost a man or two in time — sent them back and couldn't get them out. But there always has been a question as to whether he had any actual success. His notes, the ones we have, aren't too revealing. And he never published. He carried the work on secretly because he seemed to have the idea that time travel would turn out to be a gold mine, that he could rent it out to scientific expeditions, transport hunters back to the big-game fields — stuff like that, you know. One idea that he seemed to have was going back in time to South Africa and cleaning out the Kimberly diamond fields. So he kept it secret. No one ever knew much about what he really did."

"But it could have been possible," Maxwell insisted. "The time is right. Simonson and Lambert were contemporaries, and there's an abrupt break in Lambert's style. *Something* happened. That something could have been going into time."

"Sure it's possible," said Sharp. "But I wouldn't bet on it."

XXIII

When Maxwell came out of the Time building, the stars were coming out and the night wind had an edge of chill. The great elms were clumped masses of a deeper darkness, blotting out the lights of the windows in the buildings across the mall.

Maxwell shivered and turned up the collar of his jacket close about his throat, and went quickly down the stairs to the sidewalk which flanked the mall. There were a few people out.

He realized that he was hungry. He had not eaten since early morning. And that he should think of hunger when the last hope he had held had been shattered seemed to be amusing. Not only hungry, he thought, but roofless as well, for if he hoped to dodge the newsmen he could not go back to Oop's. But really there no longer was any reason he should shun the newsmen. Now there'd be nothing gained or lost in the telling of his story. But he shrank from the thought of it, from the thought of the incredulous expressions their faces would assume, from the questions they would ask, and then, more than likely, the tongue-in-cheek style they would employ in the writing of the story.

He reached the sidewalk and stood for a moment, undecided as to which direction he should go. He tried to think of a cafe or restaurant which would not be frequented by any of the faculty who might recognize him. Tonight, of all nights, he had an aversion to facing the kind of questions they would ask.

Something rustled behind him. He turned quickly and came face to face with Ghost.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

"I've been waiting for you," Ghost said. "You were a long time in there."

"I had to wait. Then we got to talking."

"Do any good?"

"None at all. The Artifact is sold and paid for. The Wheeler hauls it away tomorrow. I'm afraid that's the end of it. I could go up and try to see Arnold tonight, but there's no point to it. Not any more, there isn't."

"Oop is holding down a table for us. I imagine you are hungry."

"I am starved," said Maxwell.

"Then I lead the way."

They turned off the mall and, with Ghost leading, wound their way for what seemed to Maxwell an unusually long time, through back streets and alleys.

"A place," Ghost explained, "where we won't be seen. But where the food is edible and the whisky's cheap. Oop made a point of that."

They finally reached the place, walking down an iron staircase to reach the basement level. Maxwell pushed open the door. The interior was dim. From somewhere in the back came the smell of cooking.

"They serve family style here," said Ghost. "Plank it down upon the table and everyone helps himself. Oop is delighted with that way of serving."

Oop's massive figure moved out from one of the tables in the rear. He waved an arm at them. There were, Maxwell saw, only a half dozen or so other people in the place.

"Over here!" yelled Oop. "Someone for you to meet."

Followed by Ghost, Maxwell made his way across the room. From the table, Carol's face looked up at him. And another face, a bearded shadowed face — the face of someone that Maxwell felt he should remember.

"Our guest tonight," said Oop. "Master William Shakespeare."

Shakespeare got up and held out his hand to Maxwell. A white-toothed smile flashed above the beard.

"I deem me fortunate," he said, "to have fallen in with such rough and rowdy fellows."

"The Bard is thinking of staying here," said Oop. "Of settling down among us."

"Nay, not the Bard," said Shakespeare. "I will not have you call me it. I be no more than an honest butcher and a dealer in the wool."

"A mere slip of the tongue," Oop assured him. "We have grown so accustomed . . . ."

"Aye, aye, I know," said Shakespeare. "One mistake treads hard upon the footsteps of the one it follows."

"But stay here," said Maxwell. He shot a swift glance at Oop. "Does Harlow know he's here?"

"I think not," said Oop. "We took some pains he wouldn't."

"I slipped the leash," said Shakespeare, grinning, pleased with himself. "But with assistance, for which I acknowledge gratitude."

"Assistance," said Maxwell. "I just bet there was. Will you clowns ever learn?"

"Pete, don't carry on," said Carol. "I think it very noble of Oop. Here was this poor fellow from another time, and all he wanted was to see how the people lived and —"

"Let's sit down," said Ghost to Maxwell. "You have the look of a man who could stand a good stiff drink."

Maxwell sat down next to Shakespeare, Ghost taking the chair on the other side of him. Oop picked up a bottle and handed it across the table to him.

"Go ahead," he urged. "Don't

stand on ceremony. Don't bother with a glass. We're informal here."

Maxwell tilted the bottle to his mouth and let it gurgle. Shakespeare watched him with admiration. When he took it down, Shakespeare said, "I cannot but admire your fortitude. I essayed a drink of it and it fair to shriveled me."

"After a time you get used to it," said Maxwell.

"But this ale," said Shakespeare, touching with a finger a half-filled bottle of beer. "Now, there is stuff soft to the palate and pleasing to the stomach."

Sylvester wormed his way behind Shakespeare's chair, squeezed in beside Maxwell, and laid his head in Maxwell's lap. Maxwell scratched behind his ears.

"Is that cat bothering you again?" asked Carol.

"Sylvester and I are comrades," Maxwell told her. "We've been through wars together. We took on the Wheeler last night, you must remember, and we vanquished him."

"You bear a cheerful countenance," Shakespeare said to Maxwell. "I would presume that the business you have been about, and which had detained you until now, has gone favorably."

"The business did not go at all," said Maxwell. "The only reason I have a cheerful countenance is because I am in such good company."

"You mean Harlow turned you down!" exploded Oop. "He wouldn't give you a day or two of time?"

"There was nothing else for him to do," Maxwell explained. "He's already been paid and the Wheeler carts off the Artifact tomorrow."

Oop declared darkly, "We have the means to make him change his mind."

"Not any longer," said Maxwell. "He can't pull out now. The deal is done. He won't give back the money, he won't break his word. And if what you have in mind is what I think it is, all he needs to do is call off the lecture and refund the money for the tickets."

"I suppose you're right," Oop agreed. "We hadn't known the deal had gone so far. We figured we might pick up a little bargaining strength."

"You did the best you could," said Maxwell, "and I thank you for it."

"We had figured," said Oop, "that if we could buy a day or two, then all of us could go marching up the hill and bust in on Arnold and explain things to him by hand. But it's all over now, I guess. So have another drink and pass it over to me."

Maxwell had another drink and passed the bottle to him. Shakespeare finished off his beer and thumped the bottle back onto the table. Carol took the bottle from Oop and poured a couple of inches into her glass.

"I don't care how the rest of you conduct yourselves," she said. "I will not go utterly barbaric. I insist on drinking from a glass."

"Beer!" yelled Oop. "More beer for our distinguished guest."

"I thank you, sire," said Shakespeare.

"How did you ever find this dump?" asked Maxwell.

"I know," said Oop, "many of the backwaters of this campus."

"It was exactly what we wanted," said Ghost. "Time will be beating the bushes for our friend. Did Harlow tell you he had disappeared?"

"No," said Maxwell, "but he seemed somewhat on edge. He mentioned that he was worried, but you couldn't tell it on him. He's the kind who can sit on the edge of an exploding volcano and never turn a hair."

"How about the newsmen?" Maxwell asked. "Still covering the shack?"

Oop shook his head. "But they'll be back. We'll have to find some other place for you to bunk."

"I suppose I might as well face them," Maxwell said. "The story will have to be told some day."

"They'll tear you apart," warned Carol. "And Oop tells me you are without a job and Longfellow's sore at you. You can't stand bad publicity right now."

"None of it really matters," Maxwell told her. "The only problem is how much of it I should tell them."

"All of it," said Oop. "Tear the thing wide open. Let the galaxy know exactly what was lost."

"No," said Maxwell. "Harlow is my friend. I can't do anything to hurt him."

A waiter brought a bottle of beer and put it down.

"One bottle!" raged Oop. "What do you mean, one bottle? Go back and get an armload of it. Our friend here has a dry on."

"You didn't say," the waiter said. "How was I to know?"

He shuffled off to gather up more beer.

"Your hospitality," said Shakespeare, "is beyond reproach. But I fear I am intruding in a time of trouble."

"Trouble, yes," Ghost told him. "But you are not intruding. We are glad to have you."

"What was this Oop said about you staying here?" asked Maxwell. "About you settling down."

"My teeth are bad," said Shakespeare. "They hang loosely in the jaw and at times pain exceedingly. I have intelligence

that hereabouts are marvelous mechanics who can extract them with no pain and fabricate a set to replace the ones I have."

"That can be done, indeed," said Ghost.

"I left at home," said Shakespeare, "a wife with a nagging tongue and I would be rather loath to return to her. Likewise, the ale that you call beer is wondrous above any I have drank, and I hear tell that you have arrived at understanding with goblins and with fairies, which is a marvelous thing. And to sit at meat with a ghost is past all understanding, although one has the feeling here he must dig close at the root of truth."

The waiter arrived with an armload of beer bottles and dumped them on the table.

"There!" he said, disgusted. "That'll hold you for a while. Cook says to say the food is coming up."

"You don't intend," Maxwell asked Shakespeare, "to appear for your lecture?"

"Forsooth, and if I did," said Shakespeare, "they would forthwith, once that I had finished, whisk me home again."

"And they would, too," said Oop. "If they ever get their claws on him, they'll never let him go."

"But how will you ever earn a living?" Maxwell asked. "You have no skills to fit this world."

