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THE STRANGER

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A TOR Book

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Acknowledgments

Contents

God Bless Them

"Nobody in Congress or the federal government or the public has put forward a case for a U.S. manned Mars Mission," Press said in an interview. "And if the Soviets decide to spend $70 billion to land men on Mars in five years, we say: God bless them."

—Los Angeles TimesYreprinted in the Minneapolis Star. Thursday, October 12, 1978
—(from an interview with Frank Press, science adviser to U.S. President James Carter and chairman of the presidential review committee whose four-month study formed the basis for Carter's policy statement on the space effort.)

There was no mail at the Main Minneapolis Post Office for Merlin Swenson. Almost no one got any mail at General Delivery on Mondays now. But

people went there, anyway, although lately the air conditioning was always off.

Merlin left the post office and walked slowly the twenty-seven blocks to the slave market. It was a

blue-bright July morning, already turning hot, and he could feel the heat of the sidewalk through the thin soles of his shoes. At Twelfth Avenue and Third Street, he stepped on something hard and stopped in a panic to check the sole of the right shoe. But whatever it was, he discovered, standing on one foot, had not gone through—although the sole was now like soft cardboard and gave at a touch.

He started walking again. The shoes would be too expensive for him to replace, these days, and there was no hope of getting any worthwhile work without them. When the soles finally wore through there would be several things he could do to patch them, temporarily, but it would be the beginning of the end. And it was inevitable that they would wear through. Any day now.

In the narrow waiting room of the slave market, the hard, upright chairs along the walls were all filled. The air conditioning, roaring from the ventilator grills, barely removed the stink of unwashed bodies. Merlin, himself, was clean this morning. It had cost him, but this was a special day.

"You planning to work dressed like that?" asked the hiring clerk behind the desk. His narrow, white face, under an upright shock of brown hair, was pinched by an expression of habitual annoyance.

"I am if you can get me something clean for half a day," Merlin said. In the mirror tile behind the clerk's desk he saw his own face, square, large-boned, trained now to show no expression at all. "I've got an engineering job interview this afternoon."

"Oh?" said the clerk, staring at his computer screen. He punched the keys of the terminal. "All right. You're on the half-day list. I can tell you right now there's not much chance."

"I could manage another ten percent," Merlin said.

The clerk's shrug told the true story. It was too

much to expect a clean job somewhere for just half a day. Still, the chance could'not be passed up. Money was everything.

Merlin waited for a chair; then, sitting, he tried to rest with his eyes open. You could lose your connec-

tion with a place like this if they caught you dropping off—that explained the hard chairs and the icy air conditioning. Everybody wanted a safe place to sleep. But this was the best of the slave markets. They were honest and made a specialty of hiring people who had degrees. The Qualified Laborer is a Conscientious Laborer was their slogan. Merlin drifted into a mindless period hearing nothing until the man next to him began reading aloud from a morning newspaper.

" "All hope of possible U.N. assistance for the U.S. economy seemed doomed today in light of comment by the Soviet Representative, Anatoly Pirapich, that this country had historically refused to fund its space program adequately and that aid now to U.S. orbital industries, in particular, would be an open invitation to impoverished nations to-rely on other countries for large investment capital.

" 'Pirapich read aloud in session a 1978 quote from the Los Angeles Times, reprinted in the Minneapolis Star on October twelfth of that year:

"The While House statement says America's civil space policy centers on these tenets: that activities will reflect a balanced strategy of application, science and technology development ... it is neither feasible nor necessary at this time to commit the U.S. to a high-challenge space engineering initiative comparable to Apollo ..."'"

The man stopped reading, folded his paper and turned to Merlin.

"Can you imagine that?" he said. "Just fifteen years ago, a White House statement says that. What were they using for brains?"

"What good does it do to keep re-reading that sort of thing?" Merlin said dully. "It doesn't change anything."

"But how could anyone be so blind?"

It was a trite question. Merlin felt no urge to answer, but he was not surprised to hear it asked. Although probably his own age, the other man had the kind of appearance that made him seem barely out of adolescence. Curly black hair, slight body, pale face—an innocent in a time when innocents got eaten for breakfast. Merlin had never seen him before.

"Does it matter now?" Merlin finally said.

"There'd still be a chance for this country if . . ." The other broke off. "Oh, my name's Sam Church. My degree's in electronics. How about you?"

"Flow mechanics, gravityless."

"Gravityless? You must really have thought you'd make it with an off-world job. But don't you know you shouldn't wear good clothes for this kind of place? No telling what kind of work they'll offer you."

The assumption of experience by someone obviously new here irritated Merlin enough to rouse him from the chronic fatigue he shared with most adults nowadays.

"I'm dressed like this because I've got a job interview this afternoon," he said. "In my own field."

He was sorry he had mentioned it, the moment the words were out of his mouth. Sam Church's pale face was suddenly wiped naked of pretension; it was now desperate with longing.

"Oh, God!" Church breathed. "You really have an interview?"

"I've been waiting nine months," Merlin said gruffly. He was sorry now he had talked to this man at all. Luckily, Church seemed to be the only one who had heard his mention of a professional job interview. They were all in the same straits. Church lowered his voice.

"Where? Who with?"

"International Positions," Merlin said. "One o'clock."

"God!" said Church again. He sniffed the air. "You took a shower, too."

Merlin's small, bitter laugh caught in his throat.

"Not damn likely!" he said. "I used the washbasin on my crash floor, and it cost me three hundred for five minutes. My own soap and towel, and a hundred to hire somebody to stand guard."

Church's attitude had changed. He was now utterly the awestruck neophyte looking at an old hand.

"You're office-crashing?" he said. "How dangerous is it?"

"If you know what you're doing, it's workable," Merlin said.

"You carry a knife?"

"Of course." Merlin felt trapped by the conversation but unable to think of a way to change the subject. "That doesn't mean much. There's always someone around who's better with a knife. The real trick is knowing who's sharing the office with you, and all of you take turns on watch. You've got to

know how to wheel and deal'with the hall-patrol guards, too."

Church breathed out softly. He looked enviously at Merlin's large frame.

"I couldn't do it," he said.

Merlin looked at him. He was quite ready to believe that the other could not do it, would not be able to survive in one of the empty office buildings that had been converted to dormitories. Only the fittest survived very long.

"Where do you live?" he asked, to change the subject.

"I've only been married five months. My wife and I, we've got a room with my in-laws."

"Wife . . ." Merlin caught himself just in time. He

had had a sudden, unbearably poignant, vision of someone to go home to, only one other person and a room where you could be alone, just the two of you.

"You're married too?" Church asked.

"Yes. She's on the west coast."

"Oh."

Church did not make the mistake of asking more than that—there were limits even to his innocence, apparently. Many families had been split by the galloping inflation and the lack of jobs.

"Do you hear from her much?" Church asked.

"No."

The monosyllable finally stopped Church's questioning. They sat a while longer in silence; then, glancing at the clock. Merlin saw that it was almost noon. His mindless period had lasted longer than it seemed. He stood up, went over to the desk and told the clerk he was checking out.

"Right." The clerk punched keys on his computer terminal, not looking up. As he turned away from the desk, Merlin bumped into Church, also on his feet.

"I haven't gotten anything all morning here, either," said Church. "Do you mind if I walk along with you?"

"Yes," said Merlin-
Church blinked. "Yes? You do mind?"
"That's right. No company."

"Oh." Church fell back. Merlin turned and went past him and out the door into midday heat that was now like radiation from the hearth of a blast furnace.

He walked back the way he had come, downtown toward the International Trade Center. On the way he stopped at a discount market and bought a quarter-liter foil package of uncooked Quaker Oats for eighteen dollars. A smal! detour took him to Aimsbury Park, where he ripped open the package and ate the dry oats by the handful, washing them down with

water from a public fountain. The oat flakes, under their dustiness, had an aimost nutty taste. They were the most food available for the money, and he felt better with something in his stomach. "Courage is food; food is courage." Someone had told him that when he was young.

It was nearly one o'clock. He went on to the International Trade Center, to the office of International Positions, and gave his name to the receptionist-

"Oh, yes." She checked her computer screen. "Mr. Ghosh will see you. Just a few minutes ... if you'll sit down."

It was, of course, more than just a few minutes. His mouth began to feel dry from the oat flakes, and he got to his feet.

"Would I have time to find a drinking fountain?" he asked.

"I'm sure you will." She smiled at him. She was thin, in her forties, and in spite of having a steady job, she seemed prey to inner anxiety. "There's one just outside, to your left."

He went out through the "glass door and found the fountain. After drinking, as he straightened up, he heard a throat cleared behind him. He turned to see Church standing there.

"I hope you don't mind," Church said. "I just wanted to see how you'd come out ..."

Under his immediate irritation, something he thought he had long since repressed, something dangerous—sympathy for another human being—stirred in Merlin. Church was so helpless, so inoffensive, it was impossible not to feel sorry for him.

"All right," said Merlin. "But don't hang around here. Wait for me outside and I'll tell you about it when I leave."

"Thanks." said Church, looking up at him. "Really. I mean thanks!"

Gordon R. Dickson

"I'm not doing anything special for you," said Merlin. He went back into the office.

"Oh, good. There you are," said the receptionist as he stepped through the door. "Hurry! Mr. Ghosh is waiting for you. Straight ahead and to your right!"

Merlin hurried into the corridor beyond her desk and found his way to the open doorway of a wide room, brightly lit by a wall-wide window. The room was pleasant with air conditioning and the green of potted plants. Behind a wood-and-chrome desk sat a dark-skinned man in his forties, wearing a chalk-striped blue suit—the value of which would have given Meriin financial security for a year. Ram Ghosh, said the nameplate on his desk. But his eyes were not unkind, and he did not exhibit the condescension, the air of veiled exasperation and impatience with Americans, that so many foreigners showed these days.

"Mr. Swenson? Sit down, please." Ram Ghosh's English was almost accentiess, with only a slight prolongation of the vowels. Merlin took a chair. Ghosh tapped the papers on his desk with the nail of an index finger.

"Six months," he said. "You've waited a long time for a job offer from us."

"Lots of people wait longer," Merlin said. Ghosh smiled at him, a little sadly.

"Yes . . ." he said. He became more brisk. "Well, the matter at hand is that you now have an offer. Your education was in null-gravity flow mechanics, I see. But no experience?"

"They aren't hiring many U.S. citizens to work outside the atmosphere these days." Merlin knew his bitterness was showing. He felt a twinge of fear at the thought that he might already have prejudiced the interview, but the words had come by themselves before he could stop them. Ghosh. however, did not seem offended.

"Very true," he said, nodding. "But you can't blame off-Earth installations and factories for giving first chance to their own nationals. Many people, you know, want to work in space these days."

As many, thought Merlin, as want to enter heaven.

"No experience," Ghosh went on. "Well, we could wish you had. But, in this case, the fact you don't isn't a complete barrier. I can offer you a job in your specialty. But I warn you to treat this offer, and all information concerned with it, as a matter of se-

crecy, whether you accept the job or not."

Merlin felt an icy shock that gave way to a glow of hope so powerful that he feared it showed on his face.

"Of course," he said, slowly and clumsiiy. "Profes-sional confidentiality ... I understand."

"Good," said Ghosh, smiling again. "All right. The job will be in the metals-forming group of an elec-tronics research unit to be placed in high orbit in the next two years. Your work would be classified and would have to be explained to you later if you accept the job. But it's within your-ability and education, and you'd be paid at going rates for a space-qualified engineer of your specialty and experience . . ."

Merlin's mind reeled. The pay rate Ghosh was talk-ing about would make him comfortably welt off in any other society in the world. Here in the U.S., it would make him wealthy, by comparison with those at the income level at which he had been living for the last five years.

"I should say, that's what your pay rate would be once you were in orbit and on the job," Ghosh con-tinued. "During your training period, here on the surface, you'd be paid at a standby rate of half your space-borne pay. Should you accept . . ."

In a euphoric daze, Merlin found himself signing papers, shaking Ghosh's hand and receiving congrat-

illations as a new employee of something called Trans-Space Electronics.

"You'll report to the training center in Huntsville, Utah," Ghosh said. "The receptionist outside has all the necessary information, transportation vouchers and the rest . . ." He coughed. "If you could use an advance on your first month's wages . . ."

"I ... ves," Merlin said. He had been so over-whelmed by good fortune that he had completely forgotten he would need decent clothes, luggage, a dozen other things he had once taken for granted but no longer owned.

"My secretary can give you a check for up to a third of your first pay period's wages."

"Thank you," said Merlin. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Not at all." Ghosh smiled. "I must admit I like this job. I've had less happy ones. If you know of anyone else whom you think might work out for us ..."

"I'm afraid not," Merlin said quickly. The hard years had taught him not to recommend anyone.

There was too much risk; the other person's actions might recoil against one's own record. Life had become too brutal for casual favors.

They shook hands and Merlin went out. With the advance check and other materials in hand, he stepped back out into the lobby of the Trade Building. For a moment he hesitated, his mind whirling, unable to think of what to do first.

He turned toward the drinking fountain. The cold water tasted like expensive wine. Then he saw Church.

"I got the job," said Merlin.

"God!" said Church.

"Engineering, in my specialty," said Merlin- "Half-pay at the trainee level until I go into space, then full pay."

Church said nothing, but there was a look on his

face—one of incredulity and envy and disbelief, all mixed.

And it was a look that touched Merlin's inner core. In this moment of incredible happiness, he saw himself standing where Church was, hearing of someone else's good fortune. He knew too well what the other must be feeling. Impulsively, he spoke.

"You've got an electronics degree, you said?"

Church nodded, his face suddenly wary.

"Go in there right now," said Merlin. "You may be able to get hired yourself. Tell the secretary you heard about it at the post office—anything. Just don't tell them I sent you. The name of the outfit is Trans-Space Electronics. Remember, you didn't hear about it from me."

Church stared as if he had just heard some unknown language. Then his eyes opened wide. He spun on his heel, ran to the entrance of the offices and let himself in.

Merlin departed, clutching his check and the other papers.

His transportation vouchers got him on the evening flight to Salt Lake City. He boarded carrying a new suitcase with nothing but his old clothes and shoes in it. After being so poor for so long, he found he could not bring himself to throw things away.

It was only the first of his conflicts with the unconscious habits of near-starvation. When he got to the training camp at Huntsville, he found the Reception Center closed for the day and only the thought of the

consequences to his employment record, if he should be picked up for vagrancy, drove him to a hotel. There, in the palatial privacy of his smgle room, in the luxury of his mattressed bed, he finally fell asleep.

In the morning he reported to the Reception Cen-ter. He was put through processing, presented with a schedule of refresher and training classes and as-

signed to a barracks with other new employees. The barracks were two-story wood frame buildings, with a large dormitory room upstairs and a day room and a latrine downstairs. White partitions surrounded the individual beds in the dormitories, giving each employee the privacy of a tiny cubicle.

There were no women in the barracks. He was told that new employees were segregated by sex, even those husband-and-wife pairs who had signed their five-year employment contracts together.

In the latrine he found showers in which hot water was available day and night. Soap and towels were provided. Although he understood that this must be characteristic of newcomers like himself, he was un-able to resist the luxury of immediately soaking him-self in the shower.

He was stepping out of the shower when he saw a familiar-looking man standing at one of the washba-sins. He circled to get a glimpse of the other's face, reflected in the long mirror above the washstands. It was Church.

"You made it!" he said.

Church turned around.

"Yes, I made it!" he said. They shook hands solemnly.

"I didn't see you at any of the processing sessions," Merlin said, wrapping a towel around his waist.

"I had some special interviews," said Church. "I'm to be considered for cadre. It could mean a move to better quarters."

"Cadre?" Merlin stared at him. "1 thought all cadre would be previous employees."

"I think they'd rather have it that way. But this project's expanding so fast . . ."

"But how did you get picked for that?"

"Well . . ." Church looked at the open door to the latrine. He stepped over so he could see through it,

then stepped back again. "I think they picked me because I told them I'd had experience. Didn't you?"

"How could I? I haven't ever been in space."

"Well, neither have I, of course. But it doesn't hurt to fib a little. By the time they check, they'll have already tried you out in a position. If they like what you've done, then it doesn't matter, and if they're displeased, then you just tell them you didn't understand the original question or blame it on computer error. They're not going to go to the trouble of checking personally with whoever it was that hired you."

"It could still catch up with you," Merlin said.

"Oh, I don't think so." Church's manner was almost airy. "Well, I've got to run. One of the advantages of being considered like this is that I can phone from the offices, instead of standing in line like the rest of you. I told my wife I'd call."

"Yes, see you later," said Merlin.

He watched the other man go. Later, dressed and standing in line himself at the phone booths in the communications building, he felt his first touch of envy. Even if Church's lie caught up with him, it was almost worth it not to have to'wait here like this. The camp had a direct satellite hookup. Long-distance phone charges could be put against your first six-months' salary. Everyone just hired was desperate to talk with someone, with the mail as unreliable as it was and the cost of ordinary phoning astronomically out of reach.

He got to a phone at last and called everyone he could think of on the west coast who might know where his wife could be reached. But, as he had half-expected, he learned nothing. With his last call he hired a detective agency in San Francisco—another indulgence that would have been impossible two days before, but his only real chance of finding her. Ona had no engineering degree, but there might be other

work openings on this space factory. Even if that did not pan out, his own salary would be enough to make life secure for her, and once a year he would be getting furloughs to come back and see her.

He returned to the barracks, looked for Church's cubicle and found him sitting on his bed, talking with two of the other trainees.

"Oh, hello. Merlin," Church said, looking up. "Come in and shut the door. We're just comparing notes on the situation here."

He introduced Merlin to the other two: a middle-aged, slightly overweight man named Sloller Fread, with the patient face of a basset hound, and a blond

young man named Bill Sumash, who looked as if he was just out of school. The comparing of notes Church referred to was clearly a gossip and rumor session. Merlin sat on a corner of Church's bed and listened.

"Oh, it's a scam," Church was saying. "The idea's not so much to set up a factory station in orbit as to get their share of U.N. development funds for nations with low GNP like ours."

"But," said Stoller, "the U.N. doesn't fund private corporations."

"This isn't a private corporation," said Church. "It's a consortium of corporations with federal back-ing- As that, of course, it still can't get U.N. funds directly, but the federal government can, and then make funds of its own available to the consortium."

"But that's a great thing, isn't it?" said Sumash. "It could be the beginning of a national space-based industry, after all."

"Don't be a dupe," Church said. "This country's too impoverished to maintain a space-based indus-try. If we'd already had one—if the government had pushed one when they should've, twenty years ago—we could be in a position to compete nowadays. But we're not."

"We dropped out," said Sumash. "Now we don't have the chips to get back into the game."

"The point is that the U.S/ lost the original virtues that made it what it was," Church said. "And like an old, fat-bellied ex-athlete, it wouldn't exert itself while a bad situation ran downhill and got to be a situa-tion nobody could get out of. You're right, you know, we don't have the chips to get back into the space game—and we never will. Our golden age is gone."

Merlin got up. He had heard all this too often. It was all true, but life had no room for such large concerns now. Life was lying in the blessed privacy of his cubicle and a dream about Ona being found by the detective agency, and of their being together again.

"Sorry," he said to Church, "I can't keep my eyes open. Next time . . ."

He nodded to the other two as he stepped to the door of Church's cubicle.

"Glad to have met you," he said, and a moment later he was out on the barracks floor, headed for his own cubicle and peace.

The next few weeks were-filled with classes and training. He found himself going to bed exhausted every night. He did not miss Church, so it was some-thing of a shock, when he was next in the centra!

administration building, to see him there, dressed in a regular civilian office suit. Merlin had come in to get approval for a draw against his wages to pay the detective agency.

"Church!" he said, as the other walked hastily by him in the corridor. "Sam Church!"

Church looked around and saw him. He came over to shake hands.

"Merlin!" he said. "How're you doing? I meant to get down to the barracks and took you up, but they've got us all so busy here on planning . . ."

"You did make cadre, then!" said Merlin. "Good for you!"

"Thanks," said Church. He lowered his voice and looked around, but the corridor was momentarily deserted. "I really was going to get in touch with you, in fact. Working in this place, I hear about things ahead of time. They've got wind of some agi-tators in the trainee corps. They're going to begin making inquiries tomorrow. I wanted to warn you."

"Me?" Merlin laughed. "I don't know any agitators."

"Of course not. I don't think there actually are any. That's why I was going to warn you. Investigations like this are under pressure. They've got to produce results to justify whoever authorized them. That means they're going to be picking up on anything at all that can be made to seem socially destructive. You re-member how you sat in on some of those sessions in my cubicle . . ."

"Once," said Merlin.

"Only once? Well," said Church, "at any rate, you know how harmless they were. I've already told the investigation team all about them and no one's wor' ried. But just the same, you might want to say you didn't know anything about them . . ."

Merlin stared at Church. He had not thought of the other man in the role of protector, and he felt embar-rassed at not giving Church more credit. In a way this warning repaid the favor Merlin had done him by putting him on the track toward getting his job. It testified to an awareness of obligation in Church that Merlin had not expected.

He got the contingency payment approved and stood in tine at the phones to tell the detective agency.

"Fine, fine!" the voice of the woman at the agency crackled in his ear. "I think we've just about located your wife, Mr. Swenson. With this payment against expenses we should find her this week."

"Splendid," said Merlin. "You'll call me?"

"As soon as we've got something to report. Now,

Mr. Swenson, it was explained to you that your payment in full would have to be in our hands before we released any hard information?"

"Of course," said Merlin. "I've already talked to my employers here, and there'll be no problem getting an advance for the rest. They just want to be sure I've really found her, and they won't have to turn around and give me another advance next week."

"Good. We'll be calling you this week, Mr. Swenson."

He went back to the barracks, his mind full of Ona and her happiness when she would learn what had happened to him.

He had completely forgotten about Church's warning, when, two days later, he was called out of class with orders to report to Conference Suite 460 in the Headquarters Building. Suite 460 turned out to be a spacious room with a long table capable of seating perhaps sixteen people. But when Merlin stepped in, the only ones there were a fiftyish, tired-looking man and a woman of about the same age, raw-boned and with graying red hair. They were seated side by side at the far end of the table. „

"Come sit here, Mr. Swenson," said the woman. She pointed to the first chair on the long side of the table, at her right. He obeyed-

"Now," said the woman, glancing at a printout sheet before her. "Of those trainees presently in your barracks, Mr. Swenson, were there any you knew before you came here?"

"No," said Merlin. He did not have to stop and think in order to answer. "No" came automatically to everyone's lips these days. It was a "yes" answer that called for thought and hesitation.

The woman looked again at her printout. So far the man had said nothing. It occurred to Merlin that the psychological profile they had worked up on him might have indicated that he was more likely to trust a woman.

"Do you know a StoUer Fread or a Bill Sumash, Mr. Swenson?"

"I think they're in the barracks."

"This Fread and Sumash," the woman said, "have you ever noticed them talking together, or attempting to gather others in the barracks to talk?"

"No," said Merlin.

"Have either of them ever tried to talk to you privately, Mr. Swenson?"

"No," said Merlin. "Not that I can remember, anyway."

"Do you know anyone here whom you might have cause to suspect as an activist or subversive?"

"I'm afraid," said Merlin, "I've been so busy with the training courses, I haven't really had a chance to talk with the others much."

"Yes or no to the question I asked, Mr. Swenson?"

"Definitely no," said Merlin. "I haven't met anyone like that."

"But you'd tell us if you did, wouldn't you, Mr. Swenson?"

I'd tell you anything I needed to, true or false, thought Merlin grimly. I'd cry, dance, or crawl on the floor to keep this job, now that Ona's almost found.

"I surely would," he said aloud.

"Thank you," she said. The man continued to sit. With eyes pouched in finely wrinkled flesh, he silently studied Merlin.

Merlin was released, finally, and the next few days went by swiftly. He struggled with his training courses and impatiently wondered when the detective agency would phone with word of Ona's whereabouts.

But no call came. On the Thursday after his security interview, he discovered a memo in his message box that asked him to report to the Payroll Center at nine o'clock the next morning.

He assumed it must have something to do with the

last advance against his wages. Annoyed that he would be late for his second class of the morning, he hurried to the Center, hoping that whatever it was would not take too long.

At the Center he was directed to the Pay-Outs Cashier. Only one window was open, with two security guards standing nearby. Merlin stood in line behind three men, two of whom were cadre. From their conversation, he assumed they were here to get an advance on wages. The third man merely signed a form and left. Now Merlin was facing the cierk behind the window.

"Merlin Swenson^" asked the clerk. He searched below the counter level on his side and came up with

two pieces of paper.

"Sign this," he said, pushing one ahead of the other at Merlin. "The second one you keep."

With his pen poised in his hand, Merlin read the first paper.

1, Merlin James Swenson, acknowledge the following indebtedness to Trans-Space Electronics Corporation, Limited:

Advances
Per diem:

Equipment issued:

Miscellaneous:

Subtotal:

Less trainee wages
to date:

Total:

Signed - - .

$43,432.54
22,806.00
28,099.10
9,847.78
$104,185.42

60,765.70
$43,419.72

"What's this?" Merlin asked.

"Just your account to date. We need a signature."

"All right," said Merlin-

He signed. The clerk took back the form and separated a top copy from a bottom one. He pushed the bottom copy to Merlin, along with the other paper.

He took both sheets and started to turn away, glancing at the second paper. Suddenly, he stopped and turned back.

"What's this?"

"I just hand it to you, that's all," said the clerk. He turned and walked out of sight inside the cage.

Merlin stared at the second paper.

Termination Notice

As of the present date . . . the lines biurred in Merlin's vision, then came back into focus,

. . . services no longer required. After advances and expenses of the Corporation, it has been determined that the balance of your employee account with Trans-Space Electronics shows an indebtedness ofS43.4I9.72. Payment should be made within three months, or arrangements must be made at the end of that time to repay any amount still outstanding .. .

"Come back here!" Merlin shouted through the window—and found himself seized from behind, his elbows pulled toward the small of his back and his whole body wrenched away from the window.

He was facing one of the gray-uniformed security guards. The other guard was holding Merlin's arms in a painful backlock. A dull throbbing had already begun in the socket of each shoulder.

"You subverts are all alike," said the security guard facing Merlin. "The minute things stop going your way, you start yelling and pretending you're being picked on. Well, you're fired and you're leaving. How do you want to go? It's up to you."

Merlin choked back the bubble of fury in his chest.

"I'll go easy," he said.

"Good," said the guard. He nodded, and the other guard released Merlin's arms. "Let's go."

They marched Merlin to the door of the building, put him in a gleaming white car bearing the Trans-Space emblem on its front doors and rode with him to the compound by the entrance gate where personnel on pass waited for the hover-bus into Ogden.

"Who've you got there, Gus?" called the guard at the gate.

"Another of them," Gus called back. He and his cohort walked a small distance off and stood together, talking and glancing at Merlin from time to time.

Merlin turned his back and stared out through the heavy wire mesh that fenced the compound. Beyond, he could see the warehouse buildings of the supply area, gray silhouettes in the morning sunlight.

"Merlin!"

He looked around, but saw no one.

"Merlin, over here!"

He looked down along the fence to his left. About ten meters away was a gate, now padlocked. Merlin glanced at the guards, but they seemed indifferent to the situation. He walked along the fence until he saw

Sam Church's face looking between the vertical iron pipes that supported the gate-door.

"Merlin . . ." he said. "I got here as soon as I could . . ."

"I don't know what's happened. They're kicking me out without a chance to talk to anyone!" Merlin clung to the bars. "It has to be a computer error, or something like that. But how do I do anything about it when they're running me out like this, without a chance to talk to anyone?"

"You can't, of course . . ." Church began.

"Sam, listen! Try and get to someone! You're cadre. You can find out what went wrong and fix it, can't you? Sam . . . can't you?"

"Well . . ." said Church.

"You've got to! Don't you know what this means? It's not just this job. What outfit, anywhere, is going to hire me for anything but slave labor as long as the records here say I was a subvert? I've got to get it straightened out! What's the matter with you, Sam? Won't you even try?"

"Oh, I'li try," said Church.

"And something else—something else you can do for me right away, Sam, and it won't be hard. Not for you. You know that detective agency I had hunting my wife? They called, just Monday, and said they'd almost found her, that they'd be calling this week to teH me where she is. Sam . . ."

He fumbled in his shirt pocket and came up with a pen and a piece of paper. He scribbled on the paper and passed it between the vertical pipes into Church's hands.

"It's easy for you to phone out. Call them, Sam. Don't tell them what's happened to me. but tell them they can reach me at—they can leave a message at ..."

He stopped and searched his mind desperately.

"I know!" he burst out. "You remember that slave market in Minneapolis, where you first met me? The Availables, Fifth and First Avenue North? Tell them they can leave a message for me there. I'll be back Monday. 1 can pay off that dayclerk, and he'll go along with it."

"All right." Sam Church looked at him strangely.

"And another thing you can do for me .. ."

He was interrupted by the roar of blowers as the bus turned a corner into the compound.

"All right, Swenson!" shouted one of the guards. "Get over here!"

"Sam, listen, if you have a chance . . ."

"There's no more time, Merlin." Church was thrusting a white envelope at him between the pipes. "It's not much, but it's all I could raise in a hurry."

Merlin took if automatically. The guards were coming for him. There was not even time to take Church's hand.

"I'm sorry, Merlin," said Church. "I'm really very sorry. I couldn't help it. I have my own wife to think of."

The guards grabbed Merlin, whirled him around and marched him toward the bus. Dazedly, he found himself aboard.

"Company billing, Jake," said one of the guards. "This one to Denver Central. If he gives you any trouble, let us know."

They stood back. There were no other passengers boarding. The doors of the bus closed with a pneumatic hiss. The driver lifted the vehicle on the downward thrust of its underjets until it floated free. He turned it in its own length and headed toward the highway.

Merlin, catching at seatbacks to keep his balance in the turning bus, stumbled to the mid-section of the vehicle and sat down- Only then he realized he was still clutching the envelope that Church had given him. Numbly, he opened it. Inside were twenty hundred-dollar bills.

He laughed bitterly. This, together with the twenty-five hundred or so he had in his wallet, might be just enough to buy a bus ticket back to Minneapolis. He would have to take a bus to get there by next Monday. If you were caught hitchhiking, the police either beat you up so badly that you ran the chance of being crippled, or shot you on some pretext or other to save themselves the trouble of beating you up.

He tucked the envelope into an inside pocket. His

old work clothes and everything else he owned were getting farther behind him by the minute. Once back in Minneapolis he would have to work in what he was wearing now—for as long as it stood up. Ironically, he had been saving his good new shoes lately by wearing his old ones with the paper-thin soles; he had found out that the instructors did not care. Shoes would be a critical matter once he went back to

daywork. The money that would buy his bus ticket could be used to purchase a pair of heavy work boots instead. With those, at slave markets in Denver, he could last indefinitely. Given enough time, anything could happen. He could be reinstated with Trans-Space, if Church could get to the right person—

His thoughts broke off suddenly as he remembered Church's parting words. What had he meant by saying he couldn't help it—that he had his own wife to think of?

Understanding exploded in Merlin.

"The bastard!" he screamed.

He woke to the fact that he had half-risen out of his seat. Remembering where he was, he sank back down again. The few other passengers on the bus and the driver, in his rearview mirror, were all staring at him.

Merlin sat stunned, the whole pattern taking shape before him like a puzzle picture that suddenly becomes comprehensible. He remembered how Church had lied about having space experience in order to qualify for the cadre. He remembered Church wanting to walk downtown with him to his interview, Church meeting him there after all—which he could only have done if he had followed Merlin—and wanting to hang around and see how this perfect stranger made out in an interview. Merlin remembered the look of terrible longing on Church's face when Merlin told of his own good fortune. How many times, he

wondered now. sickened, must Church have used that look on other people?

He should have been on his guard when Church warned him to deny having been at any of the obviously subvert talk sessions in Church's cubicle. The meaning of Church's last words were clear- He had insured his own job security by throwing the corporate people a substitute victim and telling them that victim would deny everything when questioned. Then he made sure by advising Merlin to do just that.

A deep wave of rage erupted in Merlin. It rose, crested, and broke. But fury was useless. Church was out of reach—and he had always been just what he was. The way life was now, it had been up to Merlin to protect himself—and he had failed to do so. He remembered, in The Availables' slave market, how he had taken Church for an innocent. Not Church. He, himself, had been the innocent.

Fifty-six hours later, at midnight, he stumbled off the Greyhound bus at the Minneapolis terminal. He had enough money left for a week's crash space in one of the office buildings—but this late at night, he

would be taking unreasonable chances. His room-
mates might be relatively honest, but any stranger
was fair game for the pack. Better to take his chances
on the streets than pay to lie awake all night with his
eyes open.

He headed east toward the University area, where
people would be on the streets all night. The time
had been when someone like himself could ease his
way into a party of students, go back with them to
whatever apartment, room or warehouse they were
headed to, and pick up free crash space by pretend-
ing to pass out in a corner. But those easy days were
gone. The best to hope for was to stay on the streets
without attracting the attention of the police.

But this night the University district was swarm-

ing. He had the incredible luck to catch on with a
student party that ended up down in the park along
the Mississippi riverbank. Anyone but students would
have been rousted out of there by the police. But
they were left alone; and so he made it through until
Monday, and was waiting first in line outside the
door when the slave market opened at six o'clock
that morning.

The clerk came up the street to the door, recog-
nized him as a familiar face and grunted at him
sleepily before unlocking the door and letting them
all inside. He took his time, yawning as he set up for
the day. Finally, he was ready, seated behind his
computer screen and keys.

"Name?" he said ritually, not glancing up.

"Merlin. Merlin Swenson. Did a long-distance phone
call come here for me? Now look," said Merlin, swiftly,
"I know this isn't the sort of thing you do, but I can
reimburse you for your trouble. Did a long distance
call come in here for me. Thursday afternoon or
Friday?"

"Maybe," said the clerk and looked sour. "It was
collect. I had to pay two hundred and eighty to ac-
cept it for you."

"Two hundred and—"

"Look, man!" said the clerk loudly. "You want to
stiff me on money I've already paid out for you,
that's all right. I'll live. But don't come around here
again asking me to put you on somebody's payroll.
Deadbeats like you don't deserve jobs."

"All right!" said Merlin, low-voiced. "I'll pay! What's
the messsage—and tell me privately or it's no deal!"

"You come into the office with me," said the clerk,
still loudly.

He stood up from behind his desk and opened the half-door in the barricade that joined his desk to the wall on either side of it to create a small privacy

space. Merlin walked in and followed him through a door in the back wall to a tiny office.

"Here you are," the clerk said. His tone was cheerful and friendly once the office door had been closed behind them. He pulled down a sheet of paper that was thumbtacked to a cork bulletin board. "I didn't understand a word of it, but I figured someone like you would be along asking for it. That'll be two hundred and eighty."

He kept his grip on the paper until Merlin had counted over the money. Then he held it out in his fingertips. Merlin snatched it.

"This is no message!" said Merlin. "It's only a telephone number!"

"You expected more?" The clerk was curious. "That's all they gave me."

"But now I've got to call them long distance!" said Merlin. "And you cleaned me out. I don't have any money left!"

"Call them collect," advised the clerk.

"I can't call collect to a detective agency," said Merlin, desperately. "And I've got to reach them. It's a West coast outfit that's been locating my wife, and they were to phone like this when they found her."

"Sure, you can call collect," said the clerk. "For another two hundred, I'll show you how."

"Don't you understand?" said Merlin desperately. "You cleaned me out. I'm broke! Do you think I'd be standing in line here if I had more than what I gave you already?"

"Oh, what the hell!" the clerk said. He left the table, sat down before the phone terminal at the desk, and punched buttons. The screen lit up with the face of a young man.

"Yes?" he said. "Who's calling collect, please?"

"Merlin Swenson. The Avaiiables," said the clerk.

"I'm sorry. I don't have any Avaiiables or Merlin Swenson on my list to accept."

"Well then, just forget it, man. Forget it!" barked the clerk. "You people called here. If you don't want to talk to us. we sure don't want to talk to you!"

"Are you Merlin Swenson?" asked the young face.
"If you're Merlin . . ."

"Me? Merlin Swenson? You people must think a tot of yourselves. Merlin Swenson doesn't answer any outfit that calls and leaves word for him to call back. Let me talk to whoever called him, and I'll decide whether it's something to bother Merlin Swenson about."

"Just a minute," said the face, "let me check with . . ."

"Never mind. Forget it!" shouted the clerk, and warded off Merlin with one hand. "I've wasted enough time with you already, and all you've done is stall . .."

"Wait. Wait just a minute," said the other. "I think it was Maria Balsom who wanted to talk to Merlin Swenson. Just a minute . . ."

The screen went blank for a moment, then the face of the woman Merlin had spoken with before at the agency came on the screen.

"Hello? Mr. Swenson?" Her face was puzzled.

"One moment," said the clerk, He slid out of the seat and Merlin replaced him.

"I don't understand, Mr. Swenson," said Maria Balsom, "we don't accept collect calls from clients who owe us money . . ."

"Have you found her?" The words burst from Merlin.

"Of course. That's what we called you about. Then we had a message to find you at this number, so we called and left word for you to call us. But you were not being invited to call us collect. As I say, we don't accept calls from . . ."

"Where is she?"

"Really, Mr. Swenson. You don't expect this agency

to furnish information before it's paid? You've got a balance outstanding of fifteen thousand, four hundred and eighteen dollars and twelve cents. If you'll make your payment to us in that amount . . ."

"But that's why I had to talk to you," Merlin said quickly. "You see, just for the next week or so, there's been a little hitch. There was a crazy mix-up in my computer records, and until it's cleared up, they're holding up my ability to get advances of the kind I've been paying with. It's just a temporary thing because they're understaffed in the records section, but it'll hold things up for a couple of weeks. But I have to

make a decision about housing my wife while I'm in orbit, and I need to talk to her about this right away. So I thought if you could just let me know what you've turned up so far—after all, I have paid you over thirty thousand dollars already . . ."

"Mr. Swenson . . ." Maria Balsom's voice had stepped far back from him. "Are you telling me that you're not connected with Trans-Space any longer?"

"Yes and no. The point is, I can't pay your bill right now, but if you'll wait ^. ."

"Of course." Maria Balsom's voice came now from a different world. "When you've got what you owe us, Mr. Swenson, send us a credit voucher, and we'll be glad to give you the full results of our investiga-tions."

"Don't you understand . . ." Merlin began.

"I understand perfectly, Mr. Swenson. Do you?" said the woman, grimly. "Like everyone else in this business I live on my commissions from accounts collected!"

She broke the connection.

"Well, there you are," said the clerk. He slapped Merlin on the shoulder. "Come on out and I'll find you a job with some overtime."

Merlin shook him off. He stalked out of the office, out through the half-door, past the other day-laborers

still lined up at the counter, staring at him, and out of the building.

The heat of the day was stifling as he hurried away from The Availables office. He paid no attention to where he was going until he felt grass beneath his feet and looked around at Almsbury Park.

He stared about like someone just awakened from a heavy sleep. At this hour of the day, the park was only sparsely occupied. The nearest bench to him, half in sunlight, half in shadow, had only one person on it, a very old man, apparently asleep on the end in sunlight that was growing hotter by the minute.

It was a consolation prize of fate. The shady ends of the bolted-down benches were normally occupied on a hot summer day like this. Merlin gratefully sat down in the shade.

An empty hour passed. But then, slowly, little by little, the desire to live crept back into him like a dull ache. Life was still with him. Everything was lost, but his heart stiil beat. His chest still pumped. In a few hours—whatever else might happen—he would be hungry again. And soon after that, he would

once more need to sleep.

The heat of the advancing sunlight against the thin sole of his right shoe roused him from his thoughts. Any day now, he thought, the sole would wear through and there would be no replacing it. The day was heating fast, and the shadow in which he sat had retreated until it could not much longer protect him. He felt chilled in the midst of heat, naked and lonely.

He squinted along the bench at the o!d man, still sitting squarely in the sunlight. The other looked very old and weary. A lifetime of outdoor living had once darkened his skin to the color of old leather, but age and general debility had paled and faded the leather-tone to a gray shade. The bones of his face seemed unnaturally large under the thin mask of old skin. A white stubble blurred the outlines of his lower

jaw and his wrinkled eyelids rested on his cheeks. He did not move, but his chest stirred slowly under his heavy checked shirt, its colors—like his—grayed by time.

Merlin leaned toward the man, at which the smell of death came faintly into his nostrils. A wisp of feeling he thought he had lost stirred within him.

"Why don't you move this way?" he said to the old man. "There's still shade enough for both of us at this end."

There was no answer. He said it again.

"Leave me be," said the other, without opening his eyes.

"The sun'll kill you."

"It feels good."

They sat together. It was not much, but Merlin's racking loneliness had eased slightly with the ex-change of those few words with the weary figure beside him.

"I'm at the end of my rope," Merlin said. "You know how it is?"

"I know," said the old man, after a long pause. It was as if he were so far off that ,the sound of Merlin's voice look some time to reach him.

"I'll never find my wife now," said Merlin. "I'll never get a job now. It's ail gone. That's the worst part, knowing there's no use. Once, I had hope, but now . . ."

He found himself telling the old man all about it. There was no one else to tell, and he had to tell someone. The old man sat in the sun, smelling faintly

of death. He said nothing. As Merlin talked, a fly circled and landed on the pocket of the old man's checked shirt. It stayed there, resting with the old man in the sun.

"You see," Merlin went on, "there's nothing to be done. Nowhere to go."

He stopped talking, but the old man still said noth-

ing. Merlin leaned into the sun and put his lips close to the gray ear nearest him.

"I say," he said loudly, "there's no place to go, is there? Where can you go?"

The eyelids twitched slightly. The dry lips parted.

"Get off the Earth," said the old man, "If you can't scratch a living down here, you got to get off the Earth."

Merlin sat back. The advancing sun had found the thin sole of his left shoe again. The heat was burning his foot now, but he could not summon up the will to pull it back into the shade. He sat.

James

'-'James gave the hurtle of a snail in danger. .."
(from "Four Friends," a poem by A. A. Milne)

James huffied.

He paused, his horns searching the air. Some-
thing was coming toward him along the brick he himself was traversing. For a moment he tensed, then his trained perception ^recognized that the one approaching was another snail'. James glowed with pleasure and hurried to meet him.

"I'm James," he said, joyfully touching horns. "And you?"

"Egbert," replied the other. "Honored to make your acquaintance, James."

"Honored to make yours," replied James, and then, avidly, as all snails do, he asked, "What's new7"

"The word," said the other. "The word is being passed."

"No!" said James.

"Absolutely," confirmed Egbert.

"It's Homo Sapiens, of course; you might have expected it." He sighed.

"H. Sapiens?" asked James. "Why, I wouldn't have

41

42 Gordon R Dickson

thought it of them. They seemed like such targe harmless creatures, for all their rushing around. I've just been observing one—"

"They may look harmless," interrupted Egbert, sternly, "but the mischief's in them. And we can't tolerate it, of course. After coming halfway across the Galaxy to try and get away from Them, you know."

"True," agreed James. He added, a trifle wistfully, "Sometimes I think we should have crushed Them the last time they overran the planet we were on. If not the previous time. Or the time before that."

"But what a labor it would have been," protested Egbert. "Of course all they had were primitive material weapons: space warps, disintegrators and the like. But there were so many of Them—thousands of planetary systems all populated up to the pUmsoll mark. What a weary task to zzitz hard enough to exterminate them all. And how easy, comparatively, to zzitz just enough to protect ourselves."

"Ah, yes," sighed James. "Of course we are by nature sensible and wary of overexertion. Well, I suppose we're better off here after all, even with Homo Sapiens dashing back and forth as if his shell was on fire. Who would ever have thought a life form could become so active? And what is it, by the way, that they've finally done?"

"Well," said Egbert darkly, "brace yourself. It's almost unbelievable, but since it comes through the grapevine, it must be true. The official word just filtered up from the valley of the Euphrates, or the Nile, or someplace around there. One of them"—he spaced the words slowly and impressively—"one—of—them has actually just invented a wheel!"

"No!" cried James, stunned.

"That's the word," insisted Egbert. "I don't blame you for being surprised. I had trouble believing it myself when it was told to me just the month before last."

JAMES 43

"That explains it!" cried James. "I thought I'd been seeing things with wheels around, but naturally I couldn't believe my senses on the basis of purely empirical evidence. An old friend of mine was crushed by one the other day. His name was Charlie. You didn't know him, by any chance?"

"No," replied Egbert. "I never knew a Charlie." They brooded in silence for a second.

"He was a Good Snail," said James, at last, be-

stowing the words of highest tribute upon his deceased friend. His mind swung back to the implications of the news he had just heard. "But this"—he stammered—"this is terrible!"

"Of course it is," brooded Egbert, darkly. "You know what's bound to happen now, don't you? They'll be settling down, making pottery. First thing you know they'll build pyramids, discover gunpowder. Why, before we can turn around they'll be splitting the atom, and you know what happens then!"

"Spaceflight . . ." breathed James, horrified.

"Exactly!" replied Egbert grimly. "And the minute they get a ship outside the atmosphere, it'll register on Their separation-index. And you know what They'\\ do when They find out."

"Poor H. Sapiens!" quavered James.

"Yes," said Egbert. "And poor us. The minute a ship gets outside the Earth's atmosphere, it won't be more than three days, local time, before They notice it and have a fleet here englobing the planet. Which means we have only the limited time remaining between now and the launching of the first space rocket to take defensive measures. And that time gets shorter by the century. Why, for all we know—at the mad pace these humans move—one of them may be experimenting with a potter's wheel even now "

"Indeed," said James, anxiously, "I could almost swear I've noticed signs of pottery culture among our local H. Sapiens. Of course"—he added hastily—"I

have no confirmation of the fact in the way of comparative reports from other Snails."

"True. I too . . ." Egbert lowered his voice. "Let us speak off the record, James. Unscientific as it must be for only two observers to compare notes—tell me:

You haven't seen any evidence of pyramid building here in North America?"

"N-no . . ." answered James cautiously. "I have seen some rather odd structures—but no true pyramid."

"Thank heaven for that," said Egbert, with a sigh of relief. "Nor have I. Not that our two unofficial observations mean anything, but they represent a straw in the wind, a hope, James, that what you and I have seen mirrors the Big Picture, and that H. Sapiens is still, essentially, a happy herdsman."

"Still," said James doubtfully, "if I were to venture a guess pn my own—"

"James!" reproved Egbert, shocked. "This is unsnaillike. Put such thoughts from your mind. No, no,

rest assured that we have some few thousands of years still in which to contact H. Sapiens if the race is to be taught how to zzitz and so protect itself and its planet from Them. Reassure yourself that it is merely a matter of contacting the right individual, one who will believe us and who in turn will be believed by his fellows."

For a moment silence hung heavy between the two snails.

"Some people," said James finally, in an apologetic voice, "might call us slow."

"Oh, no!" cried Egbert, profoundly shocked. "Surely not!"

"And perhaps," continued James, his voice strengthening, "who knows but what we actually may be a bit slow? I want to be fair about this. I will be fair about this! Think, Egbert: it has been at least twenty planets, one after the other, which we have seen blown from beneath us, and their native life destroyed

by Them in spite of all our good intentions about teaching that native life to protect itself by zzitzing."

"But—"

"But me no buts. Egbert! Twenty chances we have had to protect the weak and defenseless. Twenty times—in a row—we have been just a little bit late in giving aid. And I say to you, Egbert, here and now, that if by following our traditional cautious methods we again slip up and see the human race destroyed, then, by all that's holy, we are a trifle slow!"

"James," breathed Egbert, shrinking back in awe. "Such energy! Such fire! You are a Snail Transformed!"

And, indeed, James was. Quivering with righteous indignation, he had reared up a full three-quarters of an inch above the surface of the brick and both sets of his horns stuck out rigidly, as if challenging the universe.

"Egbert," he said fiercely, "the tradition of eons is about to be broken. You have spoken of several thousand years in which to contact H. Sapiens. Know, Egbert, that the far end of this brick touches the sill of a window, that that sill overhangs a desk, and that at that desk sits a man high in the councils of the Five Indian Nations, or the United Nations, or some such important organization. This man I have been observing and I have discovered in him the capability to understand and believe the threat that They will pose to his race, if that self-same race continues this mad plunge of progress which has just recently brought forth the invention of the wheel."

"James!" gasped Egbert. "You mean . . . ? You

wouldn't . . . ? Not without first submitting a report for the consideration of other snails, the formation of an investigative forum, the collection of an adequate number of blanketing reports, a general referendum—"

"Cease, Egbert!" interrupted James sternly. "I would, and I will. What you and other Snails have always refused to recognize is the impermanence of

the individual H. Sapiens. They are here today, and—if I may coin a phrase—gone tomorrow." The tone of his voice changed. A note almost of pleading crept into it. "Can't you understand, Egbert, that this is a crisis' We can't afford to waste a thousand years here and a thousand years there just to make the matter official."

"But scientific method—" began Egbert.

"Scientific method, bosh!" retorted James, crudely. Egbert gasped. "What good was scientific method to the life forms of the last twenty planets we've inhabited?"

Egbert was struck dumb. It was a good twenty minutes before he managed to answer.

"Why—" he said at last. "I never thought of that. That's true, it didn't help them much, did it?" He stared at James with wonder and admiration dawning in the little eye at the tip of each of his two major horns. "But James—" he said. "To flout tradition in this fashion—to throw off at one fell swoop the age-welded bonds of ancient custom and established means. Why, James"—he went on, falling, as all Snails do when deeply moved, into iambic pentameter—"this step will sound throughout the halls of time; and through the echoing vault of universe, be duplicated to infinity. So that all future ages, hearing it, and looking back, will wonder how you could. And tell me James, how is it that you can?"

James bowed his horns in graceful acknowledgment of the question.

"I am," he replied simply, "what you might possibly characterize as a humanitarian."

"Ah," said Egbert softly, "so that's it."

"Yes," answered James. "And now—my duty calls. Farewell, Egbert."

"Farewell!" choked Egbert, almost too overcome to speak. They broke contact; and James began to turn around. "Farewell, oh brave and gallant spirit!"

Resolutely, James completed his turn and began his march. Inside the window, at the desk, a heavy

balding man with tired eyes straightened his glasses and began to read a report stamped TOP SECRET and headed PARTICULARS OF FORTHCOMING FLIGHT OF UN SPACE ROCKET x-1. He read steadily into the report as the sun crept across the sky,

After a while he stopped temporarily to rub his eyes. As he did, he caught sight of a snail which had just crawled across the sill from outside the window. It stood balanced on the edge. It was James, of course, and for a long second they looked at each other. Then the man turned back to the report.

James paused to catch his breath. The trip had been all of eleven inches and he had come at top

speed.

Finally he collected himself and turned toward the man. The H. Sapiens' head was bent over a sheaf of paper; but whatever engrossed him there would be small potatoes to what James was about to hit him with. James look a deep breath.

"Huffle." he said. "Huffle. Huffle! Huffle, huffle, huffle. huffle ..."

"James gave the huffle of a snail in danger—
And nobody heard him at all."

A. A. Milne

E Gubling Dow

f^T isten, ' said Sonny, snapping a glance at his

JL/father ' I heard something)ust now Noise like a car coming up the road to the place, here '

"I don't hear nothing," said George Weaver "No one coming calling at our farm at past midnight " He put his big, gray, wrinkled hand on the table Not striking it, just laying it out "Pass the spuds, girt "

"Here, Dad "

From beside the stove, Sonny's wife Betty came across the room with her apron whispering and the large oval blue-nmmed bowl in her hand She forked boiled potatoes onto the old man's plate

"Shut up," said Sonny ' I tell you I heard some-thing '

They stopped for a moment, Betty standing by George's chair, George staring at his son, unwillingly yet curiously silent Outside the house, the plowed fields and the moonlit wood were silent The chilly spring night was silent

'Could've swore t heard something," said Sonny, reluctantly at last He sat back in the chair at the kitchen table, and under the white wash of light

48

E GUBLING Dow 49

from the bright bulb in the ceiling, motion came back to the three of them

Betty took the potato dish back to the stove and set it down beside the burners George split his potato with a fork He looked at Sonny's thin face

"Thai murder mystery movie tonight got your head full of notions," he said

"Yes," said Sonny "If it was up to you, we'd never go to town "

"It ain't going to town, I mind It's staying up all night like this,' said the old man "Girl, where's the butter^"

"Right in the icebox behind you,' said Sonny "Come here and sit down, Bettv Let him get it his own self You haven't ate a thing yourself, yet "

"I don't mind," said Betty She had a voice as soft as the blue eyes in her small face "I'll sit in a minute "

"No, go ahead and sit down," said George "I guess my son told me my place here on the farm I've worked for forty years Go ahead and sit down "

"I'll get everything on the table first," said Betty She moved about the kitchen^ bringing things to the square, linoleum-covered table top

"I guess I'll eat and go to bed—" the old man was beginning, when Sonny cut him off, excitedly

"Listen" Hear thap"

With the tail echo of his words still hanging m the air, the other two, old man and young woman, seemed to feel rather than hear something that had just ceased It was like sensing that a sound had been, rather than that a sound was

"What is it, Sonny^" Betty asked her husband She stood by the stove, her apron caught up in the act of wiping her hands

"I don't know," said Sonny, jumping suddenly to his feet "But I'm sure as heck going to find out " He snatched up his jacket from the back of his chair and strode swiftly to the kitchen door

50 Gordon R. Dickson

"Wait!" cried Betty. "I'll go with you."

"Girl!" said the old man.

"Oh, just stay where you are, Dad!" she flung over

her shoulder at him. "I'll be back, I'll be back!"

Lifting a sweater from its hook near the kitchen door, she ran out after her husband, shutting the door behind her. On the steps she paused. Then she made out Sonny's dark shadowy form at the far edge of the back yard, looking over the duckpond into the blackness of the woods behind the farmhouse. Lightly, she ran to him.

"Sonny," she said, in a low voice, taking his arm. "What was it?"

"Don't know," he said, frowning at the woods. He turned his head to look down at her. "Something smashed out there." He gestured to the woods. "The old man giving you a specially hard time tonight?"

"Oh, he's tired," she said.

"If you'd stand up to him, he wouldn't be ordering you around all the time like a servant."

She squeezed his arm. "I don't mind."

"Well, I mind," said Sonny. "You're my wife. not his."

"It's that that bothers him," she said. "With your stepmother gone, and him not able to work the way he used to, he feels like someone extra around the place."

"He don't have to," said Sonny.

"I know. Sonny—" she said, "what was it like— what you heard?"

"Like a car coming, a long way off," he said. "And then a smash. A real light smash, crackling, sort of—like an orange crate being splintered and busting wide open."

She looked past him, into the woods. "Out there?" she said.

"Sounded like it."

He started off suddenly, down the slope toward the duckpond. She came after him.

"Maybe you better go back to the house," he said.

"No," she answered. "I want to come."

"Stay close, then," he said.

He went on, his slim shoulders bobbing in the moonlight as he detoured around the duck pond. He looked thin and small, but quick and dangerous like a ferret. Betty followed, thinking how much hitler— and yet, in other ways, how much bigger he was than

the long, heavy-jointed man, his father.

They walked into the woods. The trees were big and had killed off all but a few straggly patches of underbrush between them. The moonlight came through their bare branches, filtering down in thin shafts.

"If something's here, it ought to show," she whispered at the back of his ear. The wood was only an acre or two deep—a patch rather than a real wood.

Sonny grunted. There was silence for a moment. Then he spoke again- "There!" he said. "Look!"

He stopped and Betty stopped, and Betty looked forward over his shoulder. In the little cleared spot between two big trees was something like a large, half-shattered silver egg. Its top half was still intact, but the bottom had broken and spread.

"What is it?" asked Betty.

But Sonny was already approaching the smashed thing. He came up and stood beside it. It was barely taller than his head—not more than six feet high as it stood—and maybe eight feet through the middle.

"Funny!" he said.

Betty had caught up with him by this time. "Is it some kind of plane?" she asked.

"Not likely," he said. Then he changed his mind. "Might be. They got new stuff coming out all the time nowadays." He frowned at it. "Sure looks flimsy, doesn't it?"

He reached out a hand to touch the cracked, silver surface before him. It bent at his touch. Through the whole thing ran a shiver and without warning a strange, deep voice spoke briefly to them from the thing's interior.

"What's that?" gasped Betty. Her eyes were big in the moonlight which in this little open space flooded down all around them. She and Sonny had both drawn back at the sound; and now they stood close together, staring.

"Leave me go," said Sonny. "I've got to look into this. Just you stay back a bit—"

Betty released the hands that had clutched at him all unwittingly. When he went forward, again, she ignored his advice and stayed close beside him. Gingerly, he touched the broken object once more.

Again, the voice spoke. It was as if the shattered thing responded instinctively to his touch.

He touched it once more. Clear and sharp, for the third time, the voice made sounds like recognizable words, in the night.

"E Gubling Dow!"

"Don't, Sonny!" cried Betty. "Leave it alone! It might be something dangerous- A bomb or something."

"There's something in there," said Sonny, staring in fascination at the object.

"Maybe it's something foreign. Let's go call the sheriff," said Betty. "Please, Sonny!"

He shook her off. "Foreign or not," he said, "there's something in there. I want to know what it is."

"Don't you know better!" she cried in agony. "They've got bombs and terrible things nowadays. It's not your business to look into things like this."

"Now you shut up," said Sonny. But he did not say it angrily. "This is my farm—"

"It is not! It's your dad's!"

"Mine as much as his. And I got a right to look in what comes onto it, if I want. Now you stay back."

"I won't," she said. "If you're going to do something crazy like that I'm going to be right with you."

"All right," Sonny said. "Just don't you get in the way."

He approached the object again; and, taking the two edges of a crack, forced them apart. The metai, if it was metai, of the shell tore slowly, like heavy cardboard, but without sound. When he had separated the two edges of the crack enough, he thrust his head and shoulders inside.

A deep "E Gubling Dow" sounded from the interior and after a second, Sonny's voice followed, sounding muffled and a little hollow.

"Something here, all right. Pull that right edge back, Betty, while I lift it out."

Betty hurried to obey. The thin bright metal felt cool and flimsy in her fingers.

Sonny backed out, holding something large and curved in his arms. When he got it out into the moonlight, they saw that it was a round thing, perhaps a little larger than a basketball, but flattened as if by ifs own weight, and with an odd crease diagonally across its top.

"Brace or something had it pinned in," said Sonny. "I—-

Abruptly, in the tricky moonlight, a dimple seemed to appear near the top of the thing. The dimple deepened, widened, and spoke suddenly, the same words they had heard before.

"E Gubling Dow."

Betty gave a little throat-caught shriek, and backed off.

"It's alive!" she cried.

"Of course it's alive," said Sonny. The mouth contracted and all but disappeared. "Don't scare yourself, honey. Something like this can't hurt nobody. Here, feel it."

Betty backed away.

"Come on," urged Sonny. His hands, used to the animals of the farm, held it lightly and surely. "Nothing slimy or bad about it. It's light as a balloon, darn near."

"Put it down and we'll go call the sheriff," said Betty, tremulously.

"Feel it," commanded Sonny.

Reluctantly, Betty approached and reached out shrinking fingertips. Her first touch on the creature could have been no more than the brush of a feather. When it neither moved nor spoke, she gained courage, and drew closer, running her fingers more certainly over its surface.

"It feels—funny." she said. "Sort of satiny—smooth, and warm."

"Here, hold it," said Sonny. "Nothing to it, hardly."

Hesitantly, she took it and exclaimed in surprise.

"It's like a bubble!" she cried. "Like a big, warm bubble."

Sonny reached out and took the strange object back from her.

"We'll carry it up to the house," he said. "Then we can call the sheriff. There's something special about this." And he started off back toward the house.

"What do you suppose it is, Sonny?" asked Betty, following close behind him.

"Can't tell," said Sonny.

"Where do you suppose it came from?"

"Through the air, someplace, that's for sure," said Sonny. "That thing it was in wasn't built for moving

along the ground."

"They do all sorts of secret things, nowadays," said Betty. "Maybe the army sent it out, or the air force. or something. Sonny—"

"What?"

"You don't suppose it might be from—someplace else? Like those flying saucers, things like that?"

E GUBLING Dow

55

Sonny grunted. For a minute he did not answer;

and they walked along in silence.

"I was thinking about that," he said, finally.

"What?" asked Betty.

"I was thinking," he said. "I don't guess I'll call the sheriff after all. I think maybe I'll call the FBI."