"I," said Shakespeare, "will surely devise something. A man's wits, driven to it, will come up with answers."

The waiter arrived with a cart, laden with food. He began putting it on the table.

"Sylvester!" Carol cried.

Sylvester had risen swiftly, put his two paws on the table and reached to grab two slabs of rare roast beef which had been carved off a standing roast of ribs.

Sylvester disappeared beneath the table, with the meat hanging from his jaws.

"The pussy cat is hungry," Shakespeare said. "He harvests what he can."

"In the matter of food," Carol complained, "he has no manners whatsoever."

From beneath the table came the sound of crunching bones.

"Master Shakespeare," said Ghost, "you came from England. From a town upon the Avon."

"A goodly country to the eye," said Shakespeare, "but filled with human riffraff. Be there poachers, thieves, murders, footpads and all sort of loathsome folk . . . ."

"But I recall," said Ghost, "the swans upon the river and the willows growing on its banks and —"

"You what?" howled Oop. "How can you recall?"

Ghost rose slowly to his feet, and there was something about

his rising that made all of them fix their eyes upon him. He raised a hand, although there was no hand, just the sleeves of his robe, if robe it was.

His voice, when it came was hollow, as if it might have come from an empty place far distant.

"But I do recall," he told them. "After all these years, I do recall. I either had forgotten or I had never known. But now I do . . . ."

"Master Ghost," said Shakespeare, "you act exceedingly strange. What queer distemper could have seized upon you?"

"I know now who I am," said Ghost, triumphantly. "I know who I am the ghost of."

"Well, thank God for that," said Oop. "It will put an end to all this maundering of yours about your heritage."

"And who, pray," asked Shakespeare, "might you be the ghost of?"

"Of you," Ghost keened. "I know now — I know now — I am William Shakespeare's ghost!"

For an instant they all sat silent, stricken, and then from Shakespeare's throat came a strangled, moaning sound of fright. With a sudden surge, he came out of his chair and leaped to the table top, heading for the door. The table went over with a crash. Maxwell's chair tipped back, and he went sprawling with it. The edge of the tipping table pinned him to the floor, and a bowl of gravy, skating off its edge, caught him in the face.

He put up both his hands and tried to wipe the gravy off his face. From somewhere above him he heard Oop's raging bellows.

Able to see again, but with his face and hair still dripping gravy, Maxwell managed to crawl from beneath the table and stagger to his feet.

Carol sat flat upon the floor amid the litter of the food. Beer bottles were rolling back and forth across the floor. Framed in the kitchen door stood the cook, a mighty woman with chubby arms and tousled hair and her hands upon her hip. Sylvester was crouched above the roast, ripping it apart and rapidly swallowing great mouthfuls of meat before anyone could stop him.

Oop came limping back from the door.

"No sign of them," he said. "No sign of either one of them."

He reached down a hand to haul Carol to her feet.

"That God damned Ghost," he said bitterly. "Why couldn't he keep still? Even if he knew . . . ."

"But he didn't know," said Carol. "Not until just now. It took this confrontation to jar it out of him. Something Shakespeare said, perhaps. It's something he's been wondering about



all these years. And then suddenly it hit him."

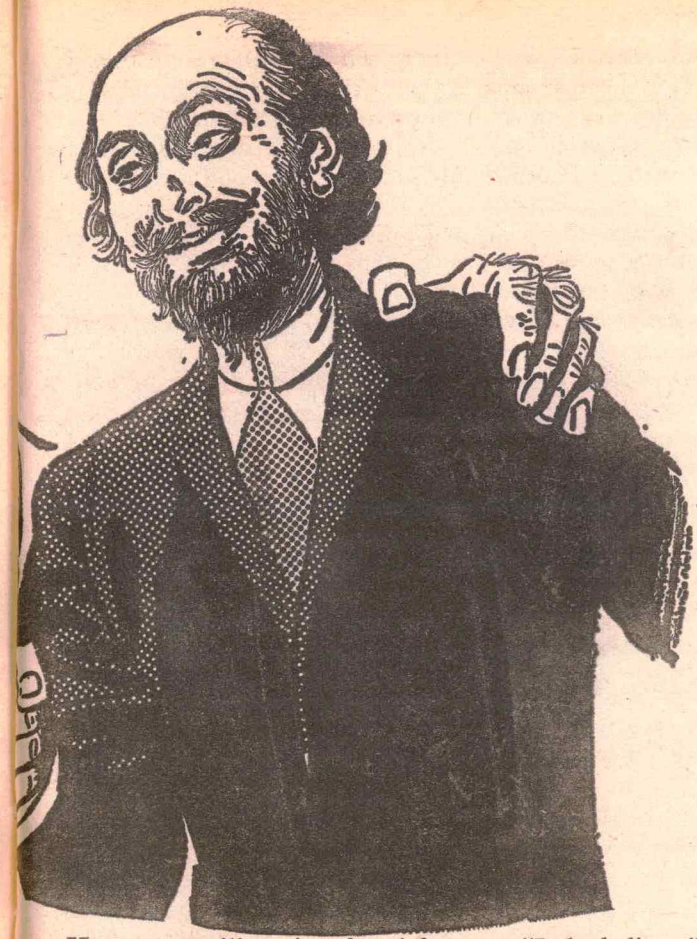
"This tears it," Oop declared. "Shakespeare never will quit running. There'll be no finding him."

"Maybe that is what Ghost is doing now," said Maxwell. "That is where he went. To follow Shakespeare and stop him and bring him back to us."

"Stop him, how?" asked Oop. "If Shakespeare sees him following, he'll set new track records."

XXIV

They sat dejectedly about Oop's rough lumber table. Sylvester lay on his back on the hearthstone, with his front paws folded neatly on his chest, his back feet thrust up into the air.



He wore a silly grin of satisfaction pasted on his face.

Oop shoved the fruit jar along the boards to Carol. She picked it up and sniffed. "It smells like kerosene," she said, "and, as I remember it, it tastes like kerosene." She lifted the jar with both her hands and drank, then pushed it across to Maxwell.

"I do believe," she said, "that after a time one could become accustomed to drinking kerosene."

"That is good booze," said Oop, defensively. "Although," he admitted, "it could do with just a touch more aging. Seems that it gets drunk up quicker than I can get it made."

Maxwell lifted the jar and drank moodily. The hooch burned its way fiercely down his gullet and exploded in his stomach, but the explosion did no good. He still stayed moody and aware. There were times, he told himself, when there was no such things as getting drunk. Pour it in two-fisted and you still stayed sober. And right now, he thought, he would dearly love to get sodden drunk and stay that way for a day or so. Maybe when he sobered up life wouldn't seem so bad.

"What I can't understand," said Oop, "is why Old Bill should take this business of his ghost so bad. He did, of course. He was scared pink with purple spots. But the thing that bothers me is that he wasn't upset with Ghost. Oh, a little jittery at first, as one might expect of a sixteenth-century man. But once we had explained it to him, he seemed rather pleased with it. He accepted Ghost much more readily than would have been the case, say, with a twentieth-century man. In the sixteenth century they believed in ghosts. Ghosts were something that could be accepted. He never got the wind up until he found that Ghost was his ghost and then . . . ."

"He was quite intrigued," said Carol, "by our relations with the Little Folk. He made us promise we'd take him down to the reservation so he could get acquainted with them. As with ghosts, he believed in them implicitly."

Maxwell took another hooker out of the jar and slid it across to Oop. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Being free and easy with a ghost, with just any ghost," he said, "would come under a different heading than meeting up with one particular ghost that turned out to be *your* ghost. It is impossible for a man to accept, to actually accept and believe in, his own death. Even knowing what a ghost is . . . ."

"Oh, don't please start that up again," said Carol.

Oop grinned. "He sure went out of there like a shot," he said. "Like you'd tied a firecracker on his tail. He went through that door without even touching the latch. He just busted through it."

"I didn't see," said Maxwell. "I had a bowl of gravy in my face."

"There wasn't anyone got anything out of the whole mess," said Oop, "except that saber-toother over there. He got a haunch of beef. Rare, the way he likes it."

"The cat's an opportunist," Carol observed. "He always comes out smelling pretty."

Maxwell stared at her. "I've been meaning to ask you. How do you come to be mixed up with us? I thought you washed your

hands of us last night after the affair with the Wheeler."

Oop chuckled. "She was worried about you. Also, she is nosey."

"There's something else as well," said Maxwell. "How come you are mixed up in it at all? Let's take it from the first. You were the one who tipped us off about the Artifact being sold."

"I didn't tip you off. I misspoke. It just came out."

"You tipped us off," Maxwell declared. "I think you meant to do it. What do you know about the Artifact? You must have known something to not have wanted it sold."

"Yeah, that is right," said Oop. "Sister, you better start telling us what it is all about."

"A couple of bullies!"

"No," said Maxwell, "let's not turn it to a joke. This is important."

"Well, I had heard about it being sold, as I told you. I wasn't supposed to know. And I was worried about it and I didn't like the sound of it. Not that there was anything really wrong with the sale of it, legally, I mean. Time had title to it and could sell it if it wished. But it didn't seem to me that a thing like the Artifact should be sold, even for umpteen-billion dollars. Because I did know something about it — something that no one else knew about it and I was afraid to try to tell anyone what I knew. Then, that night, when you two talked about it and were so interested . . . ."

"You thought maybe we could help."

"Well, I don't know what I thought. But you were the first ones who had shown any interest in it."

"Were you working with the Artifact? Is that how — "

"Well, no," she said, "not working with it. But one day when I stopped to look at it — like any tourist, you understand, just walking through the inner court of the museum and stopping to have a look at it, because it was an interesting object and a mysterious one as well — I saw something. Or thought I saw something . . . ."