"The FBL"

"I guess so."

Betty looked at her husband with wide eyes.

"If this is something special," said Sonny, "the FBI would know better how to handle it. Besides, there might be something they wanted to keep secret."

"But—" Betty stumbled. "You can't just phone."

"Why not?" he countered. "They're in the city phone book, just like everything else."

They had reached the edge of the wood and emerged into full moonlight again. Under its beams, the crea-ture in Sonny's arms seemed to gleam and glow. The dimple mouth sprang suddenly into existence, wid-ened and spoke.

"£ Gublmg Dow."

They stopped at the sound of it, staring at each other.

"This's nothing for the sheriff," said Sonny.

Betty looked from him to the creature, in which the mouth had all but vanished again. She followed Sonny back across the yard and up the back steps of the farmhouse.

"Open the door for me," ordered Sonny. She moved past him, pulled open the screen door, pushed open the back door, and stood holding both doors wide, looking into the kitchen where the old man still sat at table, a piece of cold roast pork on his fork. He put

it down when he saw her and lifted his head.

"It's going on two o'clock in the morning," he said. "If you're done traipsing all over the woods—" He broke off suddenly as Sonny came in, carrying the

creature. His creased face hardened in surprise. "What's that?"

"Something," said Sonny, briefly. He carried it across to one of the kitchen chairs and set it down on the chair's seat. It flattened a little and lay still without rolling. He went on into the living room and George and Betty could hear him on the phone, asking the local operator for the city number of the FBI.

George stared at the creature on the chair. Under the bright illumination of the electric light in the kitchen, its rounding shape ran with shifting colors. It lay still. Only the creased spot across its top was dark and colorless.

"Girl!" said the old man, finding his voice, finally. "What is that?"

"I don't know, Dad," she said. She stood facing him, feeling defensive, the edge of the sink pressing into the small of her back. "It was in something that came down and crashed back in our woods."

"What's it doing in my house?"

"Sonny brought it," she said.

"I know he brought it. I want to know what it is, and what it's doing here. And what's that Sonny's calling for on the phone?"

"The FBI."

"The FBI?" George stared at her. "Has he gone crazy? Has he gone clear out of his head?" The old man pushed himself suddenly back in his chair and stood up. With long, heavy strides, he crossed to the chair in which the creature lay; and reached out a knobby forefinger toward it.

Before he could touch it, the dimple appeared and widened. The creature spoke.

"E Gubling Dow."

George jerked his finger back as if it had been bitten. He backed away from the chair, his face angry and scared.

"It's alive!" he said.

"Yes, Dad," began Betty. "It spoke like that before."

"It's alive\" repeated the old man, hoarsely.

"Dad—"

"What kind of thing is it?"

Betty opened her mouth; but she could think of nothing to say. At that moment, however. Sonny came back from the living room.

"They said they'd send someone out," he said. He grinned, briefly. "Man on the phone sounded tike he thought I was drunk, at first."

"Richard!" said George. "Richard! What have you brought into this house?"

At the unusual use of his given name, Sonny turned slowly. For the first time, he noticed the wild stare in the older man's eyes.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked. "It's nothing, Dad. Just something from a ship of some kind that crashed into the woods."

"It ain't natural," said his father. "Whatever it is, it ain't natural, nor fit, nor holy. Look at it! And it's alive!"

"Well, why not?" demanded Sonny. "Why shouldn't there be something like that and alive? Just because it don't look—"

"Where did it come from?"

"Some sort of flying ship from someplace smashed up back in the woods."

"It's a devil creature. Something like that was never meant to exist on the good earth."

Sonny stared at his father. "Now, what're you get-ting all worked up for?" he said, gently. "It don't have to be so terrible just because it's different."

"I tell you it ain't right! Things like that just ain't right!" cried George. He stared frantically from Sonny to Betty. "Girl, you shouldn't have let him do it. You shouldn't 'a let him bring it home."

"Dad—" began Betty.

Sonny went past her and up to his father and took him by the arms.

"Here, you sit down now," he said, pushing the oid man easily into a chair. "There's no sense you get-ting all worked up like that. It's just some strange kind of animal, that's all."

"No, it ain't!" shouted the old man. "It ain't even an animal. It's something different."

"And what if it is?" answered Sonny. "Maybe that was what they call a saucer it was in, and it's from Mars or the moon or something. That don't make it something ungodly. Besides, the man is coming to take it anyhow."

"You shouldn't ought to let it live," said George in, a low, dead voice, staring across the room at it.

"Dad—" said Betty, coming across the room to him. She put a hand on his shoulder and rubbed it soothingly back and forth. "It can't hurt anyone. All it can do is talk a little. And I think it's asking for help. See—" she pointed to the dark crease across it. "I think it's hurt."

"That's where that brace pinched it," said Sonny. He walked over and examined the crease. "I don't suppose there's anything we can do."

"Kill it," said George.

"Now you listen to me!" flashed Sonny, raising his head and looking across at his father. "We aren't going to touch this thing. It ain't up to us to touch it. And anyway it's done us no harm and I don't believe in lifting any hand against any living thing until it does!"

"It ain't right," said the old man, stubbornly.

"It ain't right—it ain't right," echoed Sonny, exas-perated. "That all you can say? What's not right about it?"

"What ain't right about it?" The old man straight-ened up, his eyes wide and angry, his face flushed. "I'll tell you what, boy! This world's been going to

hell for some time now. Everybody playing hob with things that ought to be left be. Wars and destruction. Plague and pestilence. They got to monkey with the weather.

"They got to make atomic bombs which ain't no more nor less than letting loose hellfire on Earth. Every day they find something new to cut a man up for, or pump him full of serum for, or take him to court for. And that there"—he pointed a shaking finger at the round creature—"that's the end of it ail. Something that was never meant to be on this earth and there it is."

Sonny stared at his father. "This's not like you," he said, slowly.

"Not like me?" cried George.

"This roaring around about science and progress and all. I notice you ain't kicking the tractor out of

the barn for no horses!"

The old man opened his mouth, then abruptly clamped it shut again and stood glaring at his son. Sonny looked at him a moment, then went on.

"Never heard you say nothing against hybrid corn. Or Black Angus cattle. How come you're so hot under the collar about this?" and he jerked a thumb at the creature.

"They're different!" cried George. "They're natural animals. This—talks."

"Just makes a noise, is all."

"Noise, my foot!" said George. "That's talk. as clear as a man makes. That thing can talk. And it can listen. It's laying over there listening to every word we say right now."

Sonny half-turned to look at the creature, his eyes narrowing.

"You said it come in a ship, didn't you?" demanded the old man. "They don't put animals in to fly ships."

"The Russians sent a dog up, didn't they? News-

paper said we sent some monkeys up in rockets. The army or the navy or something did."

"Dogs and monkeys!" The old man's scorn was crushing. "That ain't no monkey, laying there watching us like that, speaking words like a human."

"Watching!" said Sonny. "It's got no eyes. But all right, supposing it is. Supposing it's smart as a man, Supposing it come all the way from some star we never even heard of. What about it?"

"What about it? I'll tell you what about it when you answer me one question," said George. "What's it come for? What's it come all the way to the Earth, here, to the U.S.A., to our farm and our woods and our house for?"

Sonny frowned. In the moment's silence, almost as if it was in answer to the old man's question, the dimple formed once more on the creature's smooth surface; and it spoke again.

"E Gubling—Dow," it said.

There was the slightest of pauses between the second and the last word, this time. It impressed itself on the three listeners with the particular sharpness of something at once opposite and ominous. In the pause following, Betty spoke tremblingly.

"Sonny," she said. "Sonny—I think it's getting

worse."

"Worse?" echoed Sonny. He took a step over to the creature and looked down at it. "What d'you mean?"

Betty's finger indicated the crease on the creature's top, without touching it.

"See—it's getting darker around there," she said. "And it sounded kind of—well, weak."

Sonny examined it. After a moment, he raised an angry face in the direction of his father.

"Now you see!" he said. "You with all your yelling about what a terrible thing it is. It hurt itself in that crash- Maybe it's hurt bad. You sitting there worry-

ing about it, when it's not only harmless but prob'ly dying."

"It won't die," said the old man, raising his head. "Critters of that sort don't die."

"Lot you know about it," grumbled Sonny, bending over the creature. "Betty, there ought to be something we could do for it."

"I don't know, Sonny," said Betty, standing gazing at it. "1 don't know what anyone could do for something like that."

"That brace must have pinched it bad inside, maybe it broke something. Maybe—" he broke off. suddenly aware of his father close behind him, peering over his shoulder. He turned. The old man was staring in fascination at the creature.

"It can't die," said the old man again. But there was doubt in his voice for the first time.

"Why can't it?" demanded Sonny sharply.

The old man shook his head, but said nothing. He continued to gaze at the creature, which, as if it was aware of their concentrated attention upon it, opened its dimple of a mouth once more.

"E . .. Gubling ... Dow," it said.

There was no doubt that the pauses between the words—if they were words—were longer than they had been before. Though nothing else had changed, neither the tone nor the accent with which the words were spoken, the words came slowly, as if they were being pushed out by unusual effort.

"How soon will the man be here?" asked Betty.

"He said in an hour or two."

"Be sun-up in an hour or two," said the old man.

"After three now. No sort of hours to stay up to." His voice was mechanical and absent. He remained, staring at the creature.

Sonny and Betty paid no attention.

"Do you think they can do something for it when they come?" Betty said.

"Don't know," frowned Sonny. "Take it in to the hospital, I guess. Take an X ray there and see what's wrong. I don't know."

"It'd be too bad if it—didn't last," said Betty.

"Yeah," said Sonny.

There was a moment's silence in the white-lit kitchen.

"You don't suppose—" said Betty. "You don't suppose it's something important it's trying to tell us?" She looked up into Sonny's face as if for reassurance.

Sonny shook his head.

"No telling," he said.

"What I say is," broke in George suddenly. "It must've come for some reason—" He turned to his son. "How far off are them stars?"

"Hundreds of millions of miles," replied Sonny, without turning his head.

Air hissed scornfully in between the old man's teeth. "You're crazy boy," he said. "It can't be nothing like that."

"Look in the almanac if you don't believe me," said Sonny.

"Huh!" said George; but he turned and went across to the kitchen shelf where the current issue of the almanac stood beside Betty's cookbooks.

"I just wish we could do something for it," said Betty.

"I guess we could put him on a pillow or something," said Sonny

Betty turned and went out of the room. Behind Sonny, the old man's feet shuffled across the kitchen floor.

"1 can't find it in here. Sonny," he said. pushing the almanac into his son's hands. "Where do you find figures like that?"

Sonny took it, ran through the index and turned to the almanac's interior.

"Here you are," he said. " 'The Planets and the

Solar System. Name of planet—Mercury—approxi-
mate distance from Earth in millions of miles—
maximum one thirty-six.' That's a hundred and
thirty-six million miles. 'Minimum, fifty—' That's fifty
million and so on. And the planets ain't stars. Stars
are much further off. Read it for yourself, there. Maybe
it came from a planet, maybe a star."

He handed the book back to the old man, who took
it numbly and stared at the open page.

"That can't be right," he said. "That just can't be
right. Couldn't anything come that far. Why, do you
know how far a million miles is, Sonny?"

"If they figure we can do it one of these days, no
reason this couldn't have," said Sonny.

Betty came back with the pillow.

"Lift it real gentiy, Sonny," she said. Sonny lifted.
She slid the pillow underneath the creature. It shiv-
ered, but said nothing-

"All that way—" the old man was mumbling- "What
for?"

"Maybe," said Betty, hesitantly, "it came to tell us
something."

"Tell us what?" demanded George, turning to her.

"I don't know. But the way it says E Gub—whatever
it is—over and over again—"

"Sonny," George turned to his son, "do you guess
that's it?"

"Don't know," said Sonny, gazing at the now quiet
creature.

"E—" it said. "Gubling—Dow."

"I'm going to call that FBI office again," said Sonny.
"Maybe I could meet them halfway or some such
thing."

He went into the living room; and they heard him
speaking to the operator. George turned to Betty.

"Girl—" he said, in a low voice. "Girl, I'm not as
young as 1 used to be. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but

it's hard for me—all these new things. And I don't
know about this. I just don't know."

She came over to him and took his hand, sympa-

thetically.

"You don't like it either," he said, looking up at her. "I know you don't like it, either."

She stroked his shoulder, reassuringly.

"Hush, Dad," she said. But her voice trembled a little. "Hush. I was scared at first, too- But now I'm just sorry for it. being hurt and all."

"What's it trying to say to us?" said the old man. "I can't talk to him. He don't listen to me anymore. But you know how I feel, girl. I worked for my uncle thirty years before I got this place- I tried to build it into something permanent over forty years here. And now that I got it, the world seems to be going to pieces all around me. You understand me, girl. I don't mean to be ornery and cranky all the time. I just don't feel right with things anymore."

"Hush, Dad," she said. "We know."

"You do," he answered. "But does he? He's alt one piece, that boy. All one tight little package. Can't nobody tei! what he thinks or feels or sees. Most of the time I think he don't care. I care. You care." He looked up at the girl suddenly with a strange expres- sion on his lined face. "I know and I bet he don't even. You're expecting, ain't you?"

"Shhh!" said the girl. But this time there was an urgency to her hushing. "I don't know—I mean, I'm not sure. I want to see the doctor first before I say anything. I was going today in town, but I didn't get the chance."

"You see?" mumbled George. "You and a child in you. And me—"

"E .. ." said the creature, slowly and heavily, "Gubling . . . Doooow."

The last word drew out like a disk on a record

player slowing down. They both looked over at the creature where it lav still.

"And it," said George.

Sonny came back into the kitchen, walking fast, as he always did, on his toes.

"Man's already left," he announced. "How is he?"

He bent over the creature. He shook his head. The area around the crease had darkened and enlarged and the colors that played over the surface of the sphere seemed to have slowed.

"Betty," he said, straightening up. "Let's have some

coffee. That man ought to be here in an hour. City's unty tortv miles away."

"If he doesn't get lost," put in George.

Sunny looked at his father. "He won't," he said, shortly.

Betty went to the stove and picked up the coffee pot. The coffee in it was old. She poured it out and put tresh water on. Then she came back and sat down at the table.

They sat now, all three of them, for Sonny had taken a seat at the table, top; and his lather was seated across from him. Sonny looked up at the old man.

"You tired. Dad?" he said. "No sense vou're staying up unless you want to."

"I'm waiting," said George.

A silence fell between them. After a while, the coffee pot began to sing above the burner and Betty got up to turn the current off. Still none of them said anything. Betty went to the cupboard and came out with fresh cups. She placed one before each of the men and filled it up. Then she began, mechanically, to clear the table.

"Leave that go until morning, why don't vou?" said Sonny, looking up at her.

"I hate to get up to a dirty kitchen." she said "It's no trouble—now."

He turned his gaze away from her, and back to the creature. Both men sat drinking their coffee and watching it. Their faces were stil! above the table, like the busts of old Roman Senators. Sonny's narrow, smallboned features were straining a little forward—like action suspended—with an almost predatory brightness as he watched the creature. His father's face was stiller, more settled and heavy, the wrinkled skin looking thick, like old leather weathered by time, the immobility of age holding it with a solid motionlessness. The electric clock above the sink moved noiselessly, its little purring of gears lost in the water-muted clatter of the dishes, as Betty washed up.

Three times, as the hour went by, the creature cleared its throat as if to speak, but no full words came out.

"It's going," said the old man, suddenly.

This abrupt speaking of what was in all their minds made the other two look quickly over at him.

"Maybe not," said Sonny, sharply.

The old man raised his head and looked Sonny squarely in the eye.

"Some things you can tell me, boy," he said. "But not that. I know when something's birthing, and when it's dying."

Sonny opened his mouth as if to retort, closed it again, then opened it once more.

"You'd be glad to see that, wouldn't you?" he asked.

The old man rubbed his hands together.

"Don't know," he said. "Guess we're better off without it."

"Ever figure it might be like a man, someplace else?" said Sonny. "A man with his insides smashed, dying in some place strange with things like that around him, just watching and not knowing what to do?"

The old man sighed and turned his head away. On

the window beside him the blind was pulled. He reached out with one long arm and raised it part way.

"Coming on to dawn," he said.

The first pale, grayish-white tight of morning was Hooding across the fields. It cast its illumination in through the window, making the electric light in the ceiling suddenly yellow and garish.

Abruptly, the creature shivered and rocked a little on its pillow. The dimple mouth fluttered open and shut, open and shut, and a sudden riot of wild colors, unlike anything they had seen before, flamed wildly over its surface.

"£ GUBLING DOW!" it said; and then. very fast, three times, so that the sounds were all run together, "E Gubling Dow'. E Gubling Dow! E Gubling Dow!"

The dimple sagged half open; and it went silent. The colors faded like a momentary flush, faded into gray and from there to a sickly white, like a dead fish, cast up on'a shoreline, bleaching in the sun. The old man sighed heavily, and the ghost of an echo came from Betty. Sonny cussed suddenly, in a low, bitterly furious voice; and, getting up, stalked across the room and out the back door. The door slammed behind him.

The old man and the girl looked at each other.

"What ails the boy?" cried George.

"I don't know!" said Betty. She hurried across to the door, the old man up and lumbering behind her. She pulled it open and they stepped out onto the back stoop. Three steps down, Sonny stood beluw them, his back to them, his fists clenched at his side, staring into the rising sun. At the sound of the opening door, he whirled to face them.

"Sonny'" cried Betty. "Sonny, what is it?"

He glared at them, half-raising his fists, in a furious, helpless geslure-

he shouted. "It don't mean nothing to

"You—"

you! All you want is your farms or your babies. You don't know what goes on in the inside of a live and living man!"

The Stranger

TT/e will not consider the odds involved in their W finding the stranger, for the odds were impossible.

They came down to rest their tubes on an unnamed planet of a little-known star in the Buckhorn Cluster. Because they were tired from weeks in space, they came in without looking. They circled the planet once and spiraled down to an open patch of sand between two rocky cliffs. Only then did they see the other ship.

Jeff Wadley was at the controls and his eyes widened when he saw it. But his fingers did not hesitate on the controls, for a deep-space starship is not the kind of vehicle that can change its mind about landing once it is within half a mile of the ground. He brought the Emerald Girl in smoothly to a stop not five hundred feet from the stranger. Then he sat back.

"Dad," he said flatly, into the intercom, "swing the turret!"

Peter Wadley, up in the instrument room, had already seen the strange ship, and the heavy twin barrels of the automatic rifles were depressing to cover. Jeff leaned forward to the communicator.

"Identify yourself!" The tight beam in Common Code snapped across the little stretch of open sand to the cliff against which the other seemed to nestle. "We are the mining ship Emerald Girl, Earth license, five

hundred and eighty-two days out ofArcturus Station.
Identify yourself!"

There were steps behind Jeff, and Peter Wadley
came to stand behind his son's tense back.

"Do they answer, Jeff?"

"No.

"Identify yourself. Identify yourself! Identify yourself!"

The angry demand crackled and arced invisibly
across the space between both vessels. And there was
no answer.

Jeff sat back from the communicator. The palms of
his hands were wet and he wiped them on the cloth
of his breeches.

"Let's get out of here," he said nervously.

"And leave him?" His father's lean forefinger indi-
cated the strange silent ship.

"Why not?" Jeff jerked his face up. "We're no sal-
vage outfit or Government exploration unit."

There was a moment of tenseness between them.
The older man's face tightened.

"We'd better look into it." he said.

"Are you crazy?" blazed Jeff. "It was here when we
came. It'll be here if we leave. Let's get going. We
can report it if you want. Let the Federal ships
investigate."

"Maybe, it just landed," his father said evenly.
"Maybe it's in trouble."

"What if it is?" Jeff insisted. "Don't you realize
we're a sitting target here? And what do you think it
is—Aunt Susie's runabout? Look at it!" And with a
savage flip of his hand he shoved the magnification
of the viewing screen up so that the other ship seemed
to loom up a handsbreadth beyond their walls.

It was an unnecessary gesture. There was no mis-

taking that the lines of the other ship were foreign to
any they had ever seen. It was big; not outlandishly
big, but bigger than the Emerald Girl. and bulb-shaped
with most of its bulk in front. There was no sign of
ports or airlocks, only a few stubby fins, which pro-
jected forlornly from the body at an angle of some
thirty degrees.

And from its silence and immobility, its strange
inhuman lines, a cold air of alien menace seemed to
reach out to chill the two watching men.

"Well?" challenged Jeff. But the older man was not listening.

"The radarcamera," he said, half to himself. He turned on his heel and stalked off. Jeff, sitting tensely in his chair, heard his father's footsteps die away. to be succeeded seconds later by the distant clumsy sounds of a man getting into a spacesuit. Jeff swore, and jumping to his feet, ran to the airlock. His father, radarcamera at his feet. was already half-dressed to go outside.

"You aren't going out there?" he asked incredulously.

The older man nodded and picked up his fishbowl helmet. Jeff's face twisted in dismay.

"I won't let you!" he hatf-shouted. "You're risking your life and I can't navigate the ship without you."

Helmet in hand, his father paused, the deep-graved lines of his face stiffening.

"I'm still master of this ship!" he said curtly. "Alien or not that other ship may need assistance. By intraspace law I'm obliged to give it. If you're worried, cover me from the gun turret." He dropped the helmet over his head, cutting Jeff off from further protest.

Seething with mixed fear and anger, Jeff turned abruptly and climbed hurriedly to the gun turret. The twin barrels of the rifles were already centered on their target, which the aiming screen showed, together with the area between the two vessels and a

portion of the Emerald Girl's airlock, which projected from her side. As Jeff watched, the outer lock swung open and a gray, space-suited figure raced for the protection of the bow. It was a dash of no more than five seconds duration, but to Jeff it seemed that his father took an eternity to reach safety.

He reached for the microphone on the ship's circuit and pulled it to him.

"All right, Dad?" In spite of himself, Jeff's voice was still ragged with anger.

"Fine, Jeff," his father's voice came back in unperturbed tones- "I'm well shielded and I can get good, clean shots at every part other."

"Let me know when you're ready to start back," said Jeff, and shoved the microphone away from him.

He sat back and lit a cigarette, but his eyes continued to watch the other ship as a man might watch a dud bomb which has not yet been disarmed. After a

while, he noticed his fingers were shaking, and he laid the cigarette carefully down in the ashtray.

When he comes back, thought Jeff, it'll be time. We'll have this thing out then. He's become some sort of a religious fanatic, and he doesn't know it. How a man who's been all over hell and seen the worst sides of fifty different races in as many years can think of them all as lovable human children, I don't know. But, know it or not, this taking of chances has got to stop someplace; and right here is the best place of all. When he gets back—if he gets back—we're taking off. And if he doesn't get back . . . I'll

blow that bloody bastard over there into so many bits . - .

"Coming in, Jeff," his father's voice on the speaker interrupted him.

Jeff leaned forward, his hands on the trips of the rifles; the small gray figure suddenly shot back to the protection of the airlock, which snapped shut behind

it. Then, he took a deep breath, stood up, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He went down to the instrument room

Peter Wadley was already out of his suit and developing the pictures. Jeff picked them up as they came off the roll, damp and soft to the touch.

"I can't tell much," he said, holding them up to the light.

"There's a great deal of overlap," his father answered- "We're going to have to section and fit the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. Wait'11 I'm through here."

For about five minutes more, pictures continued to come off the roll. Then Peter picked up a pair of scissors and arranged the prints in their proper sequence.

"Clear the table," he told Jeff, "and fit these together as I hand them to you."

For a little while longer, they worked in silence. Then Peter laid down his scissors.

"That's all," he said. "Now, what have we got?"

"I don't know," answered Jeff, bewilderment in his

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voice. "It looks like nothing I veever seen."

Peter stepped up to the table and squinted at the

shadowy films with eyes practiced in reading rock formations. He shook his head.

"It is strange," he said, finally.

"Do you see what I see?" demanded Jeff. "There's no real crew space. There's this one spot—up front"—he indicated it with his finger—"that's about as big as a good-sized closet. And nothing more than that—except corridors about twenty inches in diameter running from it to points all over the ship. She must be flown by a crew of midgets."

"Midgets," echoed the older man, thoughtfully. "I never heard of an intelligent race that small."

"Then they're something new," said Jeff, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"No," said his father, slowly. "I don't remember when or where I heard it, but there's some reason why you couldn't have an intelligent race much smaller than a good-sized dug. It has something to do with the fact that they grow in size as their developing intelligence gives them an increasing advantage over their environment."

"Here's the evidence," Jeff answered, tapping the film with one finger.

"No." Pete was bending over the picture fragments again. "Look at these things in the corridor. They're obviously controls."

Jeff looked.

"I see what you mean," he said at last. "If there's any similarity betwen their mechanical system and ours, these controls are built for somebody pretty big. But look how they're scattered all over the ship. There's a good fifteen or twenty different groups of instruments and other things. That means a number of crew members; and you simply can't put a number of large crew members in those little corridors."

"There's a large amount of total space," Pete began. Then, suddenly a faint tremor ran through the ship. Jeff leaped for the screen and his father moved over <o stand behind him.

"Good Lord," said Jeff, "look at her."

The other ship shook suddenly and rolled slightly to one side. Some unseen center of gravity pulled her back to her original position. She hesitated a moment, and then tried again, with the same results. She lay quiescent.

Jeff pounced on his radiation drum graph-

"What does il say?" Peter asked.

Jeff shook his head in astonishment. "Nothing," he answered, "just nothing at all."

"Nothing?" Peter came over to take a look at the graph himself. It was as Jeff had said. The line trac-

ing the white surface of the graph was straight and undisturbed.

"But that's impossible." Peter frowned.

The two men turned back to the screen. As they watched, one final shudder shook the strange ship, and then, like a stranded whale who has given up hope, it lay still.

"My God!" said Pete, and Jeff turned to him in astonishment. It was the closest to profanity his father had come in twenty years. "Jeff, do you know what I think? 1 think that ship is manned by just one great big creature—like a giant squid. That's why no radiation registered. He was trying to move his ship by sheer strength."

Jeff stared at his father.

"You're crazy," was all he could manage to say. "Why, something big enough to shake that ship would have to fill every inch of space inside it. You can't live in a space ship that way."

"That's right," Pete answered. He clamped his hand on Jeff's shoulder excitedly and led him back to the jigsaw puzzle on the table. ^

"If I'm right," he said, "that's, no ship at all as we understand it, but some sort of a space-going suit for something terrifically large. Something like a giant squid, as I said, or some other long-tentacled creature. His body would lie here—in this space you said was about the size of a closet—and his tentacles, or whatever they are, would reach out in these corridors to the various groups of instruments."

Jeff frowned.

"It sounds sensible," he muttered. "And in any case, he wouldn't be able to get outside his ship to fix anything that went wrong. And I take it there is something wrong, or else he wouldn't be jumping around inside."

"Jeff," Pete said, "I'm going outside to take a close look at him."

Jeff's head snapped up from the jigsaw puzzle. The old, sick fear had come back. It washed over him like a wave.

"Why?" he demanded harshly.

"To see if I can find out what's wrong with his ship," said Pete over his shoulder as he went to the airlock. "Coming?"

"Wait!" cried Jeff. He stood up and followed his father. For a moment there, they stood facing each other, two tall men with less apparent physical difference between them than their ages might indicate, poised on the brink of an open break.

"Wait," said Jeff again, and now his voice was lower, more under control. "Dad, there's no point in playing around any longer. You aren't going to be satisfied just to look around out there and then leave. You're going to do something. And if that's it I want to know now."

There was a moment's silence; then Pete turned back to Jeff, his face set.

"That's right," he said. "I don't have to look. I know what's wrong- And I know what I'm going to do about it. There's a living intelligence trapped in that space-thing as you and I might be trapped. I can set it free with two of our motor jacks. If you've got one inkling of what it means to be ignored when you're caught like that, you'll help me. If not, I'm taking two jacks out the airlock and you can fire the motors and take off and be damned to you."

Between the two big men the tension built and strained and broke. Jeff let out a ragged sigh.

"All right," he said. "I'm with you."

"Good," said the older man, and there was new life in his voice. "Get your suit on. I'll explain as we dress.

"The trouble with our friend there is that he's fallen over- I see you don't understand, Jeff. Well,

this ship of ours lands on her belly. We've got booster rockets all over the hull to correct our landing angle. But ships weren't always that way. They used to have to sit down on their tail. There's no furrow where that ship landed, only a circular blasted spot, so it figures. Maybe some of his mechanism went wrong at the last minute.

"At any rate, I'm betting that if we get him upright again, he can take care of himself from there on out. So you and I are going to go out there with a couple of jacks and see if we can't jack him back up into

position."

The sand was thick and heavy. The walk over to the other ship was tedious, with the heavy jacks weighing them down. They reached the alien hull, paused a moment to get their breath and then attached the magnetic grapples to the skin of the ship at two points on opposite sides of the hull and roughly a fourth of the way up from the rocket tubes.

It was hard to anchor the jacks in the soft sand. They finally found it necessary to dig them in some three or four feet to a layer of rock that underlay the sand. Then, when everything was ready, they took their stations, each at a jack, and Pete called to Jeff on the helmet set.

"All ready? Start your motor."

Jeff reached down and flicked a switch. The tiny, powerful jack motor began to spin, and the jack base settled more solidly against its rocky bed. When he was sure that it would not slip, he left it, and went around the rockets to stand by his father.

His face was gray.

"Well," said Peter tensely, "up she goes."

The nose of the alien ship was rising slowly from the sand. It quivered softly from some motion inside the ship.

"Yes," said Jeff, "up she goes." His words were flat and dull. Pete turned to look at him.

"Scared, son?" he asked. Jeff's !ips parted, closed and opened again.

"You know how we stand," he said, dully. "I've heard what you said from other men, but never from an alien. Most of the ones we know hiE first, and talk afterward. You know that once this ship is on its feet we're at his mercy. Just his rocket blasts alone could kill us; and there won't be time to get back to the Girl"

The alien was now at an angle of forty-five degrees. The little jacks stretched steadily, pushing their thin, stiff arms against the strange hull. Sand dripped from the rising ship.

"Yes, Jeff," Pete said. "I know. But the important thing isn't what he does, but what we do. The fact that we've helped him—can't you see it that way, son ?''

Jeff shook his head in bewilderment.

"I don't know," he said helplessly. "I just don't know."

The ship was now nearly upright. Suddenly, with an abruptness that startled both men, it shook itself free of the jacks and teetered free for a second, before coming to rest, its nose pointing straight up.

"Here it goes," said Pete, a tinge of excitement in his voice. They moved back some yards to be out of the way of the takeoff blast. Suddenly the ground trembled under their feet. Pete put his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Here it goes," he repeated, in a whisper.

Flame burst abruptly from the base of the ship. It was warming up its tubes. Slowly the flame puffed out from its base and it began to rise.

Jeff shook suddenly with an uncontrollable shudder. His voice came to Pete through the earphones, starklv afraid.

"Now what?" he cried. "What'll he do now?"

Pete's grip tightened on his shoulder,

"Steady boy."

The ship was rising. Up it went, and up, until it was the size of a man's little finger, a liny sliver of silver against the black backdrop of the sky. Then, inexplicably, it halted and began to reverse itself.

Slowly it turned, until the blunt nose pointed toward them. Jeff's hoarse breathing was loud in his helmet. Now it comes, he thought, and his muscles tensed.

A long minute flowed by and still the alien hung there. Then, abruptly it went into a series of idiotic gyrations; it twisted and turned, and spun around, swinging its fiery trail of rocket gases like a luminous tall in the darkness. Then, just as abruptly, it reversed once more, so that its head was away from them: in the twinkling of a moment it was gone.

Pete sighed, a deep, ragged sigh.

"Did you see it, boy?" he cried. "Did you see it?"

"I saw." Jeff's voice was filled with a new awe. "Now I get it. He wasn't swe—he didn't know we were really trying to help him until we let him get all the way out there by himself. Then he knew he was free. That's why he wouldn't answer before."

"Sure, Jeff, sure;" said the older man, a note of triumph in his voice. "But that's not what I mean. Did you notice all those contortions he was going through up there? What did they remind you of?"

There was a moment of silence, then the words came, at first slowly, then in a rush from Jeff's lips.

"Like a puppy," he said, haltingly, stumbling over the wonder of it. "Like a puppy wagging its tail."

And the light of a new understanding broke suddenly in his eyes.

"Dad!" said Jeff, turning to his father. "Dad! Do you know what I think? I think we've made a friend."

Gordon R Oickson

80

And the two men stood there, side by side, looking into the blackness of space where an odd-shaped spacecraft had vanished. It, they felt, was on its way home.

And they were right. Moreover, It was hurrying.

For It had a story to tell.

The Friendly Man

Mark Toren was very surprised to find someone waiting for him.

The awaiter was a young, pleasant-looking man wearing an open-throated sports shirt with a pipe in his mouth. He took the pipe from his mouth to wave cheerfully and pointed through a doorway into what seemed a rather pleasant living room.

"Come in," he said. "Come in, and make yourself at home."

Wondering, Mark followed him in. This was not according to what he had conceived as regulations. Did they have a reception for all visitors from time?

He looked around the room wonderingly as he took a chair It looked like any ordinary room, comfortably furnished in the style of his own century.

"You look puzzled," said the young man. who had taken a seat across from him—a deep leather armchair in which he lounged comfortably. Mark eyed him narrowly, noting the style of his clothes, which was the same as that of Mark's own.

"I am," he said, dryly. "You don't expect to go fifty thousand years into the future and find the present."

The young man chuckled. "You'd be surprised," he

81

82 Gordon R. Dickson

said. "Civilization has a way of coming full circle . . . oh, by the way, my name's Merki: and yours is—?"

"Mark Toren," said Mark. "What do you mean by full circle?"

"Ups and downs," replied the young man, airily. "Dark Ages—a period of scientific advance—another Dark Ages—another period of scientific advance—and so on."

Mark frowned. "That's odd," he said. "The cycle seemed that way in my time, surely. But according to my own prognostications, it should have levelled out to a steady uphill climb for the human race by at least twenty thousand years after my time. As a matter of fact, that's why I chose to go this far into the future; simply because that time seemed so remote that no one of my time could imagine what the human race would be like—" He interrupted himself suddenly. "If you don't mind, I'd like to ask a few questions about your present time."

"Shoot!" said the young man, blowing a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"You speak my language," asked Mark, bluntly, "you're dressed as I am. How come?"

"Oh, that," said Merkl. "We have instruments that allow us to look a little distance along the time line in either direction. We saw you coming and got things fixed up to receive you."

"That much trouble for one visitor?" asked Mark.

"It wasn't much trouble"—Merkl shrugged—"with our technology."

"Then," said Mark, "I take it that your world is very different from what I see here."

"Some," said Merkl. "We have a higher technological level, of course. At the same time, as I said, culturally, our civilization is at pretty much the same cyclic point that yours was at."

"At the same time," Mark sa''d, his eyes taking on for a second the fugitive gleam of the researcher,

"it's going to be interesting for me." He paused, and when the other made no immediate response, continued, "You don't have any objection to my seeing it, do you?" he asked.

"Oh, none. None at all," replied the young man hurriedly. "Of course, you understand, we're going to have to give you and your temporal vehicle a bit of an examination, just to make sure there's nothing about either of you that might possibly be harmful to us."

"I assure you—" Mark was beginning stiffly, when

the young man interrupted with an apologetic air.

"Oh, we realize that you have no intention of doing any harm, but you might, for example, be harboring disease germs to which we are no longer immune. Your ship might possess some latent energy which would react violently if it were inadvertently exposed to some of our technology. I assure you that there won't be anything to the examination. As a matter of fact, you can speed up the business considerably just by answering a few questions for me."

Mark grimaced wryly.

"I'd hoped the shoe would be'on the other foot," he said. "I'm bursting with curiosity. However, go ahead."

"First," said Merkl, "just to confirm the findings of our instruments, suppose you tell me from what time you come?"

"Twenty-one Ninety AD," said Mark.

Merkl nodded.

"And what type of civilization did you have, then?"

"Well," said Mark, "we considered ourselves fairly well advanced. Our rockets had reached as far as the moons of Jupiter and we had fairly well established colonies on Mars and Venus. We were making fairly wide use ot atomic power, although the installations were still so expensive as to restrict their use considerably—" He broke off, somewhat embarrassed.

"I suppose this all sounds awfully primitive and childlike to you," he said.

"Not at all," answered Merki, quickly. "Not at all. Go on."

"Well—sociologically we were, I suppose, pretty primitive. Equality among the sexes was firmly established, of course. There was still some suppression of minorities, but not much. The old Earth governments were still in force, although the real power was wielded by the large business and labor organizations."

"I see," interrupted Merkl. "Still the type of society where a strong man could hack his way to power."

"Why, yes—" said Mark, and stopped abruptly. "Why do you ask that?"

"Oh, for no particular reason," replied Merkl, easily. "The situation is merely typical of such cyclic conditions as you've been describing. Tell me more about the extent to which planetary exploration had gone. No farther than Jupiter, you say?"

"Not that I know of," answered Mark. "And I imagine I would have heard of any further advances."

"Interesting," said Merkl. "Very interesting." He rose suddenly to his feet

"I'll leave you now," he said. "The machines are ready to scan you and your machine. The process will take several days, but I assure you, will not cause you the slightest discomfort. Make yourself comfortable here. This building is yours, although I must warn you about stepping outside of it until you are told it is safe to do so."

"Of course," said Mark. "But there are a few more things I'd like to ask you—" He broke off, for Merkl had already passed through the door and was gone.

After the young man left, Mark sat for a while in thought. The reception he had been accorded was not what he had expected—but then he chided him-

self for expecting it to conform to any preconceived notions.

He was not the first explorer in time to leave from the period of the Twenty-second Century; but if he returned, he would be the first to do that. The risk was a calculated one, and he took it with no mental reservations. It was, however, with some idea of playing safe that he had set his destination at fifty thousand years in the future. Briefly, Mark had been hoping to get beyond the cyclic ups and downs to which Merkl had referred. Inevitably, he had thought, reverses and re-reverses of history must come to an end eventually as man grew in mental maturity.

How far can the human race go in fifty thousand years, considering its progress during the past five thousand years of known history? Mark had asked himself that question and answered it with the obvious reply that it was impossible to imagine the answer. The most he could guess was that by then man would be a new creature entirely, bearing only the remotest resemblance to his ancestor of the Twenty-second Century. The least Mark had imagined was that man, fifty thousand years from then, would have passed into a completely new era.

And now, here was Merkl to tell him that, aside from a greatly improved technology, man was still on the same merry-go-round of history that he had been on in Mark's time. Mark shook his head over the information. Merkl's answer was plausible, even reasonable, but it did not feel right.

Mark shook the notion from his head and rose to explore the building where he was being temporarily

held a prisoner. It consisted of three rooms and all the appurtenances of the normal Twenty-second Century bungalow. The only difference was a stairway that led up to the open roof, which gave him a view of the surrounding country.

The countryside was grassy and rolling; the air

astoundingly fresh and clear, so that the few isolated groups of buildings he could see in the distance stood out sharply, like meticulously executed miniatures. He was struck by the isolated position of his bungalow, and had halfway resolved to ask Merki about it, when it struck him that possibly they were playing extra-safe in the matter of possible contagion. Still, that was odd, when Merki had not seemed at all shy about coming into quite close proximity to him. Of course, the scientific worker sometimes took long chances— He shrugged his shoulders and went back down the stairs. I'll just check the lime machine, he thought, and then gel some sleep. As soon as the examination period is over there'll no doubt be plenty to do.

But when he came to the spot of his arrival, the time machine was gone.

Two days later, Merki returned. Mark did not hear him enter, but there he was, suddenly, in the entrance to the room where they had had their first interview.

"Hello," said Merki. with a friendly smile. "How are things going?"
Mark jumped out of his seat.
"You've taken my machine!" he snapped.
"Why, yes," said Merki. "It was easier to take it to the machines which would scan it, than to bring the machines here. I imagine you'll have it back in a day or so."

"Oh," Mark answered, somewhat mollified. Merki came on into the room, followed by an older, thinner man, who nodded pleasantly to Mark.

"Mark," said Merki, "I'd like to have you meet Termi, one of our archaeologists. He's one of the group who's been studying that machine of yours;

and he's found it interesting. So interesting, in fact,

that he wanted me to ask you if you wouldn't mind chatting with him about it."

Mark could not help feeling slightly flattered. The thin line of his mouth relaxed.

"Of course," he said. "Anything you would like to know."

"Thank you, sir," responded Termi. "Shall we sit down?"

All three took chairs, and Mark leaned forward, grasping his knees with his hands, in an attitude of attentiveness. Termi's smooth voice flowed over him.

"I must begin by an admission," said the archaeologist. "Our records of time machines are very incomplete, Mark, very. The most primitive ones of which we have any record belong to a date some fifteen thousand years later than your time. We assume that probably there was, following your time, a period of scientific retrogression, in which the basic knowledge necessary to the construction of such a machine was lost. So that your machine stands alone in our experience without any means available to tie it to later developments. It is not even readily apparent to us how you operated it; and I thought, just to save us time and effort of experimentation, that you might not mind explaining the process to us."

"Not at all," answered Mark. "You must. of course, understand that there were others working on the subject of time travel during my period and that my machine is by no means typical. But they are all founded on the same principles.

"Briefly, it was the development of psychomechanics that allowed real research on the subject of time travel to begin. Psychomechanics found that there was a definite connection between the human body's perception of time and its experience of time. That is, the body tended to react to what it perceived as a speeded-up time flow by speeding up inside. The Mackenwald distorter was the first instrument to

exploit this reaction by accelerating a subject's perception of time as much as three times normal; and, quite by accident, it was discovered that inanimate objects in close proximity to the body also tended to be affected by the speed-up process.

"From the matter of distorting the body relative to time, it was a short step to the problem of distorting time relative to the body. And from the research done in that direction finally was evolved the technique of putting the body in suspension relative to time—that is, into a timeless state.

"It's a little difficult to explain what I mean without demonstrating the processes as they occurred step by step. But, it should be easy to understand how, once it was possible to put a living person into a timeless state, all that was necessary for time travel was to find a means of moving that body along the time stream to the point at which it wished to re-enter the time stream. Psychomechanics solved that difficulty by training the human mind to the point of

using it as a propulsive unit in the timeless state. This, of course, was possible since it takes, even in practice, almost no energy to move a body relative to the time stream."

Termi leaned back in his chair and laughed.

"No wonder," he said. "That's a good joke on us. No wonder we couldn't find any evidence of a propulsive unit on your machine, when the propulsive unit was in your head, instead."

"Well," said Mark, a trifle embarrassed. "It's something like that."

"Well, well," said Termi, standing up, "thank you for being so kind as to explain it to me, Mark. Sometime later I'll have to drop back and have another chat with you. There are a lot of aspects of your time on which I'd be glad to have some firsthand information."

He turned toward the door. MerkI also rose to go, but Mark put out a hand to detain him.

"Look here, MerkI," he said, "aren't you through with investigating me, now? I'd like to get out of here and see firsthand what this world of yours is like."

MerkI stuffed his pipe thoughtfully.

"As a matter of fact," he said. "you seem to be turning out to be a more complex character than we had expected, Mark, and we're not quite done yet. I imagine that in a week or more, you can get out and around."

"A week!"

"Possibly a week," answered Merkl. "Possibly less. And now I really must go." And, wrenching his arm from Mark's grasp, he turned and was through the door before Mark could think of anything more to say.

Mark jumped to the door behind him, and flung it open. But there was nothing to be seen except a small sort of flying ship rising from the grass just outside the building. Defeated, Mark returned to the interior of the bungalow.

The week passed, leaving Mark with food for thought. The bungalow was supplied with books of the Twenty-second Century type, but, on close inspection, Mark was unable to find one that he had not read before. So he spent his time mostly on the roof of the building, enjoying the sunlight and pondering the reception that he was receiving in this world of the future.

It was not until the week was nearly over that he was able to put his finger on the oddness of his situation—the feeling that had been bothering him ever since his arrival.

It had to do with the reactions exhibited by Merkl, Termi, and the race they represented- Subconsciously, Mark had expected these men of the future to be, if

anything, supremely sure of themselves and their actions. And it was a lack of this sureness that he seemed to notice in the two men he had met so far.

He had assumed from the completeness of the building in which he found himself and the casual attitude of Merki that they had been completely prepared for his arrival. Consequently, he had reasoned that there would be little fuss and bother about the investigation to which they insisted on submitting him. Instead, there seemed to be a great deal- It was puzzling.

Consequently, when Merki next returned, at the end of the week, Mark was determined to pin him down on the matter of his further seclusion.

"Look here, Merki!" he said. "I'm not questioning your right to take adequate defensive measures against whatever inimical hosts my mind or body may be harboring, but you can't keep me shut up like this with nothing to do. I'll go crazy. Man, I'm human, too."

For some reason Mark's words seemed to catch the other completely off balance. He continued to stand facing the visitor from time, with his usual smile and puffing with his usual serenity on his pipe. But otherwise it was exactly as if a switch in his mind had been clicked off. He stood, staring at Mark for such a long time that Mark grew alarmed, thinking that the man had been struck by some sudden strange paralysis. Then, just as suddenly, he came out of it.

"You must stay here," he said. "It is impossible for you to go out right now."

"But—" cried Mark.

"I'm sorry," said Merki, and turning on his heels, fairly ran out the door to his waiting flier.

Mark, puzzled and angry, paced the bungalow after Merki had left. He had no longer any doubt that he was being deliberately cut off from the world of the

future. Why, he wondered. What on earth could be so wrong with him that he was not allowed even a close-up glimpse of the cities he could see from the roof? And out of his frustration, and the temper-

wearing pressure of nearly two weeks' enforced idleness, he formed a plan.

That night he crept up on the roof, being careful to allow no light to show. A half-insane plan had formed in his head. They had warned him against going out of the building, but the front door was unlocked. He assumed that if they expected him to leave against orders, they would not expect him to go to the trouble of dropping off one side of the roof, rather than walking directly out the door. At any rate, he would chance it.

He slithered over the roof's low railing, hung by his hands for a second, and then released his grip. He fell, but not hard, and after rolling over a couple of times in the soft grass, lay still and waited.

There was no alarm. After a while, he got to his feet and moved softly off through the night to where the nearest city gleamed against the night sky.

He had estimated that the city was some eight or ten miles away, but after trudging for three or four minutes, he was surprised to see that the glow of its lights was considerably stronger, so that it appeared to light up half of the sky. Cautiously he slowed his pace, but the glow increased with such rapidity that he finally had to drop into the grass for fear of being seen outlined against the sky.

He crept forward. There was a small hillock in his way, and for a moment this blacked out sight of the city. Then, he reached the top of it, and looked over. The glare hit him full in the face and he gave a sudden cry of animal fear.

For the city was only a model.

For a second, he lay staring at it. And then he had

jumped to his feet and was running down upon it. Its miniature buildings lowered to his chest, and the tiny streets were just wide enough for him to walk through. Unbelievingly, he ran his fingers over the structures. They were complete in every detail; little masterpieces of imitation. But it was not just that that set his mind reeling.

It was the fact that every one was a model of some building in his home town. Each one was a replica of a structure he had seen and known. Not one was unfamiliar.

Trembling, he lifted his eyes from the city. Beyond it trembled a shimmering haze on which his eyes refused to tocus. Wonderingly, he moved toward it.

It hung, like a curtain of mist, just beyond the farther limits of the city. He strode up to it, stood in front of it, and cautiously extended his hands out

and into it.

It gave without resistance and his hands plunged through, disappearing from sight. With a wordless cry, he jerked them back and looked at them in the reflected light of the city. They were whole and good. He stood for a second more, gathering his nerve, and then, taking a deep breath, walked through the curtain.

His feet passed from soft turf to solid surface, the mist thinned before his eyes. He brushed the last of it away with one hand and saw—desolation.

He stood on a street where giants might have walked. And on either side towered buildings. Not miniatures, these, but mighty edifices that towered up until they were lost to sight in the night sky. But there was no light here, and no movement. The fact was written on the dust of the street, in the blank and staring windows of the buildings.

The city was deserted.

Fear returned to Mark Toren with redoubled force. He felt lost and insignificant, like an insect upon the

windowpane of eternity, about to be squashed by the thumb of a god. And he burst into wild, unreasoning flight down the street.

After some distance, he obeyed the impulse to hide, and darted into the open doorway of one of the buildings.

"Greetings!" boomed a deep voice.

He leaped backward in sheer panic to the street outside. The voice ceased. He turned and darted wildly for another doorway and slipped inside.

"Greetings!" boomed a voice, again.

He took a step backward, but this time curiosity in part conquered fear, so that he stayed where he was, flattened against a wall, in the shadows.

And the voice went on talking. Only this time he realized that the words were not impacts of sound on his ears, but welled up unbidden, within his mind.

"Greetings, visitor," came the words. "From wherever you have come, no matter what far-flung starbom world may be your home, greetings. You stand at the birthplace of the human race.

"This was our breeding place—this earth. Here we lifted our heads from the earth. Here we stood upright and walked. Here we grew and reached out to the stars. And here we have left our memorial of the last men to be planet-bound. Look about you and see. The heritage of the human race is here.

"Now we, the last men to be planet-bound, have finished our memorial and go to Join our brothers between the stars. We do not go to some home, for we will have no other home. We have passed beyond the need of home, and all the reaches of stellar space are the same to us.

"For it was never ordained that man should cling to the smalt bodies of planets when the endless re-gions of the ether are his to wander in, as a bird might wander in the sky, winged and armored by the power of his mind.

94 Gordon R Dickwn

"So, to you, visitor, greetings Look on the works of man, his buildings, his machines, and the creatures of his machines All this he has left, as vou will one day leave vour works and all that your hands have wrought for the greater freedom that comes between the stars "

The voice ceased, and Mark turned from the door-wav, into the moonlit street again—and stopped Wait-ing for him, rank on silent rank were Merki and Termi, and others like them, although the others glinted, gaunt and bright in the moonlight without the kindness of artificial flesh to cover their metal bones They said nothing, and their eyes glittered on him And Mark knew that he should feel frightened, but the voice inside of the building had drained fear from him and he felt only pity for the ones before him

"So," he said, fmallv, "you are the creatures of the machines "

"Yes " The answer came like a sighing wind from the crowd

"And I am a man," said Mark The pity inside him welled up and he asked gently "What were you trying to do^ What did you hope to learn from me^"

"We were trying to leam life," answered Merki for them all "We are Earthbound because, while we can think, we have no imagination Mans imagination has taken him between the stars. We thought if we could learn to go back to the time when Man was stilt learning, we could learn, too "

"But," said Mark, "you could not use my machine unless you had imagination The use of psycho-mechanics requires it " They did not answer

'But why didn't vou just come out directly and a&k me7" asked Mark "And why did you hide all this"—and his arm swept out to indicate the buildings—"h-om me^"

THE FRIENDLY MAN 95

'Because we hate you," said Merki unemotionally "You are something we can never be and so we hate you "

"But you haven t harmed me—" began Mark, be wildered And then the realization struck him "You cannot harm me,' he said

"We cannot harm you," said Merk! "Therefore we hate you "

There was a long silence

"I'm sorry," whispered Mark, "but I can't do any- thing for vou "

"No." said Merki, "you can do nothing for us And we can learn nothing from you The building in which you staved was a gigantic scanner We have analyzed you We have read you like a book and we do not understand you We have taken your machine to pieces—down to its component atoms—and put it back together again But we cannot operate it Now, we only want you to leave." He lifted his hand the crowd parted, and Mark saw his time machine stand- ing in the midst of them

"We cannot travel in time/' continued Merki, "but there are machines here which can block off time from our period to yours. We will use them when vou are gone We have learned from your visit that it is not a good thing for your kind to meet ours Now.

go "
Mark stepped forward as if in a dream and walked

to his machine down the waiting corridor of the friendly men Without a word, he stepped inside it and lifted his hand to the controls Then, some inex- plicable emotion made him turn, and he looked once more at Merki, who was standing beside him Be- neath his feet, the generators began to warm up with a humming sound

"Robot," said Mark, almost wondenngly, staring at Merki

The mists of a vanishing time began to swirl up between them. Through the haze he saw the plastic face of the other strangely distorted.

"Don't curse me so!" cried the Hendiv man.

MX Knows Best

he barroom seemed to tilt a little as he walked

The
in.

"Let's get drunk, Dugie," said Alien Morg, climb-

ing onto a bar stool.

"This time in the morning?" Dugie peered at him from behind the bar, his smooth, round, young-looking face seeming to bob like a balloon in the dimness. "At ten AM? What kind of ar bad decision did you get?"

"Give me a drink, Dugie," said Alien. The round face advanced and peered at him.

"You been drinking it up already. Maybe I should punch for a decision on eighty-sixing you."

"Give me a drink," said Alien. And then the whole room swung crazily, the ceiling came down in front of his eyes and there was a blank space for a while.

He came to in one of the private lounges, and Gait

Boiver was there.

"Feel better now?" Gait asked.
"Where'd you come from?" asked Alien.
"Dugie called me. He'd have sent you home, but he

97

98 Gordon R Dickwn

didn t know where vour apartment is What's all this business about an ax^"

"Ax^" With great effort, Alien raised his head and looked past Gait's long. friendly horse face to the rest of the lounge There was no ax in sight He let his head drop back wearily "I must have lost it, some-place "

"You're lucky Dugie s been checking One place you were in last night almost put in a not call You said you were going to chop up MX "

"Did P"

"You did "

Silence descended on the lounge After a while, Alien said, "Connie took off "

"Oh^" said Gait He had been sitting still, shaggy and gaunt, just waiting by the side of the couch on which Alien was stretched out

"We were kidding one night 1 said we ought to punch for a decision before getting married She took me up on it

"WelP" asked Gait, after a minute

"Negative She took off No forwarding address "

"When was this7" asked Gait

Alien shrugged, gazing at the ceiling of the lounge with the bitter taste of anti-alcohol in his mouth

"Yesterday," he said, " or the night before "

"Your law office says you haven't been down in a week "

"Then it's a week," said Alien, expressionlessly

Gait consideied him

"Want to do some more drinking7'

"No," said Alien "I want my ax back "

"The man says it when he's sober

"That's right," agreed Alien "the man says it when he's sober "

Gait reached out and gripped his shouldei

"Hang on a little while, buddy," he ->aid "I ve got something better for you than an ax "

MX KNOWS BESI 99

It took some twenty-eight hours, to rebuild Alien Morg into a fair specimen of a sober human being again Four o'clock of the following afternoon found him and Gait on Gait's airfoil platform, fiving north out of the city to see some people

"How far is it7" asked Alien, fitting his lean body comfortably into one of the soft chairs of the platform

"About forty miles," answered Gait, squinting at the horizon with the balance wheel between his big hands Alien looked at him

"How come vou never told me about these people before7"

"Before," said Gait, "you may not have liked MX, and you may have disliked people taking its deci-sions for gospel—but were you ready to do some-thing aboutit7"

"No, I guess not," said Alien

"There vou are "

The platform tilted and slid off in a slightly new, more northwesterly direction

"Who are they, anyway7 Can you tell me that now7" asked Alien

"You know them It's Jasper Aneurme, his sister Leta and someone else "

Alien frowned, his thin, rather good-looking face becoming even more intense than usual He re-

membered the Aneunnes They had cropped up more than once at parties with Gait, several years back He had not seen them since Jasper was a silver-haired, upright man of the sort that seems to become abruptly handsome in late middle age Leta, who must be a good twenty years or more her brother's junior, had not been unusually good-looking, but rather striking in her own way Alien had been engaged to some other girl—not Connie—at that time, but he remembered being strangely and almost com-

pulsively attracted to Leta, on the few occasions of their meetings. There was a sort of lonely, destined air about her.

"How long," asked Alien, "have you belonged to this bunch?"

"Oh," said Gait. "Almost ten years."

"I've known you fifteen."

Gait nodded "But it wasn't just my secret."

"No," agreed Alien- "Still, ten years—all the while you've been hacking away as a trial lawyer, just like me at my contracts, and I never took you for a revolutionary."

"I'm not," said Gait.

"Aren't you?" said Alien, and laughed a little bitterly. "Try to take MX from the people who've given up making up their own minds, and see. The dope addict loves his drugs; the drinker loves his booze."

"Say instead," said Gait, "they can't do without them."

"Easy," said Gait, soothingly. "Easy. It's a big problem, but just a problem. That's all."

"Just a problem? How does that thing go?" demanded Alien. "Our fathers in their time sowed dragon's teeth ..."

". . . Our children know and suffer armed men," finished Gait.

They flew north and a little bit west past Scarborough. Tendale, and Cooper's City. They passed New Berlin and veered west again toward a little suburb called Kingsdale. There they came down on the parking pad of a private living area.

The drapes were pulled back on the living room beside the pad and a tall young woman with brown hair and a slim, intelligent face was waiting for them. The whispering air current of the wall cooled Alien's face for a moment as he stepped through the wall;

then he was face to face with Leta Aneurine once more.

"Leta," said Gait. "You remember Alien."

"Very well," she said. She gave him a slim, firm hand and Alien found himself holding on to it for a short second with real thankfulness. After the desert heat and sun of Connie, this was cool water.

"I remember too." he said.

"Then I'm flattered," she answered, and turned to Gait. "Jasper and Frank are in the den."

"I'll go talk to them," said Gait. "You stay here with Leta, will you Alien?" And he stalked oft, disappearing through a wall of screen light in the back of the room.

"And what makes Gait bring you out at last to see us?" asked Leta, turning back to Alien.

"Well . . ." He hesitated, but her perception was quick.

"Oh, I see," she said. "You're one of our sudden converts and I shouldn't ask. Would you like a drink—even if it's just to balance politely in your hand?"

He smiled, and found his old liking for her coming back.

"Thanks," he said, and trailed her across the room to a dispenser cabinet.

"What'll it be, now?" She opened the cabinet. A concealed rainbow of light played across the interior and a miniature, three-dimensional representation of his host's liquor supply revolved slowly for his inspection. Alien thought of the week just past with something like a shudder.

"Beer," he said, "light and cold."

"And in a stein," she said. She pressed appropriate buttons and handed it to him, taking a small glass of sherry for herself.

"Who's Frank?" he asked,

She led the way back to some easy chairs across

the room. "Frank Campanelli. He's our technical expert."

"Technical expert?"

She smiled at him. "Jasper'11 tell you. And how's business in court these days?"

"You've got me confused with Gait. I just write contracts—a sort of glorified clerk." He gazed at her curiously. "You know, I never did know what you do."

"I write poetry. Don't laugh," she added gravely, "I make a great deal of money at it. I do graded stories in poetic imagery for the school-age child. How are contracts, then?"

"Fine."

"Then it's woman trouble."

He started. "How do you know?"

"Why, I was born an expert, being female. And received the normal twenty years or so of postgraduate instruction customary for girls." She bit her lip. "Including the instincts and habit of poking my nose into what's probably none of my business. I'm sorry."

"It's nothing." He shrugged. "We punched for a decision on getting married. MX said no ... and she took it to heart."

Leta did not answer for a second. She seemed to be thinking,

"You know," she said, suddenly. "If I were Frank, or Jasper—or Gait, even, I wouldn't trust you."

He was both shocked and wounded. He stared at her in astonishment.

"Why not?" he challenged.

"You might change back, just as suddenly as you changed to." But she looked at him almost appealingly as she said it, as if begging him not to blame her for a judgment she couldn't help.

"What do you mean, suddenly?" he said. "Why, I've felt this way for years."

"But you've never done anything about it until now."

"What's that got to do with it?"

She made a defensive, apologetic gesture with one hand. as if warding off a blow.

"Well, perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps you're just not a leader."

"And you, I see," he said harshly, "are one of those women with a high 10 and nothing else, who justify themselves by taking jabs at every man they come in contact with."

The sudden storm of their antagonism blew itself out into silence. She had turned her head away, and it was not until he got up and went around to face her that he saw there were tears on her cheeks.

"You started it," he said.

"Yes," she said. "It's my fault."

He would have taken the one step that would have brought him to her, but at that moment Gait stuck his head through the light wall.

"Come on," he ordered, briefly; and disappeared again. Alien turned back to fceta and saw her using a handkerchief to repair damages'.

"Go ahead," she said. "I'll be along in a minute."

A little reluctantly, Alien turned and went. Stepping through the light wall, he found himself in a narrow hallway that led to a miniature garden and fishpond. Beyond the garden, three men sat about a table in a room.