She stopped and looked from one to the other of them. Neither spoke. They sat silent, waiting for her to go on.

"I can't be sure," she said. "Not now."

"Go ahead," said Ooop. "Tell us the best you can."

She nodded soberly. "It was just for an instant. So quick, so fast, and yet at the time there was no doubt I had really seen it. The sun was shining through the windows, and the sunlight was falling on the Artifact. Maybe

no one had ever looked at the Artifact before when the sunlight had been shining on it at precisely the angle it shone on it that day. I don't know. But it seemed to me I saw something inside the Artifact. Well, really not inside of it; rather, as if the Artifact was something that had been pressed or shaped into an oblong block, but you couldn't know this except when the sun shone just right upon it. It seemed to me that I could see an eye. And it was alive and watching me."

"But that can't be!" yelled Oop. "The Artifact is like a stone. Like a piece of metal."

"A funny piece of metal," said Maxwell. "Something that you can't pry into."

"It's only fair to say," Carol reminded them, "that now I can't be sure. It might have been only my imagination."

"We'll never know," said Maxwell. "The Wheeler will haul off the Artifact tomorrow."

"And buy the crystal planet with it," said Oop. "It seems to me we shouldn't just be sitting here."

He picked up the jar, put it to his mouth and drained it, got up and went to the hideout in the floor and got another jar. Ponderously, he unscrewed the lid and handed the jar to Carol.

"Leave us settle down," he suggested, "to building up a hangover. The newsmen will be here by morning, and I got to work up the strength to throw them out."

"Now, wait a second," said Maxwell. "I feel an idea coming on."

They sat and waited for the idea to come on.

"The translator," said Maxwell. "The one I used to read the records on the crystal planet. I found it in my bag."

"Yes?" asked Oop.

"What if the Artifact were simply another record?"

"But Carol says . . . ."

"I know what Carol says. But she can't be sure. She only thinks she saw that eye staring out at her. And it seems improbable."

"That's right," said Carol. "I can't be absolutely sure. And what Pete says does make a crooked sort of sense. If he's right, it would have to be a very important record — and a rather massive one. Perhaps a whole new world of knowledge. Maybe something the crystal planet left here on Earth, believing that no one would ever think of looking for it here. A sort of hidden record."

"Even if that should be the case," said Oop, "what good will it do us? The museum is locked, and Harlow Sharp is not about to open it for us."

"I could get us in," said Carol.

"I could phone the guard and say I had to get in and do some work. Or that I had left something there and wanted to pick it up. I have clearance for that sort of thing."

"And lose your job," suggested Oop.

She shrugged. "There are other jobs. And if we worked it right . . . ."

"But there's so little point to it," protested Maxwell. "It's no better than a million to one shot. Maybe less than that. I don't deny I'd like to have a try at it, but — "

"What if you found that it was really something important?" asked Carol. "Then we could get hold of Sharp and explain it to him and maybe — "

"I don't know," said Maxwell. "I doubt that we could find anything so important that Harlow would renege upon the deal."

"Hell," said Oop, "let's not waste time sitting here and talking about it. Let us be about it."

Maxwell looked at Carol. "I think so, Pete," she said. "I think it's worth the chance."

Oop reached out and took the jar of moonshine from in front of her and screwed on the cap.

XXV

The past surrounded them, the cabineted and cased and pedestaled past. All around were the lost and forgotten and unknown, snatched out of time by the far-ranging field expeditions that had probed into the hidden corners of mankind's history. Art and folklore objects that had been undreamed of until men went back and found them; still new pottery that had theretofore been known only as scattered shards, if even that; bottles out of ancient Egypt with the salves and ointments still prisoned, fresh, within them; ancient iron weapons new from the forge; the scrolls from the Alexandrian library which should have burned, but didn't, because men had been sent back in time to snatch them from flames at the moment before they would have been destroyed; the famed tapestry of Ely that had disappeared from the ken of man in a long-gone age — all these and many more, a treasure trove of articles snatched from the bowels of time.

The place was misnamed, Maxwell thought. Not Time Museum, but rather the Museum of No Time, a place where all ages came together, where there was no time distinction. In this building all the accomplishments and dreams of mankind might eventually be gathered, not aged things, but all fresh and new and shiny, fashioned only yesterday. And here one would not have to guess from old and scattered evi-

dence what it had been like back there, but could pick up and hold and manipulate the tools and instruments and gadgets that had been made and used through all the days of man's development.

Standing beside the pedestal which held the Artifact, he listened to the footsteps of the guard as he tramped away again on his regular rounds.

Carol had managed it. There had been a time he had doubted she would be able to, but everything had gone well. She'd phoned the guard and told him she and a couple of friends had wanted one last look at the Artifact before it was carted off, and he had been waiting to let them in at the little entryway set into one of the large doors that were opened when the museum was open to the public.

"Don't take too long," he grumbled. "I'm not sure I should let you do this."

"It's all right," she'd told him. "There is no need for you to worry."

He had shuffled off, mumbling to himself.

A bank of overhead spotlights shone down on the black block that was the Artifact.

Maxwell ducked beneath the velvet rope that guarded the pedestal and clambered up beside the Artifact, crouching down beside it, fumbling in his pocket for the interpreting apparatus.

It was a crazy hunch, he told himself. It was no hunch at all. It simply was an idea born of desperation. He was wasting his time, more than likely making himself ridiculous. Even if this wild venture should prove to have some point, there was nothing that he could do about it at this late hour. Tomorrow the Wheeler would take possession of the Artifact and of the knowledge stored on the crystal planet. As far as the human race might be concerned that would be the end of fifty billion years of knowledge dredged most laboriously and devotedly from two universes — knowledge that should have belonged to the University of Earth, but that now would be lost forever to an enigmatic cultural bloc which might, in turn, prove to be that potential cosmic enemy Earth had always feared would be found in space.

His start had been too late. Given a bit more time and he could have turned the deal, could have found the people who would have listened to him, could have gained some backing. But everything had worked against him, and now it was too late.

He slid the interpreter onto his head and fumbled with it. It didn't want to fit.

"Let me help," said Carol. He

felt her fingers manipulating it deftly, straightening out the straps, sliding them into place.

Glancing down, he saw Sylvester, seated on the floor beside the pedestal, snearing up at Oop.

Oop caught Maxwell's look. "That cat doesn't like me," said the Neanderthaler. "He senses that I'm his natural enemy. Some day he'll work up his nerve to have a go at me."

"That's ridiculous," snapped Carol. "He's just a little putty cat."

"Like hell," said Oop.

Maxwell reached up and pulled the assemblage of the interpreter down across his eyes.

And looked down at the Artifact.

There was something there in that block of black. Lines. Forms. A strangeness. No longer just a block of unimaginable blackness, rejecting all influence from outside, tolerating nothing and giving up nothing, as if it might be a thing that stood apart, sufficient to itself within the universe.

He twisted his head to try to catch the angle from which it might be possible to untangle what he saw. No lines of writing, surely — it was something else. He reached up to the headpiece and pushed over the wheel that increased the power, fiddled for a moment with the adjustment for the sensor.

"What is it?" Carol asked him.

"I don't — "

"Then suddenly he did know. He saw. Imprisoned in one corner of the block was a talon, with iridescent flesh or hide or scale and gleaming claws that looked as if they had been carved from diamonds. A talon that moved and struggled to be free so it could reach out for him.

He flinched away, moving back to get out of reach, and he lost his balance. Falling, he tried to twist to one side so he wouldn't land flat upon his back. One shoulder struck the velvet rope and the standards that held the rope in place went over with a clatter. The floor came up and smacked him hard. Striking the rope had served to twist him to one side, and he came down heavily on one shoulder, but his head was protected from the floor. He struck at his forehead with an open hand, knocking the interpreter off to one side to free his eyes.

And there, above him, the Artifact was changing. Out of it something was rising — rearing up out of the oblong of blackness, jerking itself free. Something that was alive, athrob with vitality and glittering in its beauty.

A slender, dainty head, with an elongated snout, and a sharp serrated crest that ran from the

forepart of the head along the length of neck. A barrel-like chest and body, with a pair of wings half-folded, and shapely forelegs, armed with the diamond claws. It glittered blindingly in the spotlights that pointed at the Artifact — or, rather, where the Artifact had been. Each gleaming scale was a point of hard white light striking off the bronze and gold, the yellow and the blue.

A dragon! Maxwell thought. A dragon rising from the blackness of the Artifact! A dragon, finally risen, after long eons of being prisoned in that block of blackness.

A dragon! After all the years he'd hunted one, after all the years of wonder, here finally was a dragon. But not as he'd pictured it in his mind. This was no prosaic thing of flesh and scale, but a thing of glorious symbolism. A symbol of the heyday of the crystal planet, perhaps of the universe that had died so that this present universe could be born anew — ancient and fabulous, a fellow of those strange tribes of beings of which the trolls and goblins, the fairies and the banshees were the stunted and pitiful survivors. A thing the name of which had been handed down through generations that numbered into thousands, but never seen by any member of humanity until this very moment.

Oop stood out on the floor, beyond one of the tumbled standards that had held the velvet cord, his legs more bowed than ever, as if he'd started to sink into a crouch and had frozen there, with his hamlike hands hanging at his side, his fingers hooked like claws, while he stared upward at the terror and the wonder on the pedestal. In front of him, Sylvester crouched close against the floor, knotted muscles standing out along his furry legs, his great mouth agape, with the fangs exposed and ready for attack.

Maxwell felt a hand upon his shoulder and twisted around.

"A dragon?" Carol asked.