"Oh, here he is," Gait said as Alien came in. "Alien, you know Jasper. This is Frank Campanelli."

Frank was a dark little rubber ball of a man, about Jasper's age, or possibly younger; Leta's brother did not look his years. Now he nodded his silver hair at Alien. "Hello, Alien."

"Hello," answered Alien. He shook hands with Frank Campanelli, who had risen from his seat and cx-

tended a hand as stubby and firm as the rest of his body.

"Sit down," said Jasper. "Alien, Gait knows you well and of course I've met you a number of times. But you're a complete stranger to Frank. Mind if he asks a few questions?"

"Charge ahead," said Alien.

"What're you after?" asked Frank.

The question was so abrupt as to be discourteous, and the short man made no attempt to soften it, either by manner or phrasing. Alien took his time about lighting a cigarette.

"I'd like to put MX out of business," he said.

"How long do you think you'll feel that way?"

"Until MX is out of business," said Alien. "Look here—"

"Why do you think it ought to be put out of business?"

"Because ninety percent of the human race has lost the guts to make up their own minds for themselves," said Alien. "Why do you think it ought to be put out of business?"

"We'll get to me later," said Frank. "How do you think we ought to go about doing it?"

"Well," said Alien, "I was going to try it with an ax. Maybe you've got a better idea. Have you?"

Frank didn't answer him. He turned to Jasper.

"I don't like it," he said. "I don't like anything about it. People who heat up fast can cool off fast."

"Frank," replied Jasper, calmly, "Gait tells us Alien here's been ten years coming to this."

"Why didn't he come sooner?"

"You can't have it both ways, Frank," said Jasper. "Either Alien's too fast to anger, or too slow, but not both. For my part"—he gave Alien a friendly smile—"I think he's just about right in matter of speed."

"Why," asked Alien softly, "all the fuss?"

"Because," snapped Frank, turning on him, "this is no game. This is serious business—"

"Oh, there you are, Leta," interrupted Jasper. "Come in and sit down with us. You remember Alien Morg, don't you?"

"I've just been talking to him," she said, taking one of the chairs at the table. "And I see Frank's been talking at him."

"Seriously, though," went on Jasper, quickly, before Frank could open his mouth again, "Frank is quite right. Most people have no idea what's been done to MX and what it's done to people."

"I can see what it's done to people," said Alien, unable to keep his eyes from straying to Leta. She sat with her eyes on her brother, a little abstracted, as if listening partially to her own inner thought, and did not glance at Alien.

"But do you realize the degree of it?" asked Jasper, leaning a little forward across the table. "Do you realize how it's become something that strikes at the very heart of the concept of individual freedom? The very thing that makes an individual in our society is his ability and preference for making his own decisions."

The silver-haired man's tone of voice was demanding in its claim upon Alien's attention. Reluctantly,

he withdrew his eyes from Leta and looked at her brother.

"I know that," he said. "Doesn't everybody? It's obvious."

"Obvious, but how many people take it for granted just because of that? You know, the theory behind MX was a fine one. Remember reading about it in school? A master device, a joining of the census records with the economic integration computer and the new—they were new then—psychologic computation methods. All in one machine. A public service. Code your name and what other personal informa-

tion MX requested and ask your question. 'Should 'I buy myself a new living area now, or next year?' MX integrated the problem and came up with an answer to the best of its ability."

"To ihe best of its ability!" echoed Alien, a little bitterly.

"Exactly—to the best ot its ability." Jasper's eyes gleamed darkly in his face under the silver hair. "That was the theory; ninety percent correct, ninety percent of the time, for ninety percent of the cases concerned. There, you see, was the illusion of freedom. No one, of course, would commit his life to the decisions of a machine which was only ninety percent accurate. Or so they thought. They forgot the perniciousness of habit—of the habit of having decisions made for you."

"The point is," said Gait, "people have been comforting themselves with a sense of freedom from MX that doesn't actually exist. As a practical matter, Alien, not ninety, but almost a hunded percent of the people use and obey MX a hundred percent of the time."

"Is it really that much?" asked Alien.

"That much."

"But the bad decisions—"

"They're explained away," said Jasper. "What does a man say when a decision turns out bad—say MX decides in favor of a man buying a platform now, instead of later? And the next day, with the new platform, he has an accident."

Alien nodded.

"I know," he said. "He says that maybe the computation figured a more serious accident if the machine was gotten later, or some such excuse."

"That's it!" The eyes in Gait's long face seemed to pounce like a hawk. "Maybe MX knows best!"

There was a little silence.

"A new god," said Alien, thoughtfully.

"A new god," said Gait. "And a jealous god."

Leta got up from her chair. Outside, in the garden, the light was fading.

"Time for dinner," she said. "I'll go see about it." She looked across the table into Alien's eyes. "You'll be staying for the evening."

"Thank you," said Alien, and watched her leave the room-
After dinner, he managed to corner her on a little balcony overlooking that same garden with the fish-pond. He felt a strange necessity to talk to her fur-ther, to understand her. It was as if an entirely new sort of curiosity had laid hold of him, and grew with the mounting intimacy of their talk.

"Tell me one thing," he asked, after a while. "Are you in this because of your brother, or because you feel strongly about MX, yourself?"

She looked up at his face in the dim light of the shadowed balcony.

"Because I feel strongly about MX," she said.

"I see," he answered. He was oddly disappointed and she sensed it.

"You don't like fanatic females, is that it?" The tone was light, but it quavered betrayingly on the last word. He looked down at her, and all at once her helplessness reached through to him; here, he felt flooded with tenderness toward her.

"You're not a fanatic female," he said.

Suddenly, like someone who at last surrenders com-pletely, she leaned against him. He put his arms around her. She murmured against him and he felt the warmth of her breath through his shirt.

"I don't know ... I don't know . . ." she whispered. "I know this is right, but I want to live a normal life, too."

He put his head down to kiss her, but she avoided him.

"No. Please don't," she murmured. "Please."

"Why not?"

"It's just that it's too soon yet. I couldn't help

thinking of you as on the rebound."

"You don't trust me," he said, bitterly.

She didn't answer. He put a finger under her chin and forced it upward so that she had to look at him.

"You don't trust me," he repeated.

Her face showed the pain in her.

"Oh, Alien!" she said, miserably. Brutally, he let her go and stepped away.

"Wait, Alien!" she cried behind him. "I don't care about me. It's Jasper and the others."

"Why," he demanded, turning back, "what do you think I'd do to them? Snitch to MX on them?"

She did not answer. With a sudden sense of fury and shock, he stared at her.

"You do think that'"

"Oh, Alien! Alien, darling"—she reached out to him, but he stepped back from her—"it's just that you aren't settled, you aren't stable . . ."

But he was burning with anger and determined to punish her.

"Thanks for letting me know about it," he said, and left her.

He managed to cooi down as he returned through the several rooms and hallways that separated him from the sitting room where the others were having their after-dinner coffee. But it seemed he came in on an argument here. too; the voices of Gait and Frank ceased abruptly as he entered; and all three men looked up at him from their chairs with the afterwash of strained emotion on their faces.

"What's up?" he asked, taking a cup of coffee from the dispenser and sitting down in a chair that was grouped with theirs-

MX KNOWS BEST

109

"Nothing," said Gait, tightly. "Frank thinks we're going a little too fast with you, that's all."

Alien met the other man's dark, hard eyes.

"That's his privilege," he said lightly.

"Perhaps," said Gait, his tone smoothing out. "At any rate, it's beside the point, because Jasper and I outvoted him. Now, Alien, I want you to listen with an open mind to what Jasper and Frank have to tell you, because it's the result of years of work."

Alien looked at him a little curiously, but Gait's long face was heavy with seriousness.

"Go ahead," said Alien, nodding.

Jasper cleared his throat, and Alien turned to look at him. The tension, the very feverishness that had been in the silver-haired man was gone. He spoke with the easiness of an experienced professor ad-
? dressing his seminar.

"I'm the social expert in this business, Alien," he said. "It's been my job to study and understand all the change and effect which MX has caused in our human society during the last fifty years." He put his coffee cup down on the arm of his chair and leaned forward.

"You know"—he tapped with one slim finger on the arm of the chair—"after the last shouting and drum-playing was over that celebrated the uniting of this world into a single social unit, the problems really came along. Personal problems, Alien. People were unsure of how they were supposed to act and react in this new world they suddenly had. And that's what MX grew out of—a sort of super-advisory service that was set up at that time."

Alien frowned.

"It's a fact." Jasper nodded emphatically. "There actually was a bureau with branches in every community to answer questions; you can look it up for yourself in the history books if you want to. Anvwav, of course it got more and more mechanized, or

automationized. if you like that word better, until they finally conceived of MX as a final answer to the problem. You know the rest of it—how people became more and more dependent on it. But what most people don't realize is the logical basis for the development."

"Logic?" echoed Alien. "I don't see any logic in it at all. It's just plain mental laziness."

"No, no," said Jasper, quite earnestly. "There's the-habit angle, to be sure, but there had to be something beneath and before that. There's a strong, original, logical reason for a man trusting MX's decisions instead of his own. It's this same business of percentages. MX, a man knows, is right ninety percent of the time, on the average. And he asks himself if he can do as well on his own. Usually, he believes he can't."

Alien frowned again. "But it's a gamble," he said. "Anyone knows that. You might believe that and still happen to fall into the ten percent bad answer section regularly."

Jasper nodded.

"Yes," he said. "But still, that's the logic we're up against. And on its own ground it's unbeatable, because it presupposes infallibility on MX's part. In other words, that ninety percent is something everybody thinks they can count on. But if we can destroy that faith, and replace it with a healthy attitude of doubt, we'll have people regaining their emotional integrity and their emotional balance."

"Clear enough." Alien looked across at him. "How do we go about it?"

Jasper smiled calmly.

"We're going to gimmick MX," he said. "We're going to cheat most outrageously in a good cause to remind people that a machine—even a machine like MX—can be taken advantage of by a human being. People are going to start getting some surprising answers to their questions, answers that will turn

out to be dead wrong. And sometime after that our gimmicks will be discovered."

Alien was slightly puzzled.

"Sorry," he said, "but I don't see—"

"Why," said Gait, "a man who has been awakened to the possibility that MX can be gimmicked, will have a job on his hands recovering his blind faith in it. He'll say to himself, sure, they found thai gimmick, but suppose there's others they haven't found? Suppose somebody's rigged it somehow, someplace else, for his own advantage?"

"Ah," said Alien, slowly. "I see."

"Yes." Jasper nodded at him. "Simple, crude, and effective."

"How's it to be done?"

Jasper did not answer. He turned his head to look at the short man, his friend.

"Frank . . ." he said.

Frank looked back at him stonily.

"He could be the death of all of us," Frank said.

"We settled that," said Gait, a little sharply.

Alien felt anger stir in himt~

"Just what do you mean?" he'demanded. "I could be the death of all of you?"

"Alien, no offensc meant." Jasper spoke quickly,

soothingly- "You just don't know MX as well as we do."

"What's MX got to do with my giving you away?"

"I'll tell you!" Frank broke in with sudden savagery. "MX has the necessary parts to kill us off if it finds out about us'"

Alien stared at him.

"What kind of a bogeyman tale is this?"

"Bogeyman!" said Frank, and all but turned his back on them in disgust.

"No, Alien, it's true," said Gait. "Te!l him, Frank."

"Listen," said Frank, turning back, "this 's my

field; I know. What the men who set up MX wanted in the first place was a device to reckon the probability of one human action succeeding over another. Just that. They couldn't build an actual predicting machine for two reasons. One, nothing human hands could build and human minds conceive could possibly take all the factors into account. Two, there was always the possibility that some of the factors supplied to their device would be false, or falsely stated."

"All right." Alien was determined he would not back down an inch. He faced the shorter man. "What of it?"

"What of it? That's what MX was—just a probability computer- But then the human factor came into it. The more people leaned on MX decisions in their daily life, the more they wanted it to be more accurate, more omnipotent, more godlike. And then the changes began."

"What changes?"

"There've been a lot of them," growled Frank. "But there's only two that did real damage. Twenty-three years ago, what was called a balance factor got added. And nine years ago something called an implementation circuit."

He glared at Alien.

"The balance factor was an element added that allowed MX to compensate for the psychological profile of the person asking the question. It could compensate in the direction of what it assessed to be the real desire and good of the questioner. The implementation circuit—1 suppose even you know that most of our transportation devices, large production units, and automatic machinery are directed by MX?"

"I knew some were . . ." said Alien.

"Almost all. All right, this implementation circuit allows MX to make use of all the mechanical facilities it controls to implement its own decisions. And

finally, in order to make this addition workable, it was necessary to add one thing that should never have been built into MX."

"What?"

"A desire circuit." Frank looked at him with grim triumph. "MX was furnished with the need to try and make its decisions work out."

For some reason this statement was apparently expected to be a bombshell. Alien was merely puzzled.

"I don't get it," he said.

"You should," replied Frank. "It means we're all living under the thumb of a machine whose prime purpose is to have the world run in accordance with its own decisions."

Alien stared.

"What it means for us," added Gait, leaning forward, "is that MX will fight back at any attempts to damage it, or its prestige."

Alien sat back. Slowly he relaxed, and smiled a little, in spite of himself.

"Oh, now I—" he began-

"It's the truth," interrupted Gait.

"A machine can't be inimical." Alien looked at Gait. "It can't deliberately try to hurt you."

"How about an aerial torpedo with a seeker circuit that hunts down its target?"

"But the initial impulse had to come from a human decision—"

"So," broke in Frank, "did the implementation factor, with its desire circuit- That was MX's original impulse."

"Believe us, Alien," said Gait. "This is fact."

"How do you know it all?" demanded Alien. There was a little silence-

At last, Frank said harshly, "I designed the implementation circuit."

Alien looked at him. But the short man's face was

a mask of anger that blocked off any urge to sympa-
thy. Alien sighed.

"All right," he said. "I believe you. Now what?
How do you keep safe from iP"

"A mechanical device," said Jasper, "has its limi-
tations. It may be able to respond to an actual threat,
but it can't respond to a threat that's unexpressed."

"And the sense organs of MX are the coder pan-
els," said Gait. "Unless information reaches it through
that—about us. for example—it hasn't any way of
knowing we're dangerous to it."

"Then it's simple," said Alien. "Don't use the
panels."

"Exactly," said Jasper. "I haven't used them for
fourteen years, Frank for just about as long, and Gait
for eleven. And you mustn't either, Alien."

"I?" Alien smiled. "MX doesn't know I know you,
or anything about this."

Jasper shook his head.

"Have you any idea how many factors it's possible
for MX to take into account in making a decision?"
he asked.

"No idea," replied Alien, checrfuliv

"Well, it's something over half a million. All the
years we've been keeping scrupulously away from
the coder panels, we've still had to report on the
census, pay our taxes, make purchases in the food
and shopping centers, and maintain bank accounts.
MX has years of information on us, lying like un-
fused dynamite in the code punches on our cards and
waiting for the one pertinent fact that will show us
up for the threat we are to its existence-"

"But what could it tell from me?" asked Alien.

"We don't know," said Gait. "But the chance is too
riskv to take. Leave the panels alone, Alien. You
don't need them, anyway."

"No." Alien sighed. "That's true." He brightened

up. "Well, how about the rest of this? How about the
gimmick?"

The other two men turned to Frank, who looked at
them for a second, his dark eyes unmoving.

"No!" he said.

The word dropped like a stone into the pool of
waiting silence, sending little rings of emotion rip-

pling through the others.

"No!" echoed Jasper. "Why not?"

"Because it's too soon," said Frank. "I just met this man today. Let him wait for the details."

"I told you." said Gait, in the patient tones of a man who is repeating what he has already repeated many times before, "that I know him. That I trust him. That I vouch for him. Also, we need him—not in a few days, but right now. Things are almost finished."

"No," repeated Frank.

"Franks'—Jasper's voice brought the short man's head around—"you're wrong. You're usually right to be cautious, but this time you're wrong. If you won't tell him, / will."

"Then I wash my hands.of it." Frank stood up abruptly and, turning his back, strode across the room to rip back the drape hanging in front of the air wall. Beyond, the night sky and a full yellow moon, early and enormous just above the treetops, looked in on them. Frank stood, legs spread a little apart, staring out at it and not moving.

"Alien . . ." said Jasper, gently, and Alien turned his attention back to the silver-haired man, who opened a drawer in the arm of his chair and took out a tiny, dark object, like a miniature condenser, which he handed to Alien. Alien took it curiously, examining the small, black central body from which two short wires sprouted.

"There's only one part of itself where MX wouldn't be aware of someone working on it." said Jasper, "and that's the coder panels themselves. They're eas-

ity opened with a repairman's key. and in about forty seconds a trained man can open one, attach that little object you're holding, and reclose the panel. The spot where it attaches and its design make it almost indistinguishable from the ordinary factory assembly of a coder's innards. Even a trained repairman would have to be looking for it, to find it once it was attached."

"That's what you want me for?" asked Alien.

"We're about ready to start adding these things to the coder panels—not just here, but the world over. We've been making them by hand for eight years now, in thousands of little groups like this one. Now, we need every pair of hands we can get."

"What does it do?" asked Alien.

"It distorts the information coded on the panel. MX will receive false information from anyone using

the coder; as a result, it will hand out a false decision."

Alien nodded.

"I see," he said, slowly. "Yes, I see." His hand closed tightly over the little object, and slowly, he nodded.

There was a chance before Gait and Alien left that evening for Alien to snatch a few free minutes. Once more he went in search of Leta, and discovered her, finally, in her own room. She was dressed for bed and sitting on the railing of a small terrace outside her room, gazing at the same moon that had provided a focus for Frank's attention a short while earlier in the sitting room. Against the moonlight, in the filmy night-dress, she looked like some sad figure out of an old painting, all black and silvery gray. With a rush, all the hard emotions flowed out of Alien, like water from a broken cup, and he almost groped his way across the room toward her.

"Leta . . ." he said.

She rose and clung to him. For a minute, thev said

nothing, just held on to each other. After a little while, he begged her to come away with him.
". . . you don't want this. It isn't your life."
She pressed herself tightly against him.
"But it is," she said. "You can't live with something for fifteen years like this and not have it be vour life."

"That's not true," he answered. "It was Jasper's choice, but not yours. You didn't pick this."

"That doesn't make any difference."

"You want to come with me, don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she cried. "I don't know!"

"Yes, you do."

She raised her face to look at him.

"Would you run out. Alien?"

"I?" he said, surprised. "But I don't mean that you should run out. All I mean is for you to come away from here to where you can lead your own life. I'm going through with this, of course. I want to."

"But you want me, too," she said.

"Well, why not?" he demanded. "Is there any reason why I can't have both?" ^

There was a noise from the doorway of the bedroom. They turned. Frank stood just inside the shadow of the aperture, his face in shadow.

"Jasper wants to see you, Leta," he said. His voice was perfectly even.

"Oh—" she gasped. "Excuse me." She turned and went swiftly out the door. Frank stepped aside to let her pass. Then he walked toward Alien.

"You needn't apologize," Alien said grimly.

"I wasn't going to." Frank had emerged into the moonlight on the terrace- He looked upward at Al-ien's face. "Leave Leta alone," he said.

Alien considered him. "Why?"

"A number of reasons." Frank's moonlight-pale face had no expression. "The best is that I know you by

reputation—from Gait and others. You can't be

trusted."

Alien felt the familiar stir of anger, boiling like some slow. heavy liquid inside him.

"Can't be trusted . . . how?" he asked, softly.

"In any way," answered Frank, quite calmly. "That was why I didn't want to tell you about the gim-micks downstairs. You're not the man to belong to an organization, Morg. You're an egoist; and you'll put yourself first. You'd betray any of us—alt of us—if the choice was right."

"And you," replied Alien, brutally, "are in love

with Leta."

Frank did not stir, or change his unmoving coun-tenance.

"Of course," he said. "But that doesn't come into

it."

"I think it does."

"What you think," went on Frank, easily, "is of no importance whatsoever. I've been forced into risking my life and my work on you. I won't risk the lives of the people I love. And if you keep after Leta, the time'll come when you'll put the rest of us on the auction block to buy what you want with her."

Alien grinned with rage. He was seething up inside into boiling fury.

"So what?" he asked.

"So stay away from her," continued Frank. "If you don't, I'll kill you." He reached into his shirt, took

his hand out again, and there was a small, snapping sound. The long, thin blade of a knife displayed itself in the moonlight. Alien made an involuntary little sound and took a step backward. "Oh, not with this . . . and not now," said Frank. "1 just wanted to show you I meant what I said. I will kill you, one way or another, even if it costs me my own life for doing it." He folded the knife and put it back into his shirt.

"Gait's waiting for you at the pad," he said.

MX KNOWS BEST 119

He turned and left. Alien stared after his small, blocky figure as it disappeared down the hall. After a moment, he followed.

Gait was waiting for him, at the landing pad.

"Oh, here vou are," he said, a little impatiently, as if he had been waiting for some lime. "Come on. It's late enough already and I have to be in court early tomorrow."

He led the way to the platform, and they took off.

It was a quiet ride back to the city. Alien was thinking, and Gait evidently had his mind on the case he was to plead the next day. When they reached the city transportation center and left the platform for separate cabs. Alien, instead of going directly home to his apartment, rode to a little neighborhood bar for a cup of coffee.

He was in an incredibly disturbed state of mind. Great rewards and great penalties juggled themselves in his mind. On the surface, it was fantastic that he should feel this deeply about a situation into which he had rather unwillingly fallen. But there was Leta. who had so strangely and so quickly reached through to him, and for whom he felt what he was convinced was, for the first time, a real and actual love.

The short, thick-bodied Frank Campanelli, on the other hand . . , The sharp crystals of a genuine hatred were growing in the nutrient solution of Alien's resentment toward the man. The two emotions built on each other, even while Alien cautioned himself to go slowly, go carefully, so as not to be swept away by the swift current of his own turbulent feelings.

In his mind he resolved a cold, analytical appraisal of the situation. Leta was the product of her environment. Fifteen years of devotion to a common purpose had bonded their two lives together. There seemed no way to destroy that bond without destroying at

120 Gordon R. Dickson

least one of the parties to it, and Alien—he thought to himself with a touch of self-righteousness—unlike Frank, could not seriously consider murdering another man.

Alien shoved his coffee cup angrily from him. He was furious at the particularly self-defeating structure of the problem. On the one hand, Leta; on the other, Frank. And over all, the looming greatness of the job of sabotage they were all committed to, together.

Like a sharp breaking-in of light on some dark place, the answer dissolved the obscurity of the situation. Of course! Once the sabotage had been committed, once their work had been discovered in millions of coder panels and the general population had begun to wonder how long they had been there, had begun to question and doubt MX, speculating on whether there might still be other, more secret gimmicks concealed in it—then there would be no more work to link Frank and Leta together. Then Alien would face no more problem.

Or would he? The sudden doubt sprang thornily upright in his mind. Fifteen years were a great many years to live and work together. How strong could the habit of association grow, nourished by the winters, springs, and summers of all those years? After the job was done, would the ghost of it still stand in the moonlight, a knife in its hand, barring Alien's way to Leta?

There was a coder panel in a booth across the room. Alien half-rose before he remembered, and sat down with a curse on his tongue. Of course, he couldn't use it now. But this was exactly the kind of question that MX was set up so beautifully to render a decision on. Disgustedly, Alien reached for his coffee cup, saw what he was about to do, and changed the motion of his hand to punch for a drink.

Yesterday he had thought that he would never be able to look at an alcoholic beverage with enjoyment again. But the Scotch and soda he punched for tasted clean and comforting when it came. And the quick glow, following shortly after it was down, took the unyielding edge off his disappointment.

He ordered another and sipped it. Already his mind was bouncing back from the block of the prohibition he had agreed to. To be sure, only a fool would do what he had almost done—go up, punch out the problem, giving his own name, Leta's and Frank's, and request a decision on the possibility of what he wished. But MX had been set up to handle theoretical problems, too. And what could be dangerous about a theoretical problem posed by an anonymous questioner?

How to phrase it? Alien revolved ideas in his mind, finished his drink and punched another. Then, with this half-completed, he got up and went over to the booth housing the coder panel.

Theoretical, he coded on the simple keyboard all children learned in school nowadays. Then he stated the problem in general terms, giving fictitious names for himself, Leta, and Frank.

MX was slow answering, slower than he ever remembered it being. And then, when the panel above the keyboard did light up, the words upon it were not what he had expected.

Questioner to furnish additional data on these two additional points.

1. What is the nature of the work on which the older man and the girl have been engaged for the fifteen years stated?

2. Did the younger man referred to cease relationships recently with another girl or woman not mentioned, as a result of a decision by MX?

122 Gordon R Dickwn

For a few seconds, Alien did not move. Then, very quietly, leaving the questions still on the screen, he stepped back and out of the booth. Quietly, he closed the door, and quietly, he walked out of the bar. Instinctively, his legs took him at a fast pace away down the nighttime street.

So, MX perhaps had been able to guess his identity from the situation in his questions. Who would have thought its knowledge and its system to be so fantastically extensive? But that would be the most it could do. There had been no clue to Leta or Frank in what he said. As far as MX could know, they might be any two people, any two people anywhere in the world. Certainly there could be no record of them among the list of people MX would have of those whom he had had dealings with before.

As he went homeward, his spirits started to rise and after a while he found himself whistling. What he needed, he told himself firmly, was a good night's sleep. In the morning, things would be different.

But MX was a tireless creature, and under the desire circuit it was not created to leave a problem unsolved. Click, click, click, went MX. In the endless cells and banks of its structure, little lights glowed, little impulses of current shot through. The problem was investigated, a picture built, an answer found.

From a slot in a pane! overlooking a desk where a light glowed, five cards shot out to a wire basket. The bottom one glanced off an edge of the basket and all five slid out to lie under the soft glow of the light above.

In a couple of widely separated apartments in the city outside, wiring shorted and slow fires began to smolder behind bedroom walls. And northwest of

the city, a great automatic freight transport subtly altered its blind, obedient course through the skies, so aiming itself toward a living area in a small sub-

urb called Kingsdale. Its speed when it hit would be upwards of eight hundred miles an hour.

And under the light, the first five cards lay together on the table m a little heap.

Morg, James Alien. CANCELLED
Bolver, Gait Winton Harvey. CANCELLED
Aneurme, Jasper Renee. CANCELLED
Aneurine, Leia Mane. CANCELLED
Campanelh. Frank Thomas. CANCELLED

The Quarry

f^TJe went in under here," said the older of the

JL JLtwo boys. "I saw him."

"He couldn't get under a rock like that, Jix," the other said. "He's too big."

"But he's awful skinny," said Jix. "Raby, you go around the other side and I'll call him. If he comes out your way, you hold him until I get there." Raby went off, and Jix bent down the opening. "Mr. Johnson!" he called. "Come on out, Mr. Johnson! It's only us."

Under the rock William Johnson twitched convulsively and squirmed deeper into the mold-smelling earth. He pressed his mouth to it, its grittiness against his teeth, to hide the sound of his breathing. Hollowed and drawn out between earth and rock, Jix's voice reached down to him again.

"Mr. Johnson, you come out now. If you don't come out, I'll have to come in and get you."

William did not move. Then, after a long, breath-held moment, he heard the rattle and scrape of a body crawling toward him under the rock. He made a high, squeaking sound in his throat and suddenly threw himself away from the approaching sound,

scrabbling back and up through the loose earth to the far underside of the rock. The light of day broke suddenly in on him, and he saw the far overhanging edge of the rock. Then he was out from under it, into the grass and the sun. He jerked to his feet, ready to run, and then two slim arms caught and held him.

"Jix!" cried the voice of Raby, triumphant. "I got him! I got him here!"

There was the sound from under the rock behind him and a second later Jix came around to stand before Johnson. Dirt had refused to cling to Jix's shimmering shorts and tunic. He stood in front of William, his head about shoulder-high on the man, his face as beautiful as a profile on a cameo, sad and concerned.

"Mr. Johnson." he said, "why do you run off like that?'Don't you know how easy it is for you to get hurt? We've told you and told you, Mr. Johnson."

William did not answer. He whimpered and struggled ineffectually in Raby's grasp.

"What'll we do, Jix?" asked Raby. "He's all excited, and he's going to hurt himself if he doesn't stop fighting."

"I think he wants to get back under the rock," said Jix. "Let's take him away to where there's nothing for him to crawl under. Then maybe he'll relax."

He led off. Raby followed, holding William's arms and pushing him along. As they went, William's resistance slowly melted. He ceased to fight against Raby's urging and the tension went out of his arms. After a little while the younger boy let him go and he trudged along with them with his head bowed, his gray hair falling forward over his gaunt, youngish-looking face and his arms in their iridescent sleeves— he was dressed in the same fashion as Jix and Raby— swinging limply on either side.

They had been on the side of a stone-tumbled hill, just below its peak. This peak they went up and over now, and down the far side onto a smooth falling-away of land, so carpeted with fine grass that it seemed almost parklike. In the nearer distance was a great, abrupt hole several acres in area, with a glimpse of vertical sides of white rock. Beyond this were the hazy blue shoulders of the foothills to the mountains, and here and there amongst them a flash or hint of bright color that gave no clue to its shape or purpose in being.

They went on until they reached the smooth lawn-level grass beside the quarry; and there the two boys sat down, pulling William down with them. They sat cross-legged like Indians in a rough circle.

William's eyes, for all that his body was loose again, were still abstract and wild. They stared away at the foothills; and slowly two tears formed in them, welled up and began to streak their way down his hollow cheeks.

"Home—" he said suddenly, brokenly, "home—"

Jix reached over and rhythmically, slowly, sooth-

ingly, rubbed William's near shoulder.

"Now. Mr. Johnson," he said, "you know you can't go home. You can only go forward in time, not back. We told you and told you," he almost chanted the words, matching the rhythm of his moving hand, "and told you you can't go back."

William put his head down and sobbed.

"Now. Mr. Johnson," said Jix, "it's really no use getting all unhappy. If you'll just look up and around you, you'll see all sorts of things to feel good about. See how the foothills seem to go right up into the air like towers—look, Mr. Johnson." Slowly, as if unwill-ingly, the man raised his head and turned it toward the foothills. "That darker blue behind them, that haze, that's really the mountains, only the humidi-

ty's up and we've got a temperature inversion back a ways. Isn't that something to see, Mr. Johnson?"

William swallowed, looking off in the direction indicated.

"And look at this," broke in Raby. plucking a sin-gle blade of grass and holding it up before his face, "look at this, Mr. Johnson. See how fine and sharp the lines are. So beautiful. And all complete and whole in one little piece. Doesn't that make you happy?"

Suddenly, William knocked the hand holding the blade of grass aside.

"No!" he cried. "No!"

"Please, Mr. Johnson," said Jix, now rubbing his hand soothingly up and down the sharp adult spine. "Try just a little bit to like things. You'll feel a lot better if you do. It's nice here, but you won't let yourself like it."

"It's not!" William snapped his head back and forth, glaring first in one young face and then in the other. "Not like home!"

"But you can't go home," said Raby. "And it really wasn't very nice back then, Mr.'Johnson, you know that as well as we do, but you won't admit it. It was dirty, and people were sick all the time, now wasn't it?"

"No!" exploded William. "It was fine, and plain and natural—" He sobbed again, suddenly. "There were people you could talk to. Plain people, who liked ordinary things and lived in real houses- They ate real food—real, cooked food."

"You can have anything you want to eat, Mr. John-son," said Jix- "We'll get it right now for you." ,

"I don't want your food!" cried William, desperately. "It isn't real! It isn't honest."

"Why, yes it is," said Jix. "Now, you know that;

too, Mr. Johnson. It's just as real as the food you used to get by killing animals and cooking up plants.

It's just made out of the essential raw materials, that's all."

"I say it's fake!" William jerked about on the grass between them as if he would get up and run, but did not do so. "It's not right." He whimpered, dropping his voice and head. "It's not right," he whispered to the grass between his spread legs. He lifted his head- "All right," he said defiantly. "Make me eat it."

"Mr. Johnson," said Raby, "we couldn't do a thing like that. Could we, Jix?"

"Not unless Mr. Johnson really wants us to," said Jix, firmly. "And we know he doesn't."

William brought his face around slowly to sneer in the face of the older boy-

"Oh, you're sure about that, are you?" he said, softly. "You're so sure." Jix did not pull his face back or alter his expression as the man's hot breath fanned his eyelashes. "You're so sure you know what I really want, and you try so hard to give it to me, don't you? And why? Why?"

"We feel sorry for you, Mr. Johnson," said Jix. "I'd bet you do. I'll—just—bet—you—do." William pushed himself suddenly forward and onto his knees, so that he kneeled before Jix looming over him. "Do you know what I am?" he said softly. "I'm a physicist, a research physicist. I've got four degrees, do you know that? Four college degrees! I've got a million-dollar appropriation to do whatever I want— and I did something with it nobody ever did before, something nobody was ever intelligent enough and skillful enough, and trained enough to do before. I traveled into the future, into the far future. That's the kind of man I am."

"We know, Mr. Johnson," said Raby, from behind him. "You told us, you know, lots of times."

"Then what're we sitting here for?" cried William, sitting back on his knees and looking from one to the other. "Where are the men who ought to be talking

to me? Where are the scientists? Where are the histo-

rians? Where are the institutes?"

"There aren't any, Mr. Johnson," said Jix. "Everybody told you that. Not the way you think. Everybody knows all about those things you know, but they're too busy to bother with them."

"Busy? Busy at what?" cried William.

"We told you and told you, Mr. Johnson," said Raby, patiently, "that it's no use your trying to make us tell you, because there isn't any language for explaining what people do. You've just got to understand."

"Try me. Make me understand."

"But you can't," said Raby. "You weren't bred to understand. It took generations and generations of gene selection and crossing to evolve people who could understand. That's why the grownups don't have anything to talk to you about."

"Then why do you two talk to me?" William clenched his fists. "Why you?"

"But we're just children, Mr. Johnson."

"Children!" William's voice broke on a fresh sob. "Call yourselves children! Oh, no. Children are little and not strong. You show them things. Children believe you. You? Children?"

"But we are," said Jix, calmly.

"No. you're not." William straightened up, staring at them. "Children? You're monsters. Monsters stronger than I am. Monsters who know everything, who can do anything, who haven't a shred of natural feeling. Children? Children laugh. Children cry. You don't laugh or cry, either one of you. You don't hate. You don't love."

"Mr. Johnson!" said Raby. "You know better than that. We love everybody- We love you, too."

"Love? Me? When you torture me like this, day after day? When you follow me around, making a fool of me, always hounding me, showing me up—"

"We'll go away if you want," said Jix. "But every time we go away, you come looking for us."

"Not you! Not you!" William shook his clenched fists above his head. "I want real people, adult people to talk to."

"But nobody has time to talk to you but us," said Jix. "We told you that. Besides, we want to look after you. You're liable to get hurt if we don't watch you. You're always doing something that's going to get

you hurt when we leave you alone, then we have to catch you before you do." He gestured at the wide hole a few yards off. "You nearly fell into the quarry, day before yesterday."

"The quarry!" groaned William. "Oh, God! And why did you make a quarry there in the first place? Did you just want one? Or did you want to play King Arthur with a real stone castle?"

"Our father wanted it," said Raby. "We told you that."

"He?" William gave a shout of high-pitched laughter. "The great man? The mysterious head of the household, who doesn't even exist part of the time? You mean he needed real stone? Plain stone?" William's voice rose on waves of hysterical laughter. "Plain, ordinary limestone? What for?"

The two boys looked at each other helplessly.

"It's one of those things I have to understand, isn't it?" shouted William, leaping to his feet. "Liars! Fake!" He began to dance before them, stamping his feet and bobbing his shoulders like a savage. "Mumbo jumbo! Witch doctor! Witch doctor! Spirits of the mumbo .. . jumbo .. - mumbo—" Abruptly, he stopped chanting and dancing and stared at them, his face falling into a look of agony. He fell to his knees and stretched out his skinny arms to them. Dragging himself forward on his knees, he approached them.

"Please," he said, "please ... oh please! You can

do anything. I know you can do anything. Put me out of my misery. Make me happy here. Make me not know any different. Make me forget. Fix me ... fix

me-

The two boys looked at him with sad and solemn eyes.

"Poor Mr. Johnson," said Jix. "We can't do that. If you understood, you'd know it wasn't right for us to do it. If we changed you, it would spoil you, and we would be spoiled by doing such a thing. It isn't right for people to be changed, Mr. Johnson, except by themselves."

"But I'm not people"—he clawed at their glittering tunics—"I'm an animal. I'm a pet. Have pity . . . oh, have pity—"

"No, Mr. Johnson," said Jix. "Even you know that. You're not an animal or a pet at all. You're a human man with a soul who has to find his own way, like everybody."

"But I can't . . . you all say I can't!"

"Poor Mr. Johnson," said Raby softly. "If only you'd understand."

"Make me understand," William pleaded.

"Nobody can make you understand, Mr. Johnson."

William screamed suddenly and rose to his feet. Extending his shaking hands to the air, he screamed at the sky. And then, whirling, before even the quick reflexes of the boys could stop him, he turned and ran toward the open edge of the quarry. He ran forward and out. For a fraction of a second he continued forward, seeming to run in empty air, and then he dropped from sight.

The boys leaped and ran to the edge of the quarry. Before they reached it, the sound of an impact came up from the depths. They stopped at the edge; and, looking over, saw the broken body of William lying on the pale wet rock. far below.

They looked at each other. Then they started to climb down into the quarry.

Their mother was in the garden of their house, that was like no house William had ever known, as they came up a little later carrying the crushed and ruined body. She turned to face them, a tall woman with pale skin and dark hair and as beautiful as they. Her eyes took in what was left of William and her exchange of glances with the boys seemed to gather the whole story.

"He suddenly jumped. Mother." said Raby. He looked up at the tall woman with eyes that were still the eyes of a child. "Is he all spoiled?"

"No, Raby." she answered. "Nothing is ever all spoiled. Give him to me." She took the dead man from Jix's arms easily up into her own. "I'll give him to your father when he gets back. Your father will fix him, and he'll be as good as ever in the morning."

3-Part Puzzle

The Mologhese ship twinkled across the light years separating the human-conquered planets of the Bahrin system from Mologh. Aboard her, the Mologh Envoy sat deep in study. For he was a thinker as well as a warrior, the Envoy, and his duties had gone far beyond obtaining the capsule propped on the Mologhese version of a desk before him—a sealed message capsule containing the diplomatic response of the human authorities to the proposal he had brought from Mologh. His object of study at the moment, however, was not the capsule, but a translation of something human he had painfully resolved into Mologhese terms. His furry brow wrinkled and

his bulldog-shaped jaw clamped as he worked his way through it. He had been over it a number of times, but he still could not conceive of a reason for a reaction he had observed among human young to its message. It was, he had been reliably informed, one of a group of such stories for the human young. —What he was looking at in translation was approximately this:

THE THREE (Name) (Domestic animals) (Name)
Once upon a time there was a (horrendous, carniv-

orous, mythical creature) who lived under a bridge and one day he became very hungry. He was sitting there thinking of good things to eat when he heard the sounds of someone crossing the bridge over his head. (Sharp hoof-sound)—(sharp hoof-sound) went the sounds on the bridge overhead.

"Who's there?" cried the (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature).

"It's only I, the smallest (Name) (Domestic animal) (Name)" came back the answer.

"Well, I am the (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature) who lives under the bridge," replied the (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature), "and I'm coming up to eat you all up."

"Oh, don't do that, please!" cried the smallest (Name) (Domestic animal) (Name). "I wouldn't even make you a good meal. My (relative), the (middle-sized? next-oldest?) (Name) (Domestic animal) (Name) will be along in a minute. Let me go. He's much bigger than I. You'll get a much better meal out of him. Let me go and eat him instead."

"Very well," said the (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature); and (hoof-sound)—(hoof-sound) the (Name) (Domestic animal) (Name) hurried across the bridge to safety.

After a while the (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature) heard (heavier hoof-sound)—(heavier hoof-sound) on the bridge overhead.

"Who's there?" he cried.

"It is I, the (middle-sized?) (Name) (Domestic animal) (Name)," replied a (deeper?) voice.

"Then I am coming up to eat you up," said the (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature). "Your smaller (relative?) the smallest (Name) (Domestic animal) (Name) told me you were coming and I let him go by so I could have a bigger meal by eating you. So here I come."

"Oh. you are, are you?" said the (middle-sized)

(Name) (Domestic animal) (Name). "Well, suit yourself; but our oldest (relative?), the big (Name) (Domestic animal) (Name) will be along in just a moment. If you want to wait for him, you'll really have a meal to remember."

"Is that so?" said the (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature), who was very (greedy? avaricious? gluttonous?). "All right, go ahead." (And the (middle-sized) (Name) (Domestic animal) (Name) went (heavier hoof-sound)—(heavier hoof-sound) across the bridge to safety-
It was not long before the (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature) heard (thunderous hoof-sound)—(thunderous hoof-sound) shaking the bridge overhead.

"Who's there?" cried the (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature).

"It is I!" rumbled an (earth-shaking?) deep (bass?) voice. "The biggest (Name) (Domestic animal) (Name). Who calls?"

"I do!" cried the (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature). "And I'm coming up to eat you all up!" And he sprang up on the bridge. But the big (Name) (Domestic animal) (Name) merely took one look at him, and lowered (his?) head and came charging fbcward, with his (horns?) down. And he butted that (horrendous, carnivorous, mythical creature) over the hills and so far away he could never find his way back to bother anyone ever again-

The Mologhese Envoy put the translation aside and blinked his red-brown eyes wearily. It was ridiculous, he thought, to let such a small conundrum bother him this way. The story was perfectly simple and obvious; it related how an organization of three individuals delayed conflict with a dangerous enemy until their strongest member arrived to deal with the

situation. Perfectly usual and good Conqueror indoctrination literature for Conqueror young.

But still, there was something—a difference about it he could not quite put his finger on. The human children he had observed having it told to them at that school he had visited had greeted the ending with an entirely disproportionate glee. Why? Even to a student of tactics like himself the lesson was a simple and rather boring one. It was as if a set of young students were suddenly to become jubilant on being informed that two plus two equaled four. Was there some hidden value in the lesson that he failed to discover? Or merely some freakish twist to the

human character that caused the emotional response to be disproportionate?

If there was, the Envoy would be everlastingly destroyed if he could not lay the finger of his perception on what it was. Perhaps, thought the Envoy. leaning back in the piece of furniture in which he sat, this problem was merely part and parcel of that larger and more widespread anomaly he had remarked upon during the several weeks, local time, he had been the guest of the human HQ on Bahrin II. ...

The humans had emerged on the galactic scene rather suddenly, but not too suddenly to escape notice by potentially interested parties. They had fanned out from their home system; doing it at first the hard way by taking over and attempting to pioneer uninhabited planets of nearby systems. Eventually they had bumped into the nearest Conqueror civilization— which was that of the Bahrin, an ursinoid type established over four small but respectable systems and having three Submissive types in bondage, one of which was a degraded Conqueror strain.

Like most primitive races, the humans did not at first seem to realize what they were up against. They attempted at first to establish friendly relations with

the Bahrin without attempting any proof of their own. Conqueror instincts. The Bahrin, of course, recognized Conqueror elements potential in the form of the human civilization; and for that reason struck all the harder, to take advantage of their own age and experience. They managed to destroy nearly all the major planetary installations of the humans, and over twenty percent of the population at first strike. However, the humans rebounded with surprising ferocity and speed, to drop guerrilla land troops on the Bahrin planets while they gathered power for a strikeback. The strikeback was an overwhelming success, the Bahrin power being enfeebled by the unexpected fierceness of the human guerrillas and the fact that these seemed to have the unusual ability to enlist the sympathy of the Submissives under the Bahrin rule. The Bahrin were utterly broken; and the humans had for some little time been occupying the Bahrin worlds.

Meanwhile, the ponderous mills of the Galactic social order had been grinding up the information all this had provided. It was known that human exploration ships had stumbled across their first contact with one of the Shielded Worlds; and immediately made eager overtures of friendship to the people upon it. It was reported that when the Shielded Peoples went on about their apparently meaningless business under that transparent protective element which no known Conqueror had ever been able to breach (and

the human overtures were ignored, as all Conqueror attempts at contact had always been) that a storm of emotion swept over the humans—a storm involving the whole spectrum of emotions. It was as if the rejection had had the equivalent of a calculated insult from an equivalent, Conqueror, race.

In that particular neighborhood of the galaxy the Mologhese currently held the balance of power among

the Conqueror races. They sent an Envoy with a proposal to the human authorities.

—And that, thought the Envoy, aboard the returning spaceship as he put aside the problem of the translation to examine the larger question, was the beginning of an educative process on both sides.

His job had been to point out politely but firmly that there were many races in the galaxy; but that they had all evolved on the same type of world, and they all fell into one of three temperamental categories. They were by nature Conquerors, Submissives, or Invulnerables. The Invulnerables were, of course, the people of the Shielded Worlds, who went their own pacific, nontechnologic ways. And if these could not be dominated behind the protections of their strange abilities, they did not seem interested in dominating themselves, or interfering with the Conquerors. So the situation worked out to equalities and they could be safely ignored.

The Submissive races, of course, were there for any Conqueror race's taking. That disposed of them. But there were certain elements entering into inter-Conqueror relationships, that were important for the humans to know.

No Conqueror race could, naturally, be denied its birthright, which was to take as much as it could from Submissives and its fellow-Conquerors. On the other hand, there were advantages to be gained by semipeaceful existence even within the laws of a society of Conqueror races. Obvious advantages dealing with trade, travel, and a reciprocal recognition of rights and customs. To be entitled to these, the one prime requirement upon any Conqueror race was that it should not rock the boat. It might take on one or more of its neighbors, or make an attempt to move up a notch in the pecking order in this neck of the Galactic woods: but it must not become a bother

to the local community of Conquerors as a whole by such things as general piracy, et cetera.

"In short." had replied the Envoy's Opposite Num-

ber—a tall, rather thin, and elderly human with a sad smile, "a gentleman's agreement?"

"Please?" said the Envoy. The Opposite Number explained-

"Essentially, yes," said the Envoy, feeling pleased. He was pleased enough, in fact, to take time out for a little dissertation on this as an example of the striking cultural similarities between Conqueror races that often produced parallel terms in completely different languages, and out of completely different backgrounds.

". . . In fact," he wound up, "let me say that personally, I find you people very much akin. That is one of the things that makes me so certain that you will eventually be very pleased that you have agreed to this proposal I brought. Essentially, all it asks is that you subscribe to the principles of a Conqueror intersociety—which is, after all, your own kind of society—and recognize its limitations as well as its privileges by pledging to maintain the principles which are the hard facts of its existence."

"Well," said his Opposite Number, whose name was Harrigan or Hargan, or some such, "that is something to be decided on in executive committee. Meanwhile, suppose I show you around here; and you can tell me more about the galaxy."

There followed several weeks in which the Envoy found himself being convoyed around the planet which had originally been the seat of the former Bahrin ruling group. It was quite obviously a tactic to observe him over a period of time and under various conditions; and he did not try to resist it. He had his own observations to make, and this gave him an excellent opportunity to do so.

For one thing, he noted down as his opinion that they were an exceedingly touchy people where slights were concerned. Here they had just finished their war with the Bahrin in the last decade and were facing entrance into an interstellar society of races as violent as themselves; and yet the first questions on the tips of the tongues of nearly all those he met were concerned with the Shielded Worlds. Even Harrigan, or whatever his name was, confessed to an interest in the people on the Invulnerable planets.

"How long have they been like that"3" Harrigan asked.

The Envoy could not shrug. His pause before answering fulfilled the same function.

"There is no way of telling," he said. "Things on Shielded Worlds are as the people there make them. Take away the signs of a technical civilization from a

planet—turn it all into parkland—and how do you tell how long the people there have been as they are? All we ever knew is that they are older than any of our histories."

"Older?" said Harrigan. "There must be some legend, at least, about how they came to be?"

"No," said the Envoy. "Oh, once in a great while some worthless planet without a population will suddenly develop a shield and become fertile, forested and populated—but this is pretty clearly a case of colonization. The Invulnerables seem to be able to move from point to point in space by some nonphysical means. That's all."

"All?" said Harrigan.

"All," said the Envoy. "Except for an old Submissive superstition that the Shielded Peoples are a mixed race sprung from an interbreeding between a Conqueror and a Submissive type—something we know, of course, to be a genetic impossibility."

"I see," said Harrigan.

Harrigan took the Envoy around to most of the

major cities of the planet. They did not visit any military installations (the Envoy had not expected that they would) but they viewed a lot of new construction taking the place of Bahrin buildings that had been obliterated by the angry scars of the war. It was going up with surprising swiftness—or perhaps not so surprising, noted the Envoy thoughtfully, since the humans seemed to have been able to enlist the enthusiastic co-operation of the Submissives they had taken over. The humans appeared to have a knack for making conquered peoples willing to work with them. Even the Bahrin, what there were left of them, were behaving most unlike a recently crushed race of Conquerors, in the extent of their co-operation. Certainly the humans seemed to be allowing their former enemies a great deal of freedom, and even responsibility in the new era. The Envoy sought for an opportunity, and eventually found the chance to talk to one of the Bahrin alone. This particular Bahrin was an assistant architect on a school that was being erected on the outskirts of one city- (The humans seemed slightly crazy on the subject of schools; and only slightly less crazy on the'subjects of hospitals, libraries, museums, and recreation areas. Large numbers of these were going up all over the planet.) This particular Bahrin, however, was a male who had been through the recent war. He was middle-aged and had lost an arm in the previous conflict. The Envoy found him free to talk, not particularly bitter, but considerably impressed emotionally by his new

overlords.

"... May your courage be with you," he told the Envoy. "You will have to face them sooner or later;

and they are demons."

"What kind of demons?" said the Envoy, skeptically.
"A new kind," said the Bahrin. He rested his heavy, furry, bearlike forearm upon the desk in front of him and stared out a window at a changing landscape.

142 Gordon R. Dwkson

"Demons full of fear and strange notions. Who understands them? Half their history is made up of efforts to understand themselves—and they still don't."
He glanced significantly at the Envoy. "Did you know the Submissivcs are already starting to call them the Mixed People?"
The Envoy wrinkled his furry brow.
"What's that supposed to mean?" he said.
"The Submissives think the humans are really Submissives who have learned how to fight."
The Envoy snorted.
"That's ridiculous."

"Of course," said the Bahrin; and sighed heavily.
"But what isn't, these days?" He turned back to his work. "Anyway, don't ask me about them. The more I see of them, the less I understand."

They parted on that note—and the Envoy's private conviction that the loss of the Bahri ^ 's arm had driven him slightly insane.

Nonetheless, during the following days as he was escorted around from spot to spot, the essence of that anomaly over which he was later to puzzle during his trip home emerged. For one thing, there were the schools. The humans, evidently, in addition to being education crazy themselves, believed in wholesale education for their cattle as well. One of the schools he was taken to was an education center for young Bahrin pupils; and—evidently due to a shortage of Bahrin instructors following the war—a good share of the teachers were human.

"... I just love my class!" one female human teacher told the Envoy, as they stood together watching young Bahrin at play during their relaxation period.

"Please?" said the Envoy, astounded.

"They're so quick and eager to learn," said the teacher. One of the young Bahrin at play dashed up to her, was overcome with shyness at seeing the

3-PART PUZZLE

143

Envoy, and hung back. She reached out and patted

him on the head. A peculiar shiver ran down the Envoy's back; but the young Bahrin nestled up to her.

"They respond so," said the teacher. "Don't you think so?"

"They were a quite worthy race at one time," replied the Envoy, with mingled diplomatic confusion and caution.

"Oh, yes'" said the teacher enthusiastically; and proceeded to overwhelm him with facts he already knew about the history of the Bahrin, until the Envoy found himself rescued by Harrigan- The Envoy went off wondering a little to himself whether the humans had indeed conquered the Bahrin or whether, perhaps, it had not been the other way around.

Food for that same wonderment seemed to be supplied by just about everything else that Harrigan let him see. The humans, having just about wiped the Bahrin out of existence, seemed absolutely determined to repair the damage they had done, and to improve upon the former situation by way of interest. Why? What kept the Bahrin from seething with plans for revolt at this very minute? The young ones of course—like that pupil with the teacher—might not know any better; but the older ones .. . ? The Envoy thought of the one-armed Bahrin architect he had talked to, and felt further doubt. If they were alt like that one—but then what kind of magic had the humans worked to produce such an intellectual and emotional victory? The Envoy went back to his quarters and took a nap to quiet the febrillations of his thinking process.

When he woke up, he set about getting hold of what history he could on the war just past. Accounts both human and Bahrin were available; and, plowing through them, reading them for statistics rather than reports, he was reluctantly forced to the conclusion that the one-armed Bahrin had been right. The

humans were demons. —Or at least, they had fought like demons against the Bahrin. A memory 'of the shiver that had run down his back as he watched the female human teacher patting the young Bahrin on the head troubled the Envoy again. Would this same female be perfectly capable of mowing down adult Bahrin by the automatic handweapon clipful? Apparently her exact counterparts had. If so, which was the normal characteristic of the human nature—the head-patting, or the trigger-pulling?

It was almost a relief when the human authorities gave him a sealed answer to the proposal he had brought, and sent him on his way home a few days later. He carried that last question of his away with him.

"The only conclusion I can come to," said the Envoy to the chief authority among the Mologhese, a week and a half later as they both sat in the Chief's office, "is that there is some kind of racial insanity that sets in in times of peace. In other words, they're Conquerors in the true sense only when engaged in Conquest."

The Chief frowned at the proposal answer, still sealed on the desk before him. He had asked for the Envoy's report before opening it; and now he wondered if this traditional procedure had been the wisest move under the circumstances. He rather suspected the Envoy's wits of having gone somewhat astray during his mission.

"You don't expect me to believe something like that," said the Chief. "No culture that was insane half the time could survive. And if they tried to maintain sanity by continual Conquest, they would bleed to death in two generations."

The Envoy said nothing. His Chief's arguments were logically unassailable.

"The sensible way to look at it," said the Chief, "is to recognize them as simply another Conqueror strain

with somewhat more marked individual peculiarities than most. This is—let us say—their form of recreation, of amusement, between conquests. Perhaps they enjoy playing with the danger of cultivating strength in their conquered races."

"Of course, there is that," admitted the Envoy. "You may be right."

"I think," said the Chief, "that it's the only sensible all-around explanation."

"On the other hand—" The Envoy hesitated, remembering. "There was the business of that female human patting the small Bahrin on the head."

"What about it?"

The Envoy looked at his Chief.

"Have you ever been patted on the head?" he asked. The Chief stiffened.

"Of course not!" He relaxed slowly, staring at the Envoy- "Why? What makes you ask that?"

"Well, 1 never have either, of course—especially by anyone of another race- But that little Bahrin liked it. And seeing it gave me—" The Envoy stopped to shiver again.

"Gave you what?" said the Chief

"A ... a sort of horrible, affectionate feeling—"

The Envoy stopped speaking in helplessness.

"You've been overworking," said the Chief, coldly. "Is there anything more to report?"

"No," said the Envoy. "No. But aside from all this,- there's no doubt they'd be a tough nut to crack, those humans. My recommendation is that we wait for optimum conditions before we choose to move against them."

"Your recommendation will go into the record, of course," said the Chief. He picked up the human message capsule. "And now I think it's time I listened to this. They didn't play it for you?"

The Envoy shook his head.

The Chief picked up the capsule (it was one the

Envoy had taken along for the humans to use in replying), broke its seal and put it into the speaker unit of his desk. The speaker unit began to murmur a message tight-beamed toward the Chief's ear alone. The Envoy sat, nursing the faint hope that the Chief would see fit to let him hear, later. The Envoy was very curious as to the contents of that message. He watched his Chief closely, and saw the other's face slowly gather in a frown that deepened as the message purred on.

Abruptly it stopped. The Chief looked up; and his eyes met the Envoy's.

"It just may be," said the Chief slowly, "that I owe you an apology."

"An apology?" said the Envoy.

"Listen to this—" The Chief adjusted a volume control and pressed a button. A human voice speaking translated Mologhese filled the room.

"The Committee of Control for the human race wishes to express its appreciation for—"

"No, no—" said the Chief. "Not this diplomatic slush. Farther on—" He did things with his controls, the voice speeded up to a gabble, a whine, then slowed toward understandability again. "Ah, listen to this."

". . . Association," said the voice, "but without endorsement of what the Moioghese Authority is pleased to term the Conqueror temperament. While our two races have a great deal in common, the human race has as its ultimate aims not the exercises of war and oppression, plundering, general destruction and the establishment of a tyranny in a community of tyrants; but rather the establishment of an environment of peace for all races. The human race believes

m the ultimate establishment of universal freedom, justice, and the inviolable rights of the individual whoever he may be. We believe that our destiny lies

3-PART PUZZLE

147

neither within the pattern of conquest nor submission, but with the enlightened maturity of independence characterized by what are known as the Shielded Worlds; and, while not ceasing to defend our people and our borders from all attacks foreign and domestic, we intend to emulate these older, protected peoples in hope that they may eventually find us worthy of association. In this hope—"

The Chief clicked off the set and looked grimly at the Envoy. The Envoy stared back at him in shock.

"Insane." said the Envoy. "I was right—quite insane." He sank back in his seat. "At any rate, you too were correct. They're too irrational, too unrealistic to survive. We needn't worry about them."

"On the contrary," said his ChieL "And I'm to blame for not spotting it sooner. There were indications ot this in some of the preliminary reports we had on them. They are very dangerous."

The Envoy shook his head.

"I don't see—" he began.

"But I do!" said the Chief. "And I don't hold down this position among our people for nothing. Think for a moment, Envoy! Don't you see it? These people are causal!"

"Causal?"

"Exactly," replied the Chief. "They don't act or react to practical or realistic stimuli. They react to emotional or philosophic conclusions of their own."

"I don't see what's so dangerous about that?" said the Envoy, wrinkling his forehead.

"It wouldn't be dangerous if they were a different sort of race," said the Chief. "But these people seem to be able to rationalize their emotional and philosophic conclusions in terms of hard logic and harder science. —You don't believe me? Do you remember that story for the human young you told me about, about the three hoofed and horned creatures crossing a bridge?"

148 Gordon R Dickson

"Of course," said the Envoy.

"All right. It puzzled you that the human young should react so strongly to what was merely a lesson

in elementary tactics. But—it wasn't the lesson they were reacting to. It was the emotional message overlaying the lesson. The notion of some sort of abstract right and wrong, so that when the somehow wrong mythical creature under the bridge gets what the humans might describe as his just deserts at the horns of the triumphing biggest right creature—the humans are tremendously stimulated."

"But I still don't see the danger—"

"The danger," said the Chief, "lies in the fact that while such a story has its existence apparently—to humans—only for its moral and emotional values, the tactical lesson which we so obviously recognize is not lost, either. To us, this story shows a way of conquering. To the humans it shows not only a way but a reason, a Justification. A race whose motives are founded upon such justifications is tremendously dangerous to us."

"You must excuse me," said the Envoy, bewilderedly. "Why—"

"Because we—and I mean all the Conqueror races, and all the Submissive races—" said the Chief, strongly, "have no defenses in the emotional and philosophic areas. Look at what you told me about the Bahrin, and the Submissives the humans took over from the Bahrin. Having no strong emotional and philosophic persuasions of their own, they have become immediately infected by the human ones- They are like people unacquainted with a new disease who fall prey to an epidemic. The humans, being self-convinced of such things as justice and love, in spite of their own arbitrariness and violence, convince all of us who lack convictions having never needed them before. Do you remember how you said

you felt when you saw the little Bahrin being patted on the head? That's how vulnerable we are!"

The Envoy shivered again, remembering.

"Now I see," he said.

"I thought you would," said the Chief, grimly. "The situation to my mind is serious, enough so to call for the greatest emergency measures possible. We mustn't make the mistake of the creature under the bridge in the story. We were prepared to let the humans get by our community strength because we thought of them as embryo Conquerors, and we hoped for better entertainment later. Now they come along again, this time as something we can recognize as Conquerorplus. And this time we can't let them get by. I'm going to call a meeting of our neighboring Conqueror executive Chiefs; and get an agreement to hit the

humans now with a coalition big enough to wipe them out to the last one."

He reached for a button below a screen on his desk. But before he could touch it, it came alight with the figure of his own attache.