Her words were strange, as if she had been afraid to ask them, as if she'd forced them from her throat. She was not looking at him, but upward at the dragon, which now seemed to be complete.

The dragon switched its tail, which was long and sinuous. Out on the floor Oop tumbled down ungracefully to duck the sweep of it.

Sylvester squalled in anger and crept forward a foot or so.

"Cut it out, Sylvester," Maxwell said sharply to the cat.

Oop scrambled forward hastily on his hands and knees and grabbed Sylvester by one of his hind legs.

"Talk to him," Maxwell said to Carol. "If that damn fool cat tackles him, there'll be hell to pay."

"Oop, you mean? He wouldn't tackle Oop."

"Not Oop," said Maxwell. "The dragon. If he takes off on the dragon — "

A bellow of rage came thundering out of the darkness, and the thump of running feet.

"What is going on in here?" howled the watchman, charging from the shadows.

The dragon spun upon the pedestal and came swiftly off it, switching around to face the running watchman.

XXVI

"Look out," Oop yelled, still with a tight grip upon Sylvester's leg.

The dragon moved forward carefully, almost mincingly, its head canted at a questioning angle. It flourished its tail. The tail swept across the top of a display table, brushing off a half dozen bowls and jugs. The pottery thudded and gleaming shards went skating across the floor.

"Hey, cut that out!" the watchman yelped. Then, apparently for the first time, he saw the dragon. The yelp turned into a howl of fear. The watchman turned and fled. The dragon trotted after him, not in any hurry, but very interested. His progress was marked by a series of thudding and splintering crashes.

"If we don't get him out of here," said Maxwell, "there'll be nothing left. At the rate he's going, there won't be a thing intact in less than fifteen minutes. He'll have the place wiped out. And, Oop, for the love of God, hang onto that cat. We don't want a full-fledged brawl breaking out in here."

Maxwell got to his feet, grabbed the interpreter off his head and stuffed it in his pocket.

"I could open the dors," Carol offered. "We could shoo him out of here. The big doors, I mean. I think that I know how."

"How are you, Oop," Maxwell asked, "at dragon-herding?"

The dragon had blundered to the rear of the building and now had turned around and was coming back.

"Oop," said Carol, "help me with these doors. I need a man with muscle."

"What about this cat?"

"Leave him to me," said Maxwell. "He may behave himself. Maybe he'll mind me."

A long chain of crashes marked the progress of the dragon. Listening to them, Maxwell moaned. Sharp would have his scalp for this. Friend or not, he would be



plenty sore. The whole damn museum wrecked and the Artifact transformed into rampaging tons of flesh.

He took a few tentative steps across the floor toward the crashing sounds. Sylvester slunk close against his heels. In the dimness, Maxwell could make out the dim outlines of the floundering dragon.

"Nice dragon," Maxwell said. "Take it easy, fellow."

It sounded rather silly and somehow inadequate. How in the world *should* one talk to a dragon?

Sylvester let out a hacking growl.

"You stay out of it," said Maxwell, sharply. "Things are bad enough without you messing in."

He wondered what had happened to the watchman. More than likely phoning the police and building up a storm.

Behind him he heard the creaking of the doors as they came open. If the dragon would only wait until those doors were open, then he could be shagged outdoors. And once the dragon had been gotten out, what would happen then? Maxwell shuddered, thinking of it — of the great beast blundering down the streets and across the malls. Maybe it would be better, after all, to keep him penned in here.

He stood indecisively for a moment, weighing the disadvantages of a dragon caged with a dragon on the loose. The museum was more or less wrecked already. Perhaps the complete wrecking of it would be preferable to turning this creature loose.

The doors still were creaking, slowly opening. The dragon had been ambling along, but now he burst into a gallop, heading for the opening portal.

Maxwell spun around. "Close those doors!" he shouted, then ducked quickly to one side as the galloping dragon came charging down upon him.

The doors were partly open, and they stayed partly open. Oop and Carol were racing off in different directions, intent on leaving plenty of room for the lumbering tons of flesh that were heading for the open.

Sylvester's thunderous roars boomed and echoed in the museum as he took off in pursuit of the running creature.

Off to one side, Carol was shrieking at him. "Cut it out, Sylvester! No, Sylvester, no!"

The dragon's sinuous tail flicked nervously from side to side as it ran. Cabinets and tables crashed, statues were sent spinning. A path of destruction marked the dragon's flight for freedom.

Groaning, Maxwell ran after Sylvester and the dragon, although, for the life of him, he didn't know exactly why. He was certain he didn't want to catch the dragon.

The dragon reached the opening and went through it in a single leap, high into the air, and as it leaped, the wings unfolded and swept downward in a thrumming beat.

At the doorway Maxwell skidded to a stop. On the steps below the entrance, Sylvester also had spun to a sliding halt and now was straining upward, raging loudly at the flying dragon.

It was a sight to make one catch his breath. Moonlight on the beating wings, reflecting off the burnished scales of red and gold and blue, made a flashing rainbow that quivered in the sky.

Oop and Carol burst out of the door and stopped to stare into the sky.

"Beautiful!" said Carol.

"Yes, isn't it," said Maxwell.



And now, for the first time, he realized in full exactly what had happened here. There was no longer any Artifact. The Wheeler deal was dead. And so was any deal that he could make in behalf of the crystal planet. The chain of events which had been started with the copying of his wave pattern when he had been launched for Coonskin had been canceled out. Now, except for that flashing rainbow in the sky, it was as if nothing at all had happened.

The dragon was higher now, wheeling in the sky, no longer anything more than the flashing of the rainbow colors.

"This tears it," Oop declared. "What do we do now?"

"It was my fault," said Carol.

"It was no one's fault," said Oop. "It's just the way things happen."

"Well, anyhow," said Maxwell, "we loused up Harlow's deal."

"I'll say you did," a voice said behind them. "Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

They turned around.

Harlow Sharp stood in the doorway. Someone had turned on all the museum lights, and he stood out sharply against the lighted oblong of the doors.

"The museum is wrecked," he said, "and the Artifact is gone and here are the two of you. I might have known. Miss Hampton, I'm astonished. I thought you had better sense than to become entangled in such low company. Although that crazy cat of yours — "

"You leave Sylvester out of this," she said. "He never had a thing to do with it."

"Well, Pete?" asked Sharp.

Maxwell shook his head. "I find it a bit hard to explain."

"I would think so," said Sharp. "Did you have all this in mind when you talked with me this evening?"

"No," said Maxwell. "It was a sort of accident."

"An expensive accident," said Sharp. "It might interest you to know that you've set Time's work back a century or more. Unless, of course, you somehow moved the Artifact and have it hidden out somewhere. In which case, my friend, I give you a flat five seconds to hand it back to me."

Maxwell gulped. "I didn't move it, Harlow. In fact, I barely touched it. I'm not sure what happened, but — Well, it turned into a dragon."

"It turned into a what?"

"A dragon."

"I remember now," said Sharp. "You always were blathering around about a dragon. You started out for Coonskin to find yourself a dragon. And now it

seems you've found one. I hope that it's a good one."

"It's a pretty one," said Carol. "All gold and shimmery."

"Oh, fine," said Sharp. "Isn't that just bully? We can probably make a fortune, taking it around on exhibition. We can whomp up a circus."

"But it isn't here," said Carol. "It up and flew away."

"Oop," said Sharp, "you haven't said a word, and you are ordinarily fairly mouthy. What is going on?"

"I'm mortified," said Oop.

Sharp turned away from him and looked at Maxwell.

"Pete," he said, "you probably realize what you have done. The watchman phoned me and wanted to call the police. But I told him to hold up on calling the police, and I'd come right down. I had no idea it would turn out as bad as it did turn out to be. The Artifact is gone and I can't deliver it, and that means I'll have to hand back all that cash. And a lot of the exhibits have been smashed to smithereens . . . . "

Maxwell said, "The dragon did that before we let him out."

"So you let him out? He didn't actually get away. You just let him out."

"Well, he was smashing all that stuff. I guess we weren't thinking."

"Tell me honest, Pete. Was there actually a dragon? Or are you going crazy?"

"Yes, there was one. He was immobilized inside the Artifact. Perhaps he was the Artifact. Don't ask me how he got there. Enchantment, I would guess."

Slowly, lowering himself one section at a time, Sharp sat down on the top step and looked slowly from one to the other of them.

"Not a thing," he said. "You didn't miss a thing when you started out to ruin Harlow Sharp. You made a job of it."

"We didn't start out to ruin you," said Oop. "We never had a thing against you. Somehow it seemed that things started going wrong, and they never stopped."

"By rights," said Sharp, "I should sue every one of you for every cent you have. I should ask a judgment — and don't fool yourself, I'd get it — that would keep all of you working for Time the rest of your natural lives. But the three of you together couldn't offset by a fraction, during your collective lifetimes, what you cost Time tonight. So there's no sense in doing it. Although I suppose the police will have to get into the ruckus. I don't see how they can be kept out of it. The three of you, I'm afraid, will

have to answer a lot of questions."

"If someone would only listen to me," said Maxwell, "I could explain it all. That's what I've been trying to do ever since I got back — to find someone who would listen to me. I tried to talk to you this afternoon . . . ."

"Then," said Sharp, "suppose you start right now by explaining it to me. I'll own to a slight curiosity. Let's go across the street to my office, where we can settle down and have a talk. Or might that inconvenience you? There's probably a thing or two you still have to do to finish up the job of bankrupting Time."

"No, I guess there isn't," said Oop. "I'd say offhand that we've done about everything we can."

XXVII

Inspector Drayton rose heavily from the chair in which he had been sitting in Sharp's outer office.

"I'm glad you finally arrived, Dr. Sharp," he said. "Something has arisen — "

The inspector cut short his speech when he caught sight of Maxwell. "So it's you," said the inspector. "I am glad to see you. You've led me a long, hard chase."

Maxwell made a face. "I'm not sure, Inspector, that I can reciprocate your gladness."

If there was anyone he could get along without right now, he told himself, it was Inspector Drayton.

"And who might you be?" Sharp asked, shortly. "What do you mean by busting in here?"

"I'm Inspector Drayton, of Security. I had a short talk with Professor Maxwell the other day, on the occasion of his return to Earth, but I'm afraid that there are still some questions."

"In that case," said Sharp, "please take your place in line. I have business with Dr. Maxwell, and I'm afraid that mine takes precedence over yours."

"You don't understand," said Drayton. "I have not come here to apprehend your friend. His turning up with you is a piece of good fortune I had not expected. There is another matter in which I thought you might be helpful, a matter which came up rather unexpectedly. You see, I had heard that Professor Maxwell had been a guest at Miss Clayton's recent party, and so I went to see her."

"Talk sense, man," said Sharp. "What has Nancy Clayton got to do with all of this?"

"I don't know, Harlow," said Nancy Clayton, appearing at the doorway of the inner office. "I never intended to get involved in anything. All I ever try to do is entertain my friends and I can't

see how there's anything so wrong in that."

"Nancy, please," said Sharp. "First tell me what is going on."

"It's Lambert," Nancy said.

"You mean the man who painted the picture that you have."

"I have three of them," said Nancy, proudly.

"But Lambert has been dead more than five hundred years."

"That's what I thought, too," said Nancy, "but he turned up tonight. He said that he was lost."

A man stepped from the inner room, urging Nancy to one side — a tall and rugged man with sandy hair and deep lines in his face.

"It appears, gentlemen," he said, "that you are discussing me. Would you mind if I spoke up for myself?"

There was a strange twang to the way he spoke his words. He stood beaming at them in a good-natured manner, and there was not much that one could find in him to make one dislike the man.

"You are Albert Lambert?" Maxwell asked.

"Indeed I am," said Lambert. "I hope I don't intrude, but I have a problem."

"And you're the only one?" asked Sharp.

"I'm sure that I don't know," said Lambert. "I suppose there are many other persons who are faced with problems. When you have a problem, however, the question is where to go to have it solved."

"Mister," said Sharp, "I am in the same position. I am seeking answers the same as you."

"But don't you see," Maxwell said to Sharp, "that Lambert has the right idea? He has come to the one place where his problems can be solved."

"If I were you, young fellow," Drayton said, "I wouldn't be so sure. You were pretty foxy the other day, but now I'm onto you. There are a lot of things — "

"Inspector, will you please keep out of this?" said Sharp. "Things are bad enough without you complicating them. The Artifact is gone, and the museum is wrecked, and Shakespeare has disappeared."

"But all I want," said Lambert, reasonably, "is to get back home again. Back to 2023."

"Now, wait a minute," Sharp commanded. "You are out of line."

Maxwell said, "Harlow, I explained it all to you just this afternoon. I asked you about Simonson. Surely you recall."

"Simonson? Yes, I remember now." Sharp looked at Lambert. "You are the man who painted the canvas that shows the Artifact."

"Artifact? What do you mean?"

"A big block of black stone set atop a hill."

Lambert shook his head. "No, I haven't painted it. Although I suppose I will. In fact, it seems I must, for Miss Clayton showed it to me and it's undeniably something that I would have done. And I must say, who shouldn't, that it is not so bad."

"Then you actually saw the Artifact back in Jurassic days?"

"Jurassic?"

"Two hundred million years ago."

Lambert looked surprised. "So it was that long ago. I knew it was pretty far. There were dinosaurs."

"But you must have known. You were traveling in time."

"The trouble is," said Lambert, "the time has gone haywire. I never seem to be able to go to the time I want."

Sharp put up his hands and held his head between them. Then he took them away and said: "Now, let's go at this slowly. One thing at a time. First one step and then another, till we get to the bottom of it."

"I explained to you," said Lambert, "that there's just one thing that I want. It's very simple really. All I want is to get home again."

"Where is your time machine?" asked Sharp. "Where did you leave it? We can have a look at it."

"I didn't leave it anywhere. There's no place I could leave it. It goes everywhere with me. It's inside my head."

"In your head!" yelled Sharp. "A time unit in your head. But that's impossible."

Maxwell grinned at Sharp. "When we were talking this afternoon," he said, "you told me that Simonson revealed very little about his time machine. Now it appears — "

"I did tell you that," Sharp agreed. "But who in their right mind would suspect that a time unit could be installed in a subject's brain? It must be a new principle. Something that we missed entirely." He said to Lambert, "Do you have any idea how it works?"

"Not the slightest," Lambert said. "The only thing I know is that when it was put into my head — a rather major surgical operation, I can assure you — I gained the ability to travel in time. I simply have to think of where I want to go, using certain rather simple co-ordinates, and I am there. But something has gone wrong. No matter what I think, I go banging back and forth like a yoyo from one time to yet another. None of them are the times I want to be."

"It would have advantages," said Sharp, speaking musingly and more to himself than to the rest of them. "It would admit of independent action and it would be small, much smaller than the mechanism that we have to use. It would have to be able to go inside the brain and . . . I don't suppose, Lambert, that you know too much about it?"

"I told you," Lambert said. "Not a thing. I wasn't really interested in how it worked. Simonson happens to be a friend of mine — "

"But why here? Why did you come here? To this particular place and time?"

"An accident, that's all. And once I arrived it looked a lot more civilized than a lot of places I had been, and I started inquiring around to orient myself. Apparently I had never been so far into the future before, for one of the first things I learned was that you did have time travel and that here was a Time College. Then I heard that Miss Clayton had a painting of mine, and thinking that if she had a painting I had done she might be disposed favorably toward me, I sought her out. In hope, you see, of finding out how to contact the people who might be able to use their good offices to send me home again. And while I was there Inspector Drayton arrived."

"Now, Mr. Lambert," Nancy said, "before you go any further, there is something that I want to ask you. Why didn't you, when you were back in the Jurassic or wherever it was that Harlow said you were, and you painted this picture — "

"You forget," Lambert told her. "I haven't painted it yet. I have some sketches and someday I expect to."

"Well, then. When you get around to painting that picture, why don't you put in dinosaurs? There aren't any dinosaurs in it, and you just said you knew you were a long way in the past because there were dinosaurs."

"I put no dinosaurs in the painting," said Lambert, "for a very simple reason. There were no dinosaurs."

"But you said — "

"You must realize," Lambert explained, patiently, "that I paint only what I see. I never subtract anything. I never add anything. And there were no dinosaurs because the creatures in the painting had chased them all away. So I put in no dinosaurs, nor any of the others."

"Any of the others?" asked Maxwell. "What are you talking about now? What were these others?"

"Why," said Lambert, "the ones with wheels."

He stopped and looked around

him at their suddenly stricken faces.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, not at all," Carol said sweetly.

"Go right ahead, Mr. Lambert. Tell us all about the ones with wheels. We are all terribly interested."

"You probably won't believe me," Lambert said, "and I can't tell you what they were. The slaves, perhaps. The work horses. The bearers of the burdens. The serfs. They were life forms, apparently. They were alive, but they went on wheels instead of feet and they were not one thing alone. Each one of them was a hive of insects, like bees or ants. Social insects, apparently. You understand, I don't expect that you'll believe a word I say. But I swear —"

From somewhere far away came the low, thudding rumble of rapidly advancing wheels. As they stood transfixed and listening they knew that the wheels were coming down the corridor. Nearer came the rumble, growing louder as it advanced. Suddenly it was just outside the door and slowing down to turn, and all at once a Wheeler stood inside the door.

"That's one of them!" screamed Lambert. "What is it doing here?"

XXVIII

"Mr. Marmaduke," said Maxwell, "it is good to see you once again."

"No," the Wheeler told him. "Not Mr. Marmaduke. The so-called Mr. Marmaduke will not be seen by you again. He is in very bad disgrace. He made a vast mistake."

Sylvester had started forward, but Oop had reached down and grabbed him by the loose skin of the neck and was holding him tightly while he struggled to break free.

"There was a contract made," the Wheeler said, "by a humanoid that went by the name of Harlow Sharp. Which one of you would be Harlow Sharp?"

"I'm your man," said Sharp.

"Then, sir, I must ask you what you intend to do about the fulfillment of the contract."

"There is nothing I can do," said Sharp. "The Artifact is gone and cannot be delivered. Of course your payment will be refunded promptly."

"That, Mr. Sharp," the Wheeler said, "will not be sufficient. It will fall far short of satisfaction. We shall bring the trial of law against you. We shall bust you, mister, with everything we can. We shall do our best to poverty you and —"

"Why, you miserable go-cart," Sharp yelled, "there is no law for you! Galactic law does not apply with a creature such as you. If you think you can come here and threaten me —"

Ghost appeared out of thin air, just inside the doorway.

"It's about time," Oop yelled angrily. "Where've you been all night? What did you do with Shakespeare?"

"The Bard is safe," said Ghost, "but there is other news." The arm of the robe raised and gestured at the Wheeler. "Others of *his* kind swarm in Goblin Reservation to try to trap the dragon."

So, thought Maxwell, somewhat illogically, it had been the dragon they wanted after all. Could the Wheelers have known all along that there had been a dragon? Of course they would have known; it had been they or their far ancestors who had done the work back in Jurassic days.

In Jurassic days on Earth, and how many other times on how many other planets? The serfs, Lambert had said, the horses, the bearers of the burdens. Were they now, or had they been, inferior members of that ancient tribe of beings, or had they been, perhaps, simply domesticated animals, harnessed biologically by genetic engineering, for the jobs they were assigned?