"Sir—" began this officer; "and then words failed him.

"Well?" barked the Chief.

"Sir—" The officer swallowed. "From the Shielded Worlds—a message." The Chief stared long and hard.

"From the Shielded Worlds?" said the Chief. "How? From the Shielded Worlds? When?"

"I know it's tantastic, sir. But one of our ships was passing not too far from one of the Shielded Worlds and it found itself caught—"

"And you just now got the message?" The Chief cut him short

"Just this second, sir. I was just—"

"Let me have it. And keep your channel open," said the Chief. "I've got some messages to send."

The officer made a movement on the screen and something like a message cylinder popped out of a

slot in the Chief's desk. The Chief reached for it, and hesitated. Looking up. he found the eyes of the Envoy upon him.

"Never—" said the Envoy, softly. "Never in known history have they communicated with any of us. . . ."

"It's addressed to me," said the Chief, looking at the outside of the cylinder. "If they can read our minds, as we suspect, then they know what I've just discovered about the humans and what I plan to do about it." He gave the cylinder a twist to open it. "Let's see what they have to say."

The cylinder opened up like a flower. A single white sheet unrolled within it lo lie flat on the desk; and the message upon it in the common Galactic code looked up at the Chief. The message consisted of just one word. The word was:

NO.

IT, Out of
Darkest Jungle

Screen treatment of an original story idea by Joe
Charlesville

CAST OF CHARACTERS
"IT"

SCIENCE FICTION MONSTER

Spine-chilling, monstrous white ape with blood-red

face.

JOE CHANNION

RESEARCH CHEMIST

Age twenty-eight, full of character, handsome, a sci-
entific type with glasses.
NORA WINTERS

JOE'S ASSISTANT

Age twenty-two, tall, beautiful, sensitive understand-
ing.
POOTIE (PATRICIA) LATIMER

JOE'S NIECE

Age seven, golden-haired child.
DR. SVEN SODERUP

ARCHAEOLOGIST

Age 64, white-haired, frail, scholarly.
TRUCK DRIVER, SHERIFF, ETC.—minor characters.

151

152 Gordon R. Dickson

OCIENTIFIC NOTE: Recent research has indicated
<..5lhat the Greeks (ancient) did not simply ignore
headaches as was formerly thought, but that they
may have possessed a medication unknown to pres-
ent-day medical science. This has given rise to well-
founded scientific speculation that, lost in the depths
of time, in prehistory, there may have existed a wiz-
ard master race with a knowledge of chemistry and
medicine unknown to present-day scientists. In the
words of Dr. Baker Terril, MIT, "... maybe they had
a super-aspirin." It is on this thesis that the follow-
ing science fiction story idea is based.

Scene 1—Ruins of an oriental-looking ancient city,
half-excavated from the jungle.

WE OPEN WITH AN AERIAL VIEW, PANNING DOWN AND INTO
ONE OF THE EXCAVATED BUILDINGS. THE ROOM WE ENTER IS
STILL HALF-FULL OF DIRT. THE EXCAVATED HALF SHOWS
BENCHES AND TABLES ON WHICH SIT CURIOUSLY SCIENTIFIC-
LOOKING INSTRUMENTS OF GLASS AND POTTERY. IN THE
OTHER HALF, A NATIVE LABORER IS SINGING TO HIMSELF AS
HE EXCAVATES SOMETHING LARGE AND WHITE. WHICH WE
SEE IS THE BODY OF A HUGE WHITE APE WITH A BLOOD-RED
FACE.

LABORER. SUDDENLY REALIZING WHAT IT IS HE IS EXCA-
VATING, GASPS AND DROPS HIS SHOVEL.

AS HE STARES HORRIFIED, THE APPARENTLY MUMMIFIED
APE SLOWLY OPENS ONE EYE AND WINKS AT HIM.

THE LABORER'S FACE SUDDENLY CHANGES TO A MASK OF
HORROR. HE MAKES A MOVEMENT AS IF HE WILL TURN TO
FLEE BUT THE GREAT. WHITE, APELIKE FIGURE REACHES OUT
WITH ONE HAND. GRASPS HIM BY THE THROAT AND STRAN-
GLES HIM HIS DEAD BODY DROPS WITHOUT A SOUND TO THE
FLOOR- THE APE. WHO IS —"IT." OUT OF DARKEST JUNGLE-
CLOSES HIS EYE AND GOES MOTIONLESS AND APPARENTLY
MUMMIFIED ONCE MORE.

A MOMENT LATER, DR. SODERUP ENTERS THE ROOM. FOR A
MOMENT HE DOES NOT SEE THE BODY OFTHE LABORER. THEN

HE DOES AND COMES FORWARD TO BEND OVER IT, SHOCK
WRITTEN ON HIS FACE.

DR. SODERUP

What could have killed him in that horrible fashion?

HE NOTICES THE BODY OF THE APE, WITH ITS ARM STILL OUT-
STRETCHED ABOVE THE THROAT OF THE DEAD MAN. FOR A
MOMENT HE FROWNS, AND THEN SHAKES HIS HEAD.

No, no. Obviously this creature has been dead for
many thousands of years. I am imagining things—
and who can blame me? Forty-two months in this
murderous jungle—the heat—the insects—

HE BENDS HIS ATTENTION ON THE APE BODY AND HIS EYES
LIGHT UP

But this is a priceless find. Who knows what an
examination of this body may not teach us? I must
get it back to my laboratory in Muncie, Indiana.
DISSOLVE,

Scene 2—A modern-looking concrete laboratory next
to a flimsy-looking ancient wood house somewhere
in the Kentucky hills.

WE LOOK DOWN ON THE PLACE FROM THE SURROUNDING,
WOODED HfLLS A DIRT ROAD LOOPS BY BEFORE THE TWO
BUILDINGS AND A FRONT YARD IN WHICH IS AN ANCIENT WELL,
AND A HUGE, ANCIENT HALF-BURIED GRANITE BOULDER WEIGH-
ING MANY TONS. WE MOVE DOWN AND IN A WINDOW OF THE
LABORATORY IT IS OBVIOUSLY A PLACE WHERE A CHEMIST
WORKS- BENCHES ARE COVERED WITH GLASSWARE IN STRANGE
SHAPES AND A RETORT FULL OF DARK LIQUID IS BUBBLING
MYSTERIOUSLY- YOUNG DR. JOE CHANNION SITS DISCONSO-
LATE ON A STOOL BESIDE A RACK FULL OF HALF-FILLED TEST
TUBES- NORA BESIDE HIM, STANDING.
JOE

Another failure!

NORA

Don't say that, Doctor. You will succeed. I know you will.

NORA TRIES TO COMFORT HIM, BUT SHE HAS LITTLE SUCCESS.

THOUGH CLEAN-SHAVEN AND NEAT IN HIS WHITE LABORATORY COAT, HE IS HOLLOW-EYED WITH EXHAUSTION AND DEPRESSED. NORA SUGGESTS THAT HE TAKE THE NIGHT OFF AND FORGET HIS WORK THEY COULD DRIVE INTO TOWN FOR DINNER AND DANCING. BUT JOE WAVES THE SUGGESTION LISTLESSLY ASIDE. THOUGH NORA HAS BEEN HIS ASSISTANT FOR SEVERAL YEARS AND HAS FALLEN DEEPLY IN LOVE WITH HIM. HE HIMSELF HAS NEVER TAKEN A SQUARE LOOK AT HER AND DOES NOT REALIZE HOW BEAUTIFUL AND DESIRABLE SHE IS

JOE

No, it's no use. I was a fool to throw up my research grant, build this laboratory here and try to go ahead on my own.

NORA

You were not. (Fiercely) The fools were the regents and the other chemists at the University who lacked vour faith in Aspirin-X.

JOE

(Shaking his head) No. Maybe they were right, and I was wrong. Maybe I just let myself be carried away, following that accident in which my sister and her husband were fatally injured, and I thought how different it might have been if Aspirin-X had been available to save them. (He sighs)

When they died and Pootie was orphaned, I must have lost my head. It was one thing to bury myself up here in these hills, but to bury you and Pootie—

HE BREAKS OFF, FOR POOTIE, WEARING AN APRON, HAS JUST ENTERED THE LAB.

POOTIE

Uncle Joe, I made lunch for you and Nora. It's all ready.

JOE

(Deeply touched) Did you, Pootie! How can I lose faith myself when you two have such faith in me. Well, let's have lunch, and then back to experiment number three thousand, tour hundred and ninety-six.

PRETENDING CHEERFULNESS. HE STRIDES OUT OF THE ROOM. EXCHANGING A GLANCE FULL OF FEMININE SYMPATHY. THE

WOMAN AND THE TENDER-EYED GIRL CHILD HURRY AFTER HIM.

Scene 3—Several miles up the road from the lab.

AERIAL VIEW OF THE ROAD AS IT DIPS THROUGH A SMALL VALLEY AND THEN CLIMBS UP A RIDGE JUST BEYOND THE RIDGE THAT OVERLOOKS THE LABORATORY. A WHITE PANEL TRUCK COMES INTO VIEW, DRIVES DOWN INTO THE HOLLOW AND THEN SLOWLY MOUNTS THE RIDGE, APPROACHING AS IT DOES, UNTIL WE ARE ABLE TO SEE THE FACE OF THE TRUCK DRIVER.

TRUCK DRIVER

(Muttering to himself) This ain't the right way! How'd I get onto this back road, anyhow? I'll never make it up into Indiana and Muncie tonight. How'd I get here, anyway?

HE SHAKES HIS HEAD LIKE SOMEONE WHO HAS JUST BEEN DAZED BY A BLOW.

—Now, I remember. There was that turnoff back on Route 49. I wasn't going to leave the highway and then this here compulsion sort of takes hold of me . . .

HE SHAKES HIS HEAD FIRMLY, AND BEGINS TO APPLY THE BRAKES.

I ain't going any farther. I'm just getting loster and loster.

HE THROWS AN UNEASY GLANCE OVER HIS SHOULDER AT THE SHEET METAL PARTITION BEHIND HIM WALLING OFF THE BACK OF THE TRUCK FROM HIS CAB-

Driving that big old ape mummy gives me the creeps. Whyn't they let things like that stav bur-ied? I—

AS HE HALTS THE CAR, THE SHEET METAL PARTITION BEHIND HIM RIPS AS IF IT WAS CARDBOARD JERKING AROUND, HE SEES A HUGE. BLOOD-RED APE FACE FRAMED IN THE TORN OPENING. IT WINKS AT HIM. THEN A HUGE WHITE ARM COMES

THROUGH THE-. OPENING GRASPS HIM BY THE THROAT AND BEGINS TO STRANGLE HIM AS HE FIGHTS FUTILELY AGAINST ITS GRIP

DISSOLVE TO THE CURVING DRIVEWAY THAT ENTERS THE YARD BEFORE THE LAB AND THE FLIMSY WOODEN HOUSE A COUNTY SHERIFFS POLICE CAR IS PARKED IN THE DRIVEWAY AND A UNIFORMED SHERIFF IS STANDING OUTSIDE IT SPEAK ING TO JOE

SHERIFF

I'm sorry, Doc But the law's the law I had to serve you with that there warrant and if you can't

produce the money you owe by court time, Mon-
day the Judge'11 issue the foreclosure order and I'll
have to take over vour property here

JOE

But don't you realize, ShenfP This will put an end
to my researches—an end to my last chance to give
Aspirm-X to a world racked with disease and suf-
fering And there's this feeling I have—this feeling
that I'm so close

HE GRASPS THE SHERIFF PLEADINGLY BY THE OVERALL SUS
FENDERS THE SHERIFF ENDURES IT STOLIDLY BUT WITH A
HINT OF PITY IN HIS TACITURN COUNTRY EYES

If vou could just have seen experiment number
three thousand, four hundred and ninety-six—)ust
now The precipitate I got from it was just a shade
off, almost pure white I'm sure I've almost got it

somehow it's right there under mv hngers if I
could just see it

HE RELEASES THE SHERIFF AND PASSES A HAND SHAKILY
ACROSS HIS BROW STAGGERING A BIT WITH WEARINESS

—Just one more day Sheriff

SHERIFF
Sorry, young feller If it was up to me—but it ain't
I got my duty to do Noon tomorrow

HE TURNS GETS IN HIS POLICE CAR AND LEAVES JOE TURNS
AROUND AND WALKS SLOWLY AND HEAVILY BACK INTO THE
LAB

IT OUT OF DARKEST JINGLE 157

WE WATCH THE PASSAGE OF TIME IN SPEEDED UP FASHION
THE SUN SINKS IN THE WEST THE SCENE GROWS DARK AND
LIGHTS GO ON IN THE LAB AND IN THE HOUSE THE MOON RISES

AS THE MOON CLIMBS HIGH IN THE SKY AND ILLUMINATES
THE SCENE WE SEE A WHITE PANEL TRUCK ROLL SILENTLY
OUT FROM THE SHADOW OF THE TREES HIDING THE ROAD
AND TURN INTO THE YARD IT STOPS BEHIND THE SPOT WHERE
THE SHERIFF S POLICE CAR HAD BEEN PARKED NO ONE GETS
OUT

Scene 4—Intel ior of Joe s lab The mormng sun shines
in at the windows

WE DISCOVER JOE WITH HIS HEAD ON HIS ARMS FALLEN
ASLEEP AT HIS EXPERIMENTING THE VOfCE OF NORA IS HEARD

NORA

Joe'Joe'

THE DOOR OF THE LAB OPENS AND NORA COMES IN BEARING
A POT OF STEAMING COFFEE AND TWO CUPS AT THE SIGHT OF
JOE SHE RUNS TO HIM PUTS DOWN THE COFFEE AND CUPS

AND IS ABOUT TO THROW HER ARMS AROUND HIM WHEN JOE WAKES UP

JOE

What what's thaP Oh, it s you, Nora I must have fallen asleep Let's see now for experi-ment number—

NORA

(Fiercely) You can't go on like this You're killing yourself, Joe No food, no sleep—working night and day It isn't worth it—even Aspirm-X isn't worth it

JOE
Don't sav that, Nora It is worth it—

HE POUNDS HIS FIST FIERCEl Y UPON THE I ABORATORY TABLE

It must be worth it' I can't lose faith, whatever happens Where would the world have been if Lister had lost failh7 Or Pasteur^ Or Dr and Madame Cune^ No, no, I must go on

NORA

Al least take time to drink a cup of coffee. For my sa—I mean, for the sake of the work.

JOE

(Smiling a weary, gentle smile) Very well One cup of coffee.

NORA POURS THEM EACH A CUP OF COFFEE AND THEY SIT DRINKING AS THEY SIT. THEY CHAT, AND JOE TELLS HER OF HIS NIGHT'S WORK IN THE LABORATORY
JOE

Somehow I can't get the pure, white precipitate I know I'm after. I keep getting precipitates with a slight shade of off-white.

HE WAVES AT A LARGE BLACKBOARD SET UP NEAR HIS LABO-RATORY TABLE THE SURFACE OF THE BLACKBOARD IS COV ERED WITH FIGURES AND EQUATIONS MADE UP OF SCIENTIFIC TYPE SYMBOLS

I've gone over my calculations a thousand times, and I keep getting the same answer. One of my factors in the essential equation is somehow wrong. But whicrP Until 1 can discover thai, the chemical formulas I derive from the equation will never be the correct formula for Aspirin-X, which should be recognized by its glistening white color—

NORA

(Suddenly remembering) Oh, that reminds me. Do you know anything about a while panel truck?

There was one in the front yard when I came out
this morning to bring vou this coffee.

JOE
(Puzzled) A white panel truck? No. Let's go see.

THEY GOT OUT OF THE LAB AND APPROACH THE WHITE PANEL
TRUCK FIRST THEY LOOK INTO THE CAB OF THE VEHICLE

NORA

No one here. Strange. Somebody must have driven
it.

JOE
Let's look in the back.

IT, OUT OF DARKEST JUNGLE 159

HE GOES AROUND AND OPENS THE BACK DOORS OF THE PANEL
TRUCK NORA SCREAMS—FOR THE BODY OF THE UNFORTUNATE
TRUCK DRIVER COMES TUMBLING OUT ONTO THE GROUND

NORA THROWS HERSELF INTO JOE'S ARMS, AND JOE PUTS HIS
ARMS AUTOMATICALLY AROUND HER

NORA

(Shuddering) Oh, how horrible!

JOE
It's all right . . .

SUDDENLY SELF-CONSCIOUS, THEY BREAK APART WE MOVE
IN ON JOE'S FACE AND THE CAMERA CATCHES THE DAWNING
WONDER IN HIS EYES FOR THE FIRST TIME HE IS LOOKING
ON HER AS A WOMAN, AND REMEMBERING WHAT IT FELT LIKE
TO HAVE HIS ARMS AROUND HER ABSENTM1NDEDLY, HE RE
MOVES HIS GLASSES AS IF TO SEE HER BETTER—AND THE
CLEAR EARLY MORNING LIGHT, STRIKING ACROSS HIS FEA
TURES, REVEALS \ RUGGEDNESS IN THEM THAT THE GLASSES
HAVE HIDDEN UNTIL NOW

ON HER PART. NORA HAS DROPPED HER EYES AND TURNED
A LITTLE AWAY—HER SURE FEMININE INSTINCT, WE SEE. HAS
APPRISED HER OF JOE'S SUDDEN AWAKENING TO HER EXIS-
TENCE AS A WOMAN

BEFORE EITHER OF THEM CAN SAY ANYTHING, HOWEVER, A
BATTERED SAFARI TRUCK, POSSIBLY A LAND ROVER, JOLTS
DOWN THE ROAD AND INTO THE YARD

DR SODERUP, DRESSED IN AN ORDINARY SUIT, BUT WITH
SOME ABSENTMINDED TOUCH, LIKE A WIDE-AWAKE HAT—OR
PERHAPS JUST WEARING SLACKS AND A BUSH JACKET SOME-
THING TO REMIND US OF HIS YEARS IN THE JUNGLE—JUMPS
DOWN FROM THE WHEEL OF THE TRUCK AND RUNS TO BEND
OVER AND EXAMINE THE BODY OF THE STRANGLED TRUCK
DRIVER

SODERUP

(Tragically) Just as I feared' Why didn't I trust my

instincts that day on the excavations site when I saw that poor dead man there. When the pane) truck didn't show up in Muncie on schedule, I knew something like this must have happened.

160

Gordon R. Dickson
JOE

(Approaching with Nora) Then this is your pane] truck? (blinking at Soderup) Say, aren't you Dr. Sven Soderup? I remember reading about your excavation of the Mayan ruins at Tulum in Quintna Roo when I was in high school. It's an honor to meet vou. Doctor!

SODERUP
(Staring at Joe, in turn) But you must be Dr. Joseph Channion, the brilliant young chemist whose work with the salicylates was being so highly praised at Mid-Continent University the last time I was there. What are you doing out here in the Kentucky hills, Doctor?

JOE

I gave up my research grant to continue work on my own. But you—what are you doing here, Doctor? And how did this panel truck of yours get here?

SODERUP
It was undoubtedly driven here by its driver, whom I had employed to bring to Muncie, Indiana, a huge, apelike figure recently excavated by me from some jungle ruins. But the driver, I see, is dead and the rear of the truck empty. There's no doubt that It has escaped.

NORA
(Gasping) It?

SODERUP
(Solemnly) The huge, apelike creature I excavated. Fantastic as this may seem to you, I now firmly believe that in spite of Its apparently mummified condition, the result of being buried for thousands of years, It still possesses a sort of hideous life force.

NORA
But—but—such a thing is impossible.

IT, OUT OF DARKEST JUNGLE
JOE

161

(Thoughtfully) Hum . . . No, Nora. Under certain special organo-chemical conditions, such a thing might be entirely possible. In fact, Doctor, you have given me a ray of hope—

NORA SUDDENLY INTERRUPTS HIM BY SCREAMING

NORA

(Suddenly terror-stricken) Then It must have fled from this truck into the woods surrounding us! It must be hiding in there right now!

JOE

But, Nora, I hardly think It will come out in the daylight. (Becoming suddenly thoughtful again) Unless some special need should be drawing It to my lab—

NORA

(Breathlessly) But you don't understand! Today is Monday and Pootie found herself short of clothespins to hang the washing. Just an hour ago she went off to the small general store on the other side of the ridge to buy two dozen more!

JOB

But going down the road in broad daylight she should be safe—(He breaks off suddenly) Nora! you don't mean to tell me she took the ridge trail!

SODERUP
What's the matter, Doctor? What's wrong with this—what did you call it—ridge trail?

JOE

(Desperately) It's a shortcut over the ridge to the general store. But not only does it go through thick woods inhabited by a local pack of wild bears, it also runs by Old Bottomless—a local muskeg swamp in which cattle are always being lost, swallowed up without a trace. —And now It is loose in those woods as well. I must go after her!

SODERUP
I will go with you. I have my elephant gun in the Land Rover. I'll get it.

JOE

If I'm correct in my hunch about it, no elephant gun will stop it. Besides, Doctor, I want you to stay here and protect Nora. Just a minute—

THE CAMERA FOLLOWS JOE AS HE TURNS AND DASHES BACK INTO THE LAB WE SEE HIM SNATCH UP TWO ENORMOUS HYPODERMIC SYRINGES, AND FILL THEM BOTH HASTILY. FROM A FLASK OF COLORLESS LIQUID. HE RUNS BACK OUTSIDE, CARRYING THE HYPODERMICS.

(To Nora) Here! (He gives her one of the syringes)

Hang on to this. In the chance that you should be cornered by It, inject It with this. It's the barbiturate thiopental, which given as a large intracardiac injection will cause permanent cessation of respiration in one to two seconds. I had it around to test the effectiveness of Aspirin-X, once I had produced it in pure form. Now, I will go after Foot ie.

CARRYING THE OTHER HYPODERMIC, HE DASHES OFF THE WOODS SWALLOW HIM UP DISSOLVE

Scene 5—The ridge trail, not far from the lab.

POOTIE COMES INTO VIEW. SKIPPING ALONG SINGING, CARRYING A BROWN PAPER BAG CONTAINING TWO DOZEN CLOTHESPINS THE CAMERA PANS PAST HER INTO THE WOODS WE SEE WHAT SHE DOES NOT NOTICE—THE HIDEOUS, BLOOD-RED FACE OF IT, STARING THROUGH THE BRUSH AT HER IT IS IT, OUT OF DARKEST JUNGLE, MOVING PARALLEL WITH HER PATH THROUGH THE WOODS. THE TRAIL GOES AROUND A CURVE AND COMES OUT BESIDE AN AREA OF BUBBLING MUCK WITH A FEW TUFTS OF GRASS GROWING AMID HALF-SUNKEN LOGS, ETC

POOTIE

(Pausing to look at it) There it is. Old Bottomless Swamp. I wonder if it's really bottomless the way people around here think—

A DEEP, GROWLING ROAR INTERRUPTS HER. SHE SCREAMS AND TURNS AROUND TO SEE A PACK OF HUGE BLACK BEARS

IT, OUT OF DARKEST JUNGLE 163

LUMBERING OUT OF THE WOODS AND BEARING DOWN ON HER SHE TURNS AND BEGINS TO RUN AWAY ALONG THE TRAIL TOWARD THE HOUSE AND THE LAB THAT ARE SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR

IT, OUT OF DARKEST JUNGLE, SUDDENLY BREAKS OUT OF THE WOODS BEFORE HER TO BLOCK HER PATH SHE SCREAMS AGAIN AND RUNS OFF INTO THE WOODS AT HER RIGHT

THE PACK OF HUGE BEARS, GROWLING AND ROARING, SEE IT AND CHARGE IT, INSTEAD AND THE FIGHT COMMENCES

SUCH A FIGHT WILL NEVER HAVE BEEN SEEN ON FILM BEFORE IT AND THE HUGE PACK OF VORACIOUS BEARS FIGHT AMONG THE BRUSH. IN THE OPEN ON THE HILLSIDE AND ON THE MARGIN OF THE DEADLY SUCKING SWAMP WHOLE TREES ARE TORN UP BY THEIR ROOTS ROARS AND HOWLS FILL THE AIR BLOOD IS EVERYWHERE

FINALLY, IT DISPOSES OF THE LAST BEAR TORN AND BLEEDING, IT DASHES OFF THE TRAIL INTO THE WOODS ON THE TRACK OF POOTIE

DISSOLVE

Scene 6—Back in front of the flimsy frame house and the lab.

POOTIE, HER DRESS TORN, BUT STILL CLUTCHING HER PAPER BAG OF CLOTHESPINS, COMES BURSTING OUT OF THE WOODS AND RUNS UP TO NORA AND DR SODERUP, WHO ARE STAND-ING IN THE OPEN—DR SODERUP HOLDING HIS HEAVY ELE-PHANT GUN—WAITING FOR JOE TO RETURN IT. SNARLING AND ROARING. BREAKS OUT OF THE WOODS RIGHT BEHIND HER

DR. SODERUP

(To Nora) Quick! Take the child' Get into the house and lock the door behind you. I'll take care of It.

NORA GRASPS POOTIE BY THE HAND AND THEY RUN UP TO AND IN THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR OF THE HOUSE THE CAMERA FOLLOWS THEM AND WE SEE NORA LOCK THE FRONT DOOR SHE AND POOTIE RUN TO PEER OUT THROUGH THE GLASS CURTAINS OF A TALL FRONT WINDOW

THE CAMERA LOOKS OUT OVER THEIR SHOULDER WE

SEE DR SODERLJP DROP TO ONE KNEE AND EMPTY THE MAGA-ZINE OF HIS ELEPHANT GUN AT THE ONCOMING IT.

FOR A MOMENT IT IS CHECKED AS THE HEAVY SLUGS HAMMER INTO ITS CHEST, ALMOST KNOCKING IT BACKWARD IT ROARS WITH PAIN AND RAGE. FURIOUS, IT TEARS UP OUT OF THE GROUND THE HUGE BOULDER [N FRONT OF THE HOUSE AND CRUSHES THE PANEL TRUCK WITH IT THEN IT WINKS HORRIBLY, COMES ON AND GRASPS DR SODERUP BY THE THROAT. WE SEE HIM SLOWLY STRANGLED

THEN IT ADVANCES ON THE HOUSE,

NORA AND POOTIE BACK AWAY ACROSS THE LIVING ROOM, TREMBLING. WITH ONE BLOW OF HIS FIST, IT SMASHES THE DOOR FROM ITS HINGES AND ENTERS.

NORA AND POOTIE RUN INTO THE DINING ROOM. LOCK-ING THAT DOOR BEHIND THEM. IT PURSUES AND SMASHES THROUGH THE DOOR.

IT CONTINUES TO PURSUE THEM FROM ROOM TO ROOM, BREAKING DOWN THE DOORS THEY LOCK BEHIND THEM,

FINALLY THEY ARE IN THE LAST ROOM, THE PANTRY OF THE HOUSE NORA SWINGS THE DOOR TO, BEHIND THEM, THEN DISCOVERS THAT THIS DOOR HAS NOTHING BUT A HASP FITTING OVER A STAPLE, WITH NO BOLT TO GO THROUGH IT

NORA

(Almost sobbing) There's nothing to lock it with.

POOTIE
(Whipping one of her clothespins out of the paper bag she stil! holds) Here, Aunt Nora, try this!

NORA SNATCHES THE CLOTHESPIN AND STICKS IT THROUGH THE STAPLE TO LOCK THE DOOR JUST IN TIME

THEY HEAR IT APPROACH THE DOOR IT THROWS ITS WEIGHT AGAINST IT THEY CRINGE.

IT BEGINS TO SNARL AND BEAT ON THE DOOR. THE CLOTHES-PIN HOLDS BUT WE BEGIN TO SEE FINE CRACKS APPEAR—IN THE UPPER PANEL OF THE DOOR

POOTIE

(All but weeping) Oh, where is Uncle Joe?

IT, OUT OF DARKEST JUNGLE 165

NORA

(Putting her arms around the little girl) Maybe the door will hold . . .
DISSOLVE

Scene 7—Joe, carrying his hypodermic syringe, at the point in the woods where Pootie left the trail.

JOE

She's headed home. Her tracks are plain. —But so are these others, that must be the tracks of It. It must have been right behind her.

HE DASHES OFF ALONG THE DOUBLE TRAIL OF TRACKS TO-WARD THE HOUSE AND THE LAB CUT

Scene 8—Back in the pantry at the house.

THE PANTRY DOOR IS FINALLY GIVING TO THE POUNDING OF IT A HUGE WHITE FIST COMES THROUGH THE UPPER PANEL THE WOOD DISSOLVES. A BLOOD-RED FACE LOOKS THROUGH AND WINKS AT NORA AND POOTIE.

A FEW MORE BLOWS SMASH AN OPENING THROUGH WHICH IT CAN ENTER. IT APPROACHES THE WOMAN AND THE GIRL, WHO SHRINK BACK AND BACK UNTH- THEY ARE AGAINST THE WALL AND CAN RETREAT NO FARTHER •

CAMERA CUTS TO LOOK AT IT FROM THEIR POINT OF VIEW WE SEE IT SLOWLY STUMPING FORWARD, LOOMING HORRIBLY AND MONSTROUSLY ABOVE THEM- A STRANGE, PLEADING EX-PRESSION CROSSES HIS BLOOD-RED FACE

NORA

(Driving the hypodermic needle into Its chest in the region of Its heart) There'.

IT

(Roaring in rage and pain as the deadly poison is pumped into Its heart) Aaaaaarrrg!

IT STAGGERS BACK. WITH A SPASMODIC EFFORT, IT RIPS OUT THE HYPODERMIC SYRINGE THAT IS STICKING IN ITS CHEST AND THROWS IT AWAY TURNING, IT LURCHES, STAGGERING OUT THROUGH THE RUINED ROOMS, OUT OF THE HOUSE AND OVER AND INTO THE LAB NEXT DOOR

THE CAMERA FOLLOWS IT.

IN THE LAB WE SEE IT TUCK JOE'S BLACKBOARD UNDER ONE ARM. AND THEN SWEEP UP INTO BOTH ITS ARMS AN AS-SORTMENT OF LAB GLASSWARE AND CHEMICALS,

HOLDING THESE, IT LURCHES BACK OUT OF THE LAB AND STAGGERS OFF INTO THE WOODS, AS NORA AND POOT!E COME OUT OF THE RUINED HOUSE IN TIME TO SEE IT DISAPPEAR.