And now these former slaves, having established an empire of their own, reached out their hands for something that they may have reason to believe should be their heritage. Theirs, since nowhere else in the universe was there left any trace of the great colonization project dreamed by the crystal planet.

And perhaps, thought Maxwell — perhaps it should be theirs. For theirs had been the labor that had engineered the project.

Had the dying banshee, laden with an ancient guilt, sought to right a wrong when he had doublecrossed the crystal planet, when he had sought to help these former slaves? Or had he perhaps believed that the heritage should go, not to some outsider, but to a race of beings who had played a part, however menial, however small, in the great project that had crumbled into failure?

"You mean," Sharp said to the Wheeler, "that at the very moment you were standing here and threatening me, you had your bandits out?"

"He works all the angles that there are," said Oop.

"The dragon went home," said Ghost, "to the only home that he could recognize upon this planet. To where the Little Folk reside, so that he could see his fellows once again, flying in the clear moonlight above the river valley.

And then the Wheelers attacked him in the air, trying to force him to the ground, so that he could be captured. The dragon is fighting back most magnificently, but — "

"Wheelers can't fly," protested Sharp. "And you make it sound like there were a lot of them. There can't be. Mr. Marmaduke was the only . . . . "

"Perhaps," said Ghost, "they are not believed to fly, but they are truly flying. And as for the number of them, I am mystified. Perhaps here all the time, hiding from the view. Perhaps many coming in through the transport stations."

"We can put a stop to that," said Maxwell. "We can send word to Transportation Central."

Sharp shook his head. "No, we can't do that. Transportation is inter-galactic, not of Earth alone. We cannot interfere."

"Mr. Marmaduke," said Inspector Drayton, speaking in his best official voice, "or whoever you may be, I think I'd better run you in."

"Leave off this blathering," said Ghost. "The Little Folk need help."

Maxwell reached out and picked up the chair. "It's time we put an end to fooling," he declared. He raised the chair and said to the Wheeler. "It's time for you to start talking, friend. And if you don't, I'll damn well cave you in."

A circle of jets suddenly protruded from the Wheeler's chest, and there was a hissing sound. A stench hit them in the face, a terrible fetor that struck like a clenched and savage fist, that made the stomach somersault and set the throat to gagging.

Maxwell felt himself falling to the floor, unable to control his body, which seemed tied up in knots from the fearful stink that exuded from the Wheeler. He hit the floor and rolled. His hands went to his throat and tore at it, as if to rip it open to allow himself more air — although there seemed to be no air, nothing but the foulness of the Wheeler.

Above him he heard a fearful screaming. When he rolled around so he could look up, he saw Sylvester suspended above him, his front claws hooked around the upper portions of the Wheeler's body, his rear legs clawing and striking at the bulging and transparent belly in which writhed the disgusting mass of roiling insects. The Wheeler's wheels were spinning frantically, but something had gone wrong with them. One wheel spun in one direction and the second in another. The Wheeler whirled about in a giddy dance, with Sylvester clinging desperately and his back legs working like driving pistons at the Wheeler's belly. It looked for all the world, thought Maxwell, as if the two of them were engaged in a rapid and unwieldly waltz.

An unseen hand reached out, grasped Maxwell by the arm and hauled him unceremoniously across the floor. As his body thumped across the threshold, some of the foulness diminished. There now was a breath of air.

Maxwell rolled to his hands and knees and fought his way erect. He reached up with his fists and rubbed at his streaming eyes. The air still was heavy with stench, but one no longer gagged.

Sharp sat propped against the wall, gasping and rubbing at his eyes. Carol was slumped upon the floor. Oop, crouched in the doorway, was tugging Nancy out of the fetid room, from which still came the screaming of a saber-tooth at work.

Maxwell staggered forward, reached down, picked up Carol and slung her like a sack across one shoulder. He beat an unsteady retreat down the corridor.

Thirty feet away he stopped and turned around. As he did, the Wheeler burst out of the doorway, finally free of Sylvester and with both wheels spinning in unison. He came down the hall, wheeling crazily and lopsidedly — staggering blindly, if a thing with wheels could be said to stagger, slamming into one wall and caroming off it to smash into the other. From a great rent in his belly small whitish objects dropped and scattered all across the floor.

Ten feet from where Maxwell stood, the Wheeler finally collapsed when one wheel hit the wall and caved in. Slowly, with what seemed to be a rather strange sort of dignity, the Wheeler tipped over.

Out of the torn belly gushed a bushel or so of insects that piled up on the floor.

Sylvester came slinking down the hall, crouched low, his muzzle extended in curiosity, taking one slow step and then another as he crept up on his handiwork. Behind Oop and Sylvester came the rest of them.

"You can let me down now," said Carol.

Maxwell let her down, stood her on her feet. She leaned against the wall.

"I never saw a more undignified way to be carried," she declared. "You haven't got a spark of chivalry to pack a girl around in a manner such as that."

"It was all a mistake," said Maxwell. "I should have left you there, laid out on the floor."

Sylvester had stopped now and reaching out his neck, sniffed at the Wheeler, all the while with wrinkles of disgust and wonder

etched upon his face. There was no sign of life in the Wheeler. Satisfied, Sylvester pulled back, squatted on his haunches and began to wash his face. On the floor beside the fallen Wheeler, the mound of bugs were seething. A few of them started crawling from the pile, heading out into the hall.

Sharp swung out past the Wheeler.

"Come on, he said. "Let's get out of here."

The corridor still was sour with the terrible stench.

"But what is it all about?" wailed Nancy. "Why did Mr. Marmaduke — "

"Nothing but stink bugs," Oop told her. "Can you imagine that? A galactic race of stink bugs! And they had us scared!"

Inspector Drayton lumbered forward importantly. "I'm afraid it will be necessary for you all to come with me," he said. "I will need your statements."

"Statements," Sharp said, viciously. "You must be out of your mind. Statements, at a time like this, with a dragon loose!"

"But an alien has been killed," protested Drayton. "And not just an ordinary alien. A member of a race that could be our enemies. This could have repercussions."

"Just write it down," said Oop, "killed by a savage beast."

"Oop," snapped Carol, "you know better than to say a thing like that. Sylvester isn't savage. He's gentle as a kitten. And he is not a beast."

Maxwell looked around. "Where is Ghost?" he asked.

"He took it on the lam," said Oop. "He always does when trouble starts. He's nothing but a coward."

"But he said — "

"That he did," said Oop. "And we are wasting time. O'Toole could do with help."

XXX

Mr. O'Toole was waiting for them when they got off the roadway.

"I knew coming you would be," he greeted them. "Ghost, he said he would get you yet. And badly do we need someone who will talk sense to the trolls, who hide and gibber in their bridge and will listen to no reason."

"What have the trolls got to do with it?" asked Maxwell. "For once in your life, can't you leave the trolls alone?"

"The trolls," Mr. O'Toole explained, "filthy as they are, may be our one salvation. They be the only ones who, from lack of any civilization whatsoever, or any niceties, remain proficient in the enchantments of old times. And they specialize in the really dirty kinds of work, the most vicious of enchantments. The

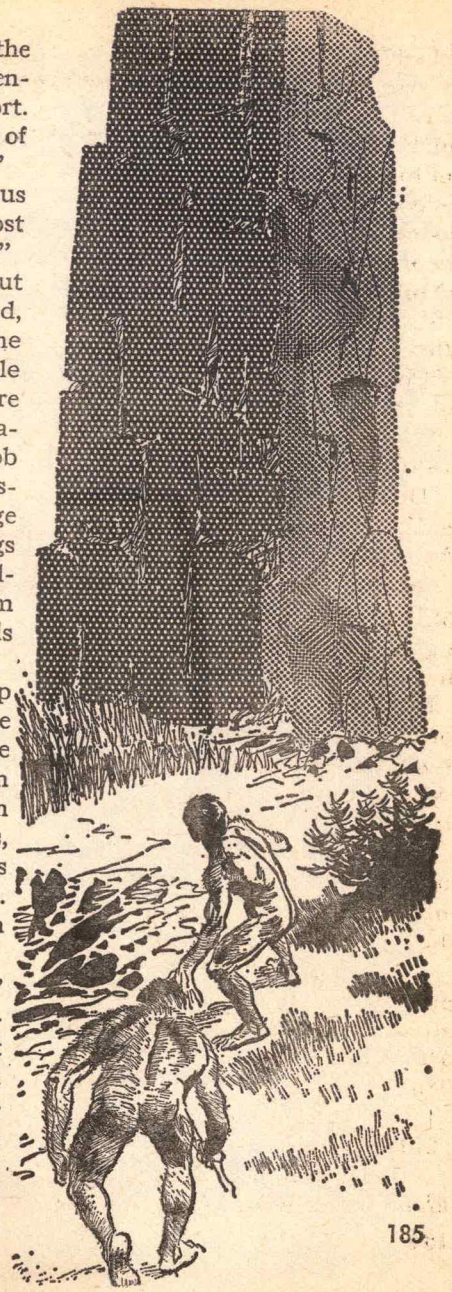
fairies, naturally, also cling to the old abilities, but all of their enchantments are of the gentle sort. And gentleness is something of which we do not stand in need."

Sharp asked, "Can you tell us exactly what is going on? Ghost didn't hang around to explain."

"Gladly," said the goblin, "but leave us start to walking and, walking, I'll relate to you all the happenstance. We have but little time to waste and the trolls are stubborn souls and vast persuasion they will need to do a job for us. They lurk within the mossy stones of that senseless bridge of theirs and they titter like things which have lost their minds. Although, bitter truth to tell, them stinking trolls have little minds to lose."

They trudged in single file up the rocky ravine which lay in the notch between the hills, and in the east the dawn-light had begun to show, but the path, buried in the trees and flanked by bushes, was dark. Here and there birds woke from sleep and twittered. Somewhere up the hill a raccoon was whickering.

"The dragon came home to us," O'Toole told them as they walked, "the one place on Earth left for him to go, to be with his own kind again. And the Wheelers — which in ancient times had another name than Wheelers — have attacked him, like broom-



sticks flying in formation. They must not force him to the ground, for then they have him caught and can whisk him hence very rapidly. And, forsooth, he has made a noble fight of it, the fending of them off, but he is growing tired. We must hurry rapidly and with much dispatch if we are to give him aid."

"And you're counting," Maxwell said, "on the trolls being able to bring the Wheelers down like they brought down the flier."

"You apprehend most easily, my friend. That's what lingers in my mind. But these befouled trolls make a bargain of it."

"I never knew," said Sharp, "that the Wheelers could fly. All I've seen them do was trundle."

"Of abilities they have many," said O'Toole. "From their bodies they can grow devices without number and beyond imagination. Nozzles for the spreading of their nasty gas, guns to shoot the lethal bolt, jets to make them broomsticks that move with amazing speed. And never are they up to any good. Full of anger and resentment after all the ages, lying out there, deep in the galaxy, with rancor eating like a cancer into their putrid minds, waiting for a chance to be what they never can be — for no more than menials they are or ever will be."

"But why bother with the trolls?" asked Drayton, out of sorts. "I could have guns and planes here."

"Don't try to be any more of a fool than you already are," said Sharp. "We can't lay a finger on them. We can't create an incident. The humans can take no part in this. This is something between the Little Folk and their former slaves."

"But the cat already killed — "

"The cat. Not a human."

Carol said, "Sylvester was only trying to protect us."

"Do we have to go so fast?" protested Nancy. "I'm not used to this."

"Here," said Lambert, "take my arm. The path does seem slightly rough."

"Do you know, Pete," said Nancy, bubbling, "that Mr. Lambert has agreed to be my house guest for a year or so and paint some pictures for me. Isn't that a lovely thing for him to do?"

"Yes," said Maxwell. "I am sure it is."

The path had been climbing the hillside for the last hundred feet or so. Now it dipped down toward the ravine, which was clogged with tumbled boulders which, in the first faint light of morning, looked like crouched, humped beasts. And spanning the ravine was the ancient bridge, a structure jerked raw from an old medieval road. Looking at it, Maxwell found it hard to believe that it had been built only a few decades ago when the reservation had been laid out.

Two days, he thought. Had it been only two days since he had returned to Earth to find Inspector Drayton waiting? So much had happened that it seemed much longer.

He tried to summon up a hatred of the Wheelers, but he found there was no hatred. They were too alien, too far removed from mankind, to inspire a hatred. They were abstractions of evil rather than actual evil beings — although that distinction made them no less dangerous. That other Peter Maxwell had surely been murdered by the Wheelers, for when he had been found there had been a curious, repulsive odor lingering, and now, since that moment in Sharp's office, Maxwell knew what that odor was. Murdered because the Wheelers had believed that the first Maxwell to return had come from the crystal planet and murder had been a way to stop him from interfering with the deal with Time for the Artifact. But when the second Maxwell had appeared, the Wheelers must have been afraid of a second murder. That was why, Maxwell told himself, Mr. Marmaduke had tried to buy him off.

And there was the matter of a certain Monty Churchill, Maxwell reminded himself. When this all was finished, no matter how it might come out, he would hunt up Churchill and make certain that the score he owed him was all evened out.

They came up to the bridge and walked under it and halted.

"All right, you trashy trolls," Mr. O'Toole yelled at the silent stone. "There is a group of us out here to hold conversation with you."

"You hush up," Maxwell told the goblin. "You keep out of this. You and the trolls do not get along."

"Who," the O'Toole demanded, "along can get with them? Obstinate things they are and without a shred of honor and of common sense bereft."

"Just keep still," said Maxwell. "Don't say another word."

They stood, all of them in the silence of the coming dawn, and finally a squeaky voice spoke to them from the area underneath the far end of the bridge.

"Who is there?" the voice asked. "If you come to bully us, bullied we'll not be. The loudmouthed O'Toole for all these years has bullied us and nagged us. No more we'll have of it."

"My name is Maxwell," Maxwell told the speaker. "I do not

come to bully you. I come to beg for help."

"Maxwell? The good friend of O'Toole?"

"The good friend of all of you. Of every one of you. I sat with the dying Banshee, taking the place of those who would not come to see out his final moments."

"But drink with O'Toole, you do. And talk with him, oh, yes. And give credence to his lies!"

The O'Toole strode forward, bouncing with wrath. "That down your throats I'll stuff!" he screamed. "Let me get my paws but once upon their filthy guzzles . . . ."

His words broke off abruptly as Sharp reached out and, grabbing him by the slack of his trouser-seat, lifted him and held him, gurgling and choking in his rage.

"You go ahead," Sharp said to Maxwell. "If this little pipsqueak so much as parts his lips, I'll find a pool and dunk him."

Sylvester sidled over to Sharp, thrust out his head and sniffed delicately at the dangling O'Toole. O'Toole batted at the cat with windmilling arms. "Get him out of here," he shrieked.

"He thinks you're a mouse," said Oop. "He's trying to make up his mind if you are worth the trouble."

Sharp hauled off and kicked Sylvester in the ribs. Sylvester shied off, snarling.

"Harlow Sharp," said Carol, starting forward, "don't you ever dare to do a thing like that again. If you do, I'll —"

"Shut up!" Maxwell yelled exasperated. "Shut up, all of you. The dragon is up there fighting for his life, and you stand here, wrangling."

They all fell silent. Some of them stepped back. Maxwell waited for a moment, then spoke to the trolls. "I don't know what's gone on before," he said. "I don't know what the trouble is. But we need your help and we're about to get it. I promise you fair dealing, but I also promise that if you aren't reasonable we're about to see what a couple of sticks of high explosive will do to this bridge of yours."

A feeble, squeaky voice issued from the bridge. "But all we ever wanted, all we ever asked, was for that bigmouthed O'Toole to make for us a cask of sweet October ale."

Maxwell turned around. "Is that right?" he asked.

Sharp set O'Toole back upon his feet so that he could answer.

"It's the breaking of a precedent!" howled O'Toole. "That is what it is. From time immemorial us goblins are the only ones who ever brewed the gladsome ale. And drink it by ourselves. Make we cannot more than we can drink. And make it for the trolls, then the fairies will be wanting . . . ."

"You know damn well," said Oop, "that the fairies would never drink the ale. All they drink is milk. The brownies too."

"Athirst you would have us all," screamed the goblin. "Hard labor it is for us to make only what we need and much time and thought and effort!"

"If it's a simple matter of production," suggested Sharp, "we certainly could help you."

Mr. O'Toole bounded up and down in wrath. "And the bugs!" he shouted. "What about the bugs? Exclude them from the ale I know you would when it was brewing. All nasty sanitary. To make October ale, bugs you must have falling into it and all other matters of great uncleanliness or the flavor you will miss."

"We'll put in bugs," said Oop. "We'll go out and catch a bucket full of them and dump them into it."

The O'Toole was beside himself with anger, his face a flaming purple. "Understand you do not," he screamed at them. "Bugs you do not go dumping into it. Bugs fall into it with wondrous selectivity!"

His words cut off in a gurgling shriek, and Carol called out sharply, "Sylvester, cut that out!"

The O'Toole dangled, wailing and flailing his arms, from Sylvester's mouth. Sylvester held his head high so that Mr. O'Toole's feet could not reach the ground.

Oop rolling on the ground in laughter, beating his hands upon the earth. "He thinks O'Toole's a mouse!" Oop yelled. "Look at that putty cat! He caught hisself a mouse!"

Sylvester was being gentle about it. He was not hurting O'Toole, except his dignity. He was holding him lightly in his mouth, with the two fangs in his upper jaws closing neatly about his middle.

Sharp hauled off to kick the cat.

"No," Carol yelled, "don't you dare do that!"

Sharp hesitated.

"It's all right, Harlow," Maxwell said. "Let him keep O'Toole. Surely he deserves something for what he did for us back there in the office."

"We'll do it!" O'Toole yelled, frantically. "We'll make them their cask of ale. We'll make two casks of it."

"Three," said the squeaky voice coming from the bridge.

"All right, three," agreed the goblin.

"No weaseling out of it later on?" asked Maxwell.

"Us goblins never weasel," said O'Toole.

"All right, Harlow," said Maxwell. "Go ahead and belt him."

Sharp squared off to kick. Sylvester dropped O'Toole and slunk off a pace or two.

The trolls came pouring from the bridge and went scurrying up the hillside, yelping with excitement.

The humans began scrambling up the slope, following the trolls.

Ahead of Maxwell, Carol tripped and fell. Maxwell stopped and lifted her. She jerked away from him and turned to him a face flaring with anger. "Don't you ever touch me!" she said. "Don't even speak to me. You told Harlow to go ahead and kick Sylvester. You yelled at me. You told me to shut up."

She turned then and went scrambling up the hill, moving quickly out of sight.

Maxwell stood befuddled for a moment, then began the climb, skirting boulders, grabbing at bushes to pull himself along.

Up on the top of the hill he heard wild cheering and off to his right a great black globe, with its wheels spinning madly, plummeted out of the sky and crashed into the woods. He stopped and looked up and saw, through the treetops, two globes streaking through the sky on collision courses. They did not swerve or slacken speed. They came together and exploded on impact. He stood and watched the shattered pieces flying. In a few seconds there were pattering sounds among the leaves as the debris came raining down.

The cheering still was going on atop the bluff and far off, near the top of the hill that rose beyond the ravine, something that he heard, but did not see, came plunging to the earth.

There was no one else in sight as he began the climb again.

It was all over now, he told himself. The trolls had done their work, and now the dragon could come down. He grinned wryly to himself. For years he'd hunted dragons, and here finally was the dragon, but something more, perhaps, than he had imagined. What could the dragon be, he wondered. And why had it been enclosed within the Artifact, or made into the Artifact, or whatever might have been done with it?

Funny thing about the Artifact, he thought — resisting everything, rejecting everything until that moment when he had fastened the interpreting mechanism on his head to examine it. What had happened to release the dragon from the Artifact? Clearly the mechanism had had a part to play in the doing of it, but there still was no way of knowing what might have happened. Although the people on the crystal planet certainly would know, one of the many things they knew, one of the many arts they held which still lay outside the knowledge of others in the galaxy. Had the interpreter turned up in his luggage by design rather than by accident? Had it been planted there for the very purpose for which it had been used? Was it an interpreter, at all? Or was it something else fashioned in a manner that resembled an interpreter?

He recalled that at one time he had wondered if the Artifact might not once have served as a god for the Little Folk, or for those strange creatures which early in the history of the Earth had been associated with the Little Folk? And had he been right, he wondered. Was the dragon a god from some olden time?

He began the climb again, but went slower now, for there was no need to hurry. It was the first time since he had returned from the crystal planet that there was no urgency.

He was somewhat more than halfway up the hill when he heard the music, so faint at first, so muted, that he could not be sure he heard it.

He stopped to listen, and it was surely music.

The sun had just moved the top part of its disk over the horizon. A sheet of blinding light struck the treetops on the hill above him, so that they blazed with autumn color. But the hillside that he climbed still lay in morning shadow.

He listened and the music was like the sound of silver water running over happy stones. Unearthly music. Fairy music.

And that was what it was. On the dancing green off to his left a fairy orchestra was playing.

A fairy orchestra and fairies dancing on the green! It was something that he had never seen, and here was a chance to see it. He turned to his left and made his way, as silently as he could, toward the dancing green.

Please, he whispered to himself, please don't go away. Don't be frightened by me. Please stay and let me see you.

He was close now. Just beyond that boulder. And the music kept on playing.

He crawled by inches around the boulder, on guard against making any sound.

And then he saw.

The orchestra sat in a row upon a log at the edge of the green and played away, the morning light flashing off the iridescent wings and the shiny instruments.

But there were no fairies dancing on the green. Instead there

were two others he never would have guessed. Two such simple souls as might dance to fairy music.

Facing one another, dancing to the music of the fairy orchestra, were Gfiost and Shakespeare.

XXXI

The dragon perched upon the castle wall, its multi-colored body glittering in the sun. Far below, in its valley, the Wisconsin river, blue as a forgotten summer sky, flowed between the shores of flaming forests. From the castle yard came sounds of revelry as the goblins and the trolls, for the moment with animosity laid aside, drank great tankards of October ale, banging the tankards on the tables that had been carried from the great hall and singing ancient songs that had been composed long before there had been such a thing as Man.

Maxwell sat upon a deep-buried boulder and gazed out across the valley. A dozen feet away the edge of the bluff cut off, above a hundred feet of cliff. On the edge of the cliff grew a twisted cedar tree, bent by the winds that had howled across the valley for uncounted years, its bark a powdery silver, its foilage a light and fragrant green. Even from where he sat, Maxwell could catch the sharp tang of the foilage.

It all had come out right, he told himself. There was no Artifact to trade for the knowledge of the crystal planet — although there was the dragon; and the dragon, after all, probably had been what the people on that planet wanted. But even if this should not prove to be the truth, the Wheelers had lost out. And in the long run that might be more important than the acquiring of the knowledge.

It all had worked out okay. Better than he could have hoped. Except that now everyone was sore at him. Carol was angry at him because he'd told Harlow to go ahead and kick Sylvester and because he'd told her to shut up. O'Toole was sore at him because he'd abandoned him to Sylvester and thereby forced him to give in to the trolls. Harlow more than likely still was plenty burned up because he had messed up the deal for the Artifact and because of all the busted pieces in the museum. But maybe the fact that he'd got Shakespeare back might make up for some of that. And there was Drayton, of course, who still might want to question him, and Longfellow, at Administration, who wouldn't like him any better no matter what had happened.

Sometimes, he told himself, it didn't pay to care too much about anything or to fight for anything.

Maybe it was the ones like Nancy Clayton who really had it made — featherheaded Nancy with her famous house guests and her fabulous parties.

Something brushed against him, and he turned to see what it might be. Sylvester reached out a rough and rasping tongue and began to wash his face.

"Cut it out," said Maxwell. "That tongue of yours takes off hide."

Sylvester purred contentedly and settled down beside him, leaning hard against him. The two of them sat and gazed across the valley.

"You got an easy life," Maxwell told the cat. "You don't have any problems. You don't have to worry."

A foot crunched on some stones. A voice said, "You've kidnapped my cat. Can I sit down and share him?"

"Sure, sit down," said Maxwell. "I'll move over for you. I thought you never wanted to speak to me again."

"You were a nasty person down there," said Carol. "I didn't like you much. But I suppose you had to be nasty."

A black cloud came to rest inside the cedar tree.

Carol gasped and shrank against Maxwell. He put out an arm and held her close.

"It's all right," he said. "It is just a Banshee."

"But he hasn't any body. He hasn't any face. He is just a cloud."

"That is not remarkable," the Banshee told her. "That is what we are, the two of us that are left. Great dirty dishcloths flapping in the sky. And you need not be frightened, for the other human is a friend of ours."

"I wasn't a friend of the third one," said Maxwell. "Nor was the human race. He sold out to the Wheelers."

"And yet you sat with him, when no one else would do it."

"Yes, I did that. Even your worst enemy could demand that you do that."

"Then, I think," the Banshee said, "that you can understand a little. The Wheelers, after all, were us. Still are us, perhaps. And ancient ties die hard."

"I think I do understand," said Maxwell. "What can I do for you?"

"I only came," the Banshee told him, "to tell you that the place you call the crystal planet has been notified."

"And they want the dragon?" Maxwell asked. "You'll have to give us the coordinates . . . ."

"The coordinates," said the Banshee, will be given to Transportation Central. You will want to go there, you and many others,

to transfer the data. But the dragon stays on Earth, here on Goblin Reservation."

"I don't understand," said Maxwell. "They wanted —"

"The Artifact," the Banshee said, "to set the dragon free. He had been caged too long."

"Since the Jurassic," said Maxwell. "I agree. That is far too long."

"But we did not plan so long," the Banshee said. "You moved him before we could set him free, and we thought that we had lost him. The Artifact was only to preserve and hide him until the colony on Earth could become established, until it could protect him . . . ."

"Protect him? Why did he need protection?"

"Because," the Banshee said, "he is the last of his race and therefore very precious. He is the last of the — I find it hard to say — you have creatures you call dogs and cats?"

"Yes," said Carol. "We have one of them right here."

"Pets," the Banshee said. "And yet much more than pets. Creatures that have walked the Earth with you from the very early days. The dragon is the pet, the last pet, of the people of the crystal planet."

"The goblins will take care of him," said Carol. "And the trolls and fairies and all the rest of them. They will be proud of him. They will spoil him rotten."

"And the humans, too?"

"And the humans, too," she said.

They did not see him go. But he was no longer there.

A pet, thought Maxwell. Not a god, but a simple pet. And yet, perhaps, not so simple as it sounded. When men had first made the biomechs, what had they created? Not other men, at least at first, not livestock, not freaks engineered to specific purposes. They had created pets.

Carol stirred against his arm. "What are you thinking, Pete?"

"About a date," he said. "Yes, I guess I was thinking of a dinner date with you. We had one once, but it never quite came off. Would you like to try again?"

"At the Pig & Whistle?"

"If that is what you want."

"Without Oop and Ghost. Without any troublemakers."

"But with Sylvester, of course."

"No," she said. "Just the two of us. Sylvester stays at home."

They got up from the boulder.

Sylvester looked up at the dragon perching on the castle wall and snarled.

The dragon lowered its head on its sinuous neck and looked him in the eye. It struck out at him a long and forked tongue.

— CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

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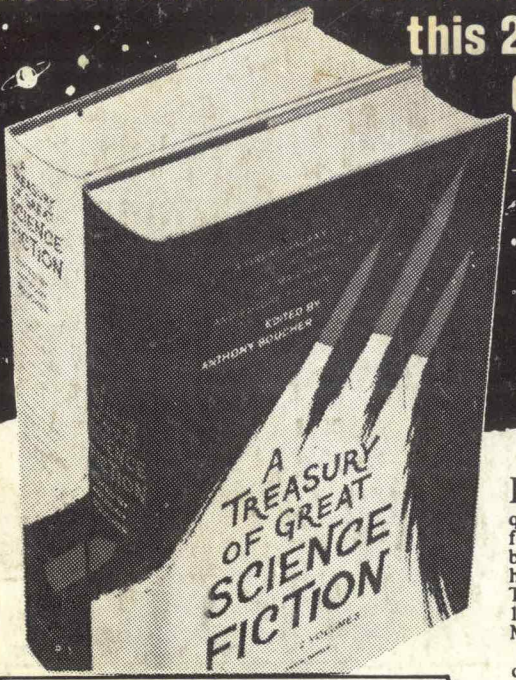
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