AT THE SAME MOMENT. JUST AS IT IS DISAPPEARING, JOE BURSTS FROM THE EDGE OF THE WOODS NOT FAR AWAY AND A TRUCK DRIVES INTO THE YARD. THE TRUCK IS LOADED WITH THE SHERIFF AND A DOZEN OR MORE SHOTGUN-CARRYING DEPUTIES THEY, LIKE JOE, SEE IT DISAPPEAR

SHERIFF

(Leading his deputies and descending from the truck, speaks to Joe as Joe comes up) We heard there was a dangerous jungle animal loose around here. Tha. must be it.

JOE

(Solemnly) It is no mere jungle animal, Sheriff. But I think I know where we can find it. Follow me.

HE LEADS THE WAY INTO THE WOODS. NORA AND POOTIE FOLLOW. BEHIND THEM ARE THE SHERIFF AND HIS DEPUTIES, HANGING BACK FEARFULLY. BUT ALSO FOLLOWING.

CUT.

Scene 8—A little deeper in the woods, almost to Old Bottomless Swamp.

WE SEE IT, REELING AND STAGGERING THROUGH THE WOODS, THE BLACKBOARD UNDER ONE ARM, FRANTICALLY GROANING AND MIXING THE CHEMICALS IT HOLDS [N ITS HANDS- THE BIG TEST TUBE IN ITS RIGHT HAND IS FIZZING AND CHANGING COLOR

IT BREAKS OUT OF THE WOODS ONTO THE EDGE OF OLD BOTTOMLESS INTENT ON ITS CHEMICALS-MIXING. IT STEPS OFF THE EDGE, BLUNDERING INTO THE MUSKEG- BEFORE IT REALIZES WHERE IT IS GOING

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, IT BEGINS TO SINK,

ROARING, IT THRASHES AROUND, SINKING. BUT MANAGES TO TURN ITSELF SO THAT IT FACES THE EDGE OF THE SWAMP ONLY A YARD OR SO AWAY. SEEING IT iS STILL SINKING, IN SPITE OF ALL IT CAN DO. IT GOES FRANTICALLY BACK TO ITS MIXING

JOE, WITH POOTIE AND NORA. AND FOLLOWED BY THE SHERIFF WITH HIS DEPUTIES, EMERGE FROM THE WOODS AND APPROACH THE SWAMP. THEY HALT ON THE EDGE OF THE MUSKEG IN WHICH IT IS TRAPPED.

JOE

(To the Sheriff) Quick, we must try to pull it out.

SHERIFF
(Shaking his head) We can't. No rope. And you won't get any man in these here parts even as close to the edge of Old Bottomless as you're standing right now.

IT
(Roaring) Aaaaarrrg!

IT IS UP TO THE NECK NOW, AND QUICKLY GOING DOWN OUT OF SIGHT JOE SPINS ABOUT AND FOR A MOMENT THE CAMERA CUTS BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN HIS FACE AND THE BLOOD-RED FEATURES OF IT- A LOOK OF STRANGE UNDERSTANDING SEEMS TO PASS BETWEEN THEM.

THEN IT. JUST AS THE SWAMP IS ABOUT TO CLOSE OVER ITS HEAD. WINKS AT JOE AND REACHES OUT TO PASS THE TEST TUBE IN HIS HAND TO JOE

JOE TAKES IT. HE STARES AT IT. HE GIVES AN EXCLAMATION OF SURPRISE. IT DISAPPEARS UNDER THE SURFACE OF THE SWAMP WITH A HORRIBLE BUBBLING SOUND.

BUT A MOMENT LATER, ONE LONE ARM EMERGES FOR A SECOND TO PASS THE BLACKBOARD OUT TO JOE-
JOE TAKES THIS. TOO. AND EXCLAIMS AGAIN.

NORA

Oh, Joe! What is it?

JOE

(Excitedly, showing the contents of the test tube to Nora) White! Pure white! See it?

NORA STARES, AND GASPS.

NORA

Joe! You mean—(She dares not say it)

JOE
(Happily) Yes! That's what it is! Aspirin-X.

HE STARES. OVERJOYED, AT NORA AND POOTIE.

It had the answer all the time. How else could It have survived those thousand years of being buried? In the days of Its ancient culture, Aspirin-X must have been as available as ordinary aspirin is now! When It was excavated, It realized It needed more of this miracle drug. Some strange, forgotten

sense must have drawn It to my laboratory—the one place on Earth where the materials for Aspirin-X were available.

NORA
But why didn't It just ask us—

JOE

Did we ever really give It a chance? No, from the beginning we treated it like a scientific specimen, an artifact. It was alone in this younger world of beings who did not understand It—who feared It because it was different.

CAMERA CUTS TO SHOW JOE'S FACE IN CLOSEUP, THERE IS A NOBLE SADNESS IN HIS EYES.

Naturally, It had to fight for existence the best way It could. But in It there was perhaps the spark of a humanity greater than our own. Didn't Pootie say that It came to her rescue when the pack of savage bears came after her at this very spot? Then, when It followed after her—possibly to find out if she was all right—It was greeted by gunfire from Dr. Soderup. Possibly It was still trying to explain Itself when you pumped It full of thiopental.

POOTIE
Why didn't that kill It right then, Uncle Joe?

JOE

It would have, sweetheart, if It hadn't been permeated by the Aspirin-X It had used during Its an-

cient lifetime. As it was, the Aspirin-X slowed the action of the poison so that It should have had time to make more Aspirin-X to cure itself completely. —Which was what It was doing when, running away from us, It stumbled into the swamp here. But still, It passed me the completed Aspirin-X as It sank, that the secret might not be lost to the world, though it was too late to save It, Itself.

SHERIFF
(To Joe) Taking a lot for granted, aren't you, son? Might've been sheer chance that critter put the right stuff together to get your Aspirin-X.

JOE
(In ringing tones) Chance? Never!

HOLDING THE BLACKBOARD IN ONE HAND, WITH THE OTHER, HE SWEEPS DIRT FROM THE SURFACE OF THE BOARD, REVEALING THE SYMBOLS CHALKED UNDERNEATH. HE POINTS TO A SYMBOL THAT HAS BEEN ERASED AND REPLACED WITH ANOTHER SYMBOL PLAINLY DRAWN BY A DIFFERENT HAND.

See there! There's where I went wrong in my calculations. It corrected them for me, and Its last act

was to pass me the blackboard that the knowledge would not be lost. Yes ...

HE PUTS THE ARM STILL HOLDING THE BLACKBOARD AROUND NORA AND HIS OTHER ARM AROUND POOTIE. THEY ALL TURN AND GAZE AT THE SWAMP WHERE IT HAS DISAPPEARED AS HE SPEAKS THE CAMERA PANS DOWN AND AWAY FROM THEM OUT OVER THE AREA OF MUCK IN WHICH IT WENT DOWN,

. . . Aspirin-X has now become available to the world of men, as it was available to the Earth populated by Its people. Will we use it wisely, this time, 1 wonder? Only the future will tell . . .

POOTIE
(Awed) Uncle Joe, is It really dead?

JOE

(Ponderingly) It should, indeed, be dead, Pootie—poisoned and sunk no ope knows how deep under the muskeg. But can we tell?

BACKGROUND MUSiC RISES OVER HIS VOICE.

Once before It was thought to be dead, even mummified. But we do not yet know the full powers of Aspirin-X. It survived for thousands of years before to walk the Earth again. Perhaps, who knows, down under all that muskeg, a spark of life still lingers. . . .

THE RISING OF THE BACK-GROUND MUSIC DROWNS OUT HIS VOICE. WE SEE ONLY THE LITTLE SQUARE OF MUSKEG IN THE SCREEN, AS WE WATCH. A BUBBLE OOZES TO THE SURFACE, SWELLS UP AND POPS,

THE MUSKEG IS STILL AGAIN.

THE SCENE DARKENS. THE FINAL MUSIC FILLS OUR EARS. SLOWLY, RISING UP OUT OF THE NOW DARKENED SWAMP COME THE SHINING WORDS—

THE END
FOLLOWED SLOWLY BY ONE MORE WORD IN A RUNNING SCRIPT. . . .

—Maybe. . . .

The Green Buildini

That new green building down there? Sorry, everything behind the fence is government property, and I don't have anything to do with ... A reporter, are you? Fancy that, now. No—no sir, I do not believe in censorship of a free press. I happen to vote a straight ticket, and . . . Well, that's mighty nice of you to say so. Of course, I know we depend on our newspapers. You take a restaurant-owner like myself . . . You don't say so! Those army fellers said that? Well, I certainly sympathize and—

Well now, I will sit down for a minute. The lunch rush is over now—but these waitresses . . . Yes, I was here from the beginning. In fact, I was here at the beginning. You mean to say they've kept it a secret from you newspaper fellers all this time? Well now, that's a shame—now don't quote me as saying that. After all I'm in business here . . .

No, no, I didn't think you would, but I thought I'd better mention it, just to make sure like . . . What do I mean at the beginning? Why, I mean at the begin-ning. I was here. right here on this very spot, when It landed.

Not in this restaurant building, of course. I had a

... I should say I do know what it used to be like around here. Those old days arc graven on my heart—yes sir, graven right on my heart. Like I say, I used to have a different sort of business, a—well, you might call it a sort of candy store right here on this spot.

I'd sit here in the afternoon, waiting for school to let out and the kids to come by, just tike I was the afternoon it happened, only that was Memorial Day and no school.

But I used to sit right here and—just look out the window beside you, there—and see right down across to the park and the little creek with the teeter-totters the kids used to play on, alongside it. And then up the other side of the hill to where the grade school itself was and the lops of Piper Park just showing over the head of the hill beyond.

It was real green and pretty then. None of the concrete and smell and barbed wire they got now. Just a free, happy, little hollow, sort of. I used to say . . .

The day it happened? That's what I'm telling you about. There I was, sitting and looking out, about two-twenty in the afternoon, thinking how peaceful it all was. Then I heard this sort of roaring overhead-Them jet fighters again, I said to myself. But I didn't get up and go to the window and look—because, you know, by the time you go to look for them, they're gone already. Besides, I seen them lots before.

I just sat and waited for the roar to fade out. But it didn't fade. It got louder and louder. Then, just when I was starting to get up and look after all, there was this terrific concussion, and that was the last I knew for some few minutes.

When I recovered consciousness—come to, you know—I was lying in the ruins of what had been my once fine store. For a minute, I couldn't just remem-

ber what had happened. Then I began to notice the counter knocked over and glass all over the place

and how dark it was because the roof had fallen down around me.

I was sort of pinned in a little, narrow spot, there. Not pinned in, really, but sort of boxed in, so's I couldn't get out. I could see to the outside, though, and a little patch of the hollow with It laying there.

Well, I lay stuck there, with my head starting to ache, and watched It sticking up out of the grass in the park by the teeter-totters like a big chunk of old granite rock, the size of a three-story building, with no telling how much more of it out of sight, buried in the ground underneath. I watched It glowing and fuming, and the trees all wilting around It. I could feel the heat and smell of It clear up here.

And then, after a couple of hours, finally the soldiers come along and dug me out. You know, Camp Krilibee was on some kind of maneuvers around here just then. They had this area staked off faster'n you can say Jump Jimmy. That's what stopped you fellers from being wised up, of course. I noticed, afterwards, they had a story in the papers about a meteorite that fell here—and-that was all.

But not for me. it wasn't all. I tell you, those government people wanted to know everything I knew, right down to what I had for breakfast that same morning. First off, they took me to an army hospital and kept me there the rest of the day, though there wasn't anything wrong with me but a little bump on the head—and I don't know to this day where that come from, unless it was a can of beans falling off the shelf behind me when It hit.

Then, when they let me go home, I wasn't to tell anyone anything, not even my wife. Lot they know about such things! Why, nobody even asked me. You'd think some people'd be interested, but in new suburbs like this Piper Park, your next door neighbor's a stranger, sometimes.

Well now, I'm a man who keeps his word—which

is more than you can say for certain people. Anyway, I didn't tell anybody what I saw. Not Jeanie, my wife, or my married daughter, or anyone. And, like I say, they weren't too interested, except in what was to be done about the store. I told her the govemment'd fix it. That settled her. Oh, I did say, too, that I saw something big that had fell—but they took for granted it was the meteorite the papers said it was. They never raised the subject again until I did.

But these government investigating fellers sure did. They let on it was about getting me a new store, they had me down at the site—right close to where the green building is now—asking me questions, and asking me questions until. Lord love Bessie, you'd have thought they'd wear their tongues out. They'd set up some temporary buildings—not like the permanent ones they have now, more like army barracks—surrounding It and pretty much hiding It.

They never let the school open again, either. Those kids had a real picnic for a week until Piper Park got them sorted out to other schools. And all the time, they were after me with these questions. What'd I hear first? And what kind of noise was it? And what'd I see when It was just sitting there, before they dug me out?

Well now, I wasn't born yesterday, nor the day before- They didn't tell me anything—but it didn't take much looking to see what was going on. Army trucks going in, and coming out, and stuff being set up, armed soldiers all around the fence, and cannonlike things sitting all around pointed at It. They had men in civilian clothes swarming all over It, too, with all sorts of instruments, enough to resurrect the dead.

Meteorite! That wasn't any meteorite. Of course, I could've told them that from the beginning. Meteors don't smell—and they don't sweat wet stuff out of them—and trees don't curl up and die around them. More'n that—and I wouldn't be telling you this now,

except for what happened later—they don't move none after they hit the ground. They don't twist and wiggle around like an old hog settling down into the mud, the way I'd seen It do before they dug me out of my wrecked store.

I told them that. I told them everything. They didn't thank me any—just kept after me, the same questions over and over again. I finally got my fill of it.

"You think I'm lying, say so!" I told them.

"No, no," they'd answer, real soothing. "No, no, we'd just like to go over it once more, in case you remember something else." Well, I'm as patient as Sunday. I kept going over it with them.

Then, just about that time—oh, maybe a month or two after it happened—when they were starting to slack up on the meteorite story and let on It was maybe an army secret flying missile that'd gone astray, my money for the store come through. Insurance check.

Well, I know a good thing when I see it. I bought the land here, where my candy store was, and had

this restaurant built. There was already about five hundred people working on It down there, all coming on to starve about noon, with nothing closer—except an army chow line—than a hamburger joint at the highway overpass the other side of Piper Park.

Of course, I had to give the building and, later on, the business my personal attention, day and night, you know. So, about this time, I began figuring that maybe they ought to owe me some money for the time I was spending answering their questions. So I asked them for it.

Well sir, not a cent. Not—a—cent! Twenty-thirty dollars a day for one of those civilian youngsters to pound away at It with a little rock-chipping hammer and make guesses—but not a cent for the man who saw It land, and knew . . .

What'd I know? Why, that It was alive, of course! They hadn't fooled me with their meteorite, guided-missile business. That thing was just as alive as you or I, and they were plenty concerned on account of it. Something that big and alive—and so hard they couldn't make a dent in It—and so tough it could land the way It did without getting hurt. I tell you, they were concerned.

But I don't want to get off on a sidetrack here. The important thing was, like I'm telling you, they refused to pay me a cent for my time.

"We only hire experts," this one feller told me.

"Well, I'm an expert," I said. "An expert at seeing It land. You got no experts to match me in that department."

He admitted that. But they'd gone over the landing pretty thoroughly with me, he said. And so on and so forth—and, what with one thing and another, they figured they didn't have any more need for me.

"All right," I said. "Fair enough. Now, how about paying me for the time I've already spent?"

Seems he didn't have the authority to do that. Of course, I could bill Congress down in Washington or some such fool thing. But I had ought to consider that I was in pretty much the same position as a citizen who sees a crime being committed. I couldn't very well expect the police to pay me for telling them what I saw.

Now that's a pretty strong argument. If he'd left it at that, I might have left it at that, and no more said. But the darn fool couldn't leave well enough alone. He took me by the elbow and pulled me over to the window of his office and pointed at my new restaurant.

"Look there," he said. "And think of what you had

before this happened. It seems to me that's pretty good payment for what you've done."

That made me mad.

"Mister," I said, "you better figure out who ate

hamburger instead of pot roast to keep up the insurance on the old place, these last twenty years, before you go taking credit for that."

I slammed my hat on my head and walked out. And I've never been through the gates over there again since.

All right, I'm not one to fly off the handle before I know which way I'm going. I've never said any more about it. I've gone right on serving all these mineralogists and bacteriologists and chemists and what-nots, just the same as ever. But I made up my mind when I walked out of that office that there was a certain fair and honest sum due me for the time and trouble I'd taken—and, come someday, I'd collect it. Sonny, it looks like you're the one to help me get it.

Yes, you! Now, you can just save yourself the trouble of pretending to be so surprised. I'm not as green as I look. You knew all about me before you came into this restaurant. Why did you know? Because they've finally decided to let the news out, that's why! All you newspaper fellers are jumping on it as quick as you can. The end "of this week, the whole story's going to bust wide open.

How do I know? Never mind how I know. The point is, do you want to be first with the real eyewitness story of It landing, and all the facts? All right. Well, then—it just so happens I've got it worked out, down to the penny, what my time was worth in answering those questions.

How much? I'll just write it down here on the edge of your paper napkin. That's the figure. Yes sir, there's a pay phone right around the corner there by the Men's. I'll sit right here and wait . . .

They said okay? Thought they would. Now, lean closer here. Let me tell you. That thing down there's just about the size of a three-story building above ground, and maybe as much again below ground.

And heavy? They figure it's heavier than lead—heavier than gold, even. Diamonds won't scratch it.

More'n that—lean real close, I don't want to talk too loud—they figure, even if they tried an atom bomb, It wouldn't be hurt. You follow me, sonny? We got something down there like nothing the human race ever bumped into before.

Ever since—now listen close—ever since the day It landed, they've been working, and studying, and testing, all the top scientists in the country, trying to figure It out. What is It? What's It here for? What's It aim to do? And what'l) happen to us if It does? And they found some answers—that's how come the green building you asked about. They just finished that last week.

Let me tell you some more about It, first. You know that heat It puts out—you can feel it even up here—well, that's because it's got radioactive insides. They been mining all around It, setting up what they call heat-exchange units. They figure It puts out enough heat to warm every house in Piper Park - . .

What? No, the radiation doesn't reach the outsides of It, just the head. All that stuff It sweats out—orthophosphonc acid. It eats ordinary dirt and rock and breathes air and sweats orthophosphoric acid. That's why the railroad spur going into the place—and the tank cars.

But you see what I mean—It's alive. And that's not the half of it—It's intelligent.

They got some feller down here who's been studying brain-waves for years, and he got pictures of brain-waves from It. They showed It was thinking—you gel it now?

Two thousand people down there now, behind that barbed wire fence and those soldiers—nearly all of them top specialists in something or other. Well now, that's it. Something had to be done. Because, you see, while they managed to figure out that It was

thinking, there's no possible earthly way—vet—they can figure out what It's thinking. And there's no telling what It might do.

That's the reason for the green building. That's why they've been working so hard and why they can't keep it secret any longer. It's that green building. What they got in it, even I don't know. But I do know the man in charge of it came ail the way from the East to watch and make sure it was put up right.

in

That, sonny, is a device to keep that thing down there from taking off again until we humans are through with It.

Tempus Non Fugit

The desk clerk at the placement service sighed. "You again?" "Yes," said Whitely Spence un-

happily. He was a little man with a little voice; it always annoyed him. No matter how he tried to sound as if it did not matter how other people felt about him, that voice of his would insist on giving him away- Right now, he was suffering under the clerk's scorn and his voice revealed the fact.

"What went wrong this time?" demanded the clerk.

"My—er—employer absconded with the funds for the charity drive," said Whitely, meekly.

"Oh, if was that guy, was it?" said the clerk. "I was reading about it in the newsfax. Well, I suppose now you want us to find you something else?"

"If you don't mind."

"Well, I don't know," grumbled the clerk, punching buttons on the desk before him. "We don't have too much call for private business managers, anyway, and with your record"—there was a buzz, and a screen set in the desk before him lit up with Whitely's dossier—"we've fixed you up with five different employers, and you haven't been able to stick with any of them. There was this boxer first—"

"But he got married, and his wife made him quit," said Whitely, hurriedly. "He didn't need me any more.''

"Then this rich fella; all you had to do was keep track of his investments—"

"I—er—don't drink," said Whitely. "And he—"

"Says here your puritanic attitudes made him uncomfortable. Then there's the used helicopter dealer—"

"But he cheated his customers outrageously," protested Whitely. "I couldn't in conscience—"

"The old lady with philanthropies—"

"I was allergic to her cats."

"And now this last guy. Well," said the clerk. "I don't know what we can do for you. I suppose there's no technical blame to be hung on you for this string of failures, but clients don't like our recommending someone with a record like yours. Ever think of going into some other line of work?"

"But I put in ten years of college and field work," said Whitely. "It takes that much to qualify for a business manager's private certificate. You must have something."

"Wellll," drawled the clerk, "I'don't say we don't. But I don't recommend it." He punched a few more buttons, and a new series of lines flipped into existence on his desk screen. "There's one chance here. An inventor. Ten percent of his gross income to his business manager."

"Ten percent!" Whitely goggled at this liberality. Two percent was the most he had ever hoped for. Then his native caution tugged at his elbow. "Er—I suppose he makes an adequate gross income?"

"Strict amount confidential," replied the clerk. "Authorized however to inform you in six figure bracket."

"Six figures!" Whitely reeled. This was too good to be true. After all his trouble, to stumble on a job paying a minimum of ten thousand credits a year.

His heart palpitated. "What—what's wrong with the job?"

"Wrong? Nothing!" said the clerk, stiffly. "Never anything wrong with the jobs we handle. It's just that this one's for Hobart Grogan."

"Hobart Grogan?" said Whitely, mystified.

"Don't know him? Well—" said the clerk, with a cough. "He's a bit eccentric; you know how inventors are. The last dozen or so managers we've sent him all quit. Up to you, of course."

Whiteiy thought it over. On one hand, the job for this unknown and rather terrify ing-sound ing inventor; on the other hand—Whitely thought of the fact that there remained less than twenty credits in his central account, and that all the other placement agencies in town had turned him down.

"You," the voice of the clerk interrupted his considerings, "might be just the sort of man to get along with Grogan. And ten thousand a year and up—"

"I'll take it," said Whitely.

Hobart Grogan, true to the best tenets of eccentricity, lived on the outskirts of town, in a large sprawling house of bubble plastic, the rooms of which seemed filled and jammed with all sorts of equipment in total disregard for their original intended function.

No one answered the door speaker; and since the door was ajar, Whitely entered and wandered to and fro through the building until he came at last to a closed door with a do not disturb sign hung upon it. Whitely hesitated for a moment, then diffidently knocked.

Silence.

He knocked again; somewhat harder this time.

"Come in!" barked an irascible voice.

Whitely gulped, adjusted his tunic scarf, and entered. In a small, square room littered with papers, a comfortable couch and an over-size desk, a tall, thin

man with a red beard sat busily rattling away at a typer. He did not look up as Whitely entered. His eyes continued to glare at the page in his typer, and his beard bristled,

"Bah!" he snorted.

Whilely approached.

"I don't mean to disturb you—" he began, having reached Hobart Grogan's elbow.

"Well you are," growled Grogan through his beard, still not lifting his eyes from his typer. "Who are you,

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anyway

"The Professional Placement service sent me." said Whitely. "I'm a business manager. I—"

"File B," said Grogan.

"What?"

"File B!" roared Grogan, suddenly. "Do I have to explain everything to everybody in words of one syllable? Damn the world's numbskulls! B for Bills; B for Bank statement. In the filing cabinet, whatever-your-name-is."

"Whiteiy Spence," said Whitely, faintly.

"B, Spence! B! Be astute! "Be alive. Balance my accounts."

Somewhat stunned, Whitely tottered over to the filing cabinet, found the file in question (crammed with bills) and went to work. At the end of half an hour, he shyly approached Grogan who was still typing-

"Er—Mr. Grogan—" he said.

Grogan said nothing.

"Mr. Grogan," went on Whitely, his voice gaining firmness. "You seem to be somewhat in debt."

Still, Grogan said nothing.

"You seem." said Whitely, "to have run up a bill with United Electronics for six thousand, two hundred and fifty credits. Your bank balance shows only one thousand, nine hundred and thirty-one credits,

leaving a deficit of four thousand, three hundred and nineteen credits." He waited.

"Mr. Grogan—"

"Shut up will you!" said Grogan, suddenly. "I want to finish this silly story."

Whitely stared.

"Silly story?" he echoed in something like a squeak.

The typer machine-gunned on for a few lines, then stopped abruptly.

"Certainly, silly story," said Grogan, complacently turning from the typer. "A story which is silly; I write them for my own amusement."

To prove his point, he glanced at the last page he had written and burst into a guffaw of laughter, his red beard jiggling madly.

"Listen to this—" he began.

"Mr. Grogan!" interrupted Whitely firmly. He was determined to make a success ot this last chance of his; he told himself that it was going to be necessary to be decisive with his employer. "This is no time for stories, silly or otherwise. The amount lacking to meet your current commitments is four thousand, three hundred and nineteen credits. As your business manager, I want to know if you have any means of raising it."

"Certainly," said Grogan. "Sell something."

"Sell what?"

"Anything," said Grogan with an airy wave of his hand. "Don't bother me with details; just take something and sell it. Simple procedure/' he muttered into his beard. "Don't know why / have to be the one to suggest things all the time."

Whitely quivered inside like a vanilla pudding, but his courage was up. "Grogan!" he said, manfully. "This won't do. I don't know what you will want to keep and what you won't want to. You—

"Bah!" snorted Grogan, exploding out of his chair. He shot out of the room and returned a moment later

with a small device somewhat resembling an archaic crystal set, which he shoved into Whitely's hands-
"Here!" he roared.

Whitely took it, hesitantly. "What i;i iP"
"A temporal determinant," said Grogan.
Whitely Spence gulped. Past experience had taught^ him that employers hated explaining themselves".*!
"What," inquired Whitely, "is a temporal deter-minant?"

Grogan, it seemed, was no exception to the general rule about employers. He immediately began to swear at Whitely in something that sounded like Low Dutch.
"—stupid oaf!" he thundered, emerging at last into English. "What could a temporal determinant be, but a determinant of temporal factors? In other words, fool, it determines what lime it is."
"A sort of clock?" hazarded Whitely, weakly.
"Not clock, idiot!" snarled Grogan. "A clock notes time, it doesn't determine it. You look at a clock to find out what time it is; you set this to make it the time you want."

Realization struck WhiteTy like a thunderbolt. A warm, blissful wave flowed over him and visions of million dollar checks (made out to Grogan) and hun-dred thousand dollar checks (made out to W. Spence) danced before his eyes.

"A time machine," he breathed. He touched it with trembling, reverent fingers. "Can I try it now?"

Grogan reached over and touched a small dial on the set. "Forward, or back?"

Whitely hesitated. Maybe it might be dangerous.
"Back," he said. "About half an hour or so."
Grogan twisted the dial. The room vanished.
Whitely knocked diffidently at the door.
Silence.

He knocked again, somewhat harder this time.
"Come in!" barked an irascible voice.
He gulped, adjusted his tunic scarf and entered—

But this is ridiculous, thought Whitely. I'm just doing the same thing over again. And he strained desperately against the unbreakable fabric of the Es-tablished Past, but could not alter it. Only with the temporal determinant, that was outside of Time, and independent of it, did he have freedom of action. Frantically he twisted the dia! in the opposite direction.

It was night. The room was the same, except that Grogan was placidly smoking a pipe in a corner and listening to Brahms' Second Symphony on his colore-corder.

"There you are finally," said Grogan. "You must

have gone to the full forward limit of the determinant."

Whitely drew a deep, relieved breath. "What is the limit?"

"Seven hours and twenty-three minutes—approximately," said Grogan. "After that, the probability index drops below the line of precise logical development. 1 could show you the mathematics—but then you wouldn't understand it, anyway. Of course you can go as far back along your own lifeline as you wish, although if you went too far back there might be some practical considerations preventing your return. However—you'd better be getting back."

"Getting back?" echoed Whitely.

"Certainly," said Grogan. "Back to the point at which you started your movements in time. It's now nine o'clock at night. After you came from here this afternoon, you talked to me for a couple of minutes and then dashed out as if your tail was on fire."

"Where was I going?" asked Whitely.

"You didn't say," replied Grogan, dryly; and, reaching over, twisted the dial back to its original position.

TEMPUS NON FUGIT

187

"Satisfied?" asked Grogan.

Whitely looked around him. It was daylight again;;

the determinant was still in his hands.

"Where am I going?" he demanded excitedly.

"What do you mean—where are you going?" snapped Grogan. "Try to be explicit, Whitely. I know it's a strain, but try."

"I was just seven hours and twenty-three minutes—or something like that—in the future," babbled Whitely. "And you said that after I got back here, I went someplace suddenly. And—since I haven't actually gone, yet, I don't know where I went I thought you could tell me where to go."

Grogan's face lit up with a happy smile. "Bless you, Whitely; you have brightened my day for me. It's so seldom in a man's life that opportunities like this occur. Of course I'll tell you where to go."

And he did—in detail. It took about five minutes.

"That wasn't," said Whitely, indignantly, after Grogan had finished, "what I meant."

"Naturally not," answered Grogan, and burst into a roar of laughter.

"Well," said Whitely, red-faced, after Grogan's guffaws had toned down to chuckles, "you might tell me why I found myself repeating what I'd done before, on my trip into the past."

Grogan sobered up. "The past is immutable. All this hogwash about alternate futures is so much pig swill."

"Oh," said Whitely, and lapsed into thoughtful silence-

"Well," rasped Grogan, impatiently. "You wanted something to make money from, to pay that little bill of mine. Take the blasted thing out and sell it, or hock it, or something."

"Sell?" muttered Whitely. "Hock^* No, no—license, that's what we'll do with it."

And, with that, he rushed out the door.

188 Gordon R. Dickson

United Electronics was a large outfit. It not only sold to people like Grogan, it also bought from people like him when they came up with something United Electronics would find useful. And Whitely already had a nodding acquaintance with the purchasing agent, as a result of his short interlude with the rich gentleman who had been offended by Whitely's lack of taste for liquor. Consequently, it was to United Electronics that Whitely took himself as soon as he had taken the trouble of putting the determinant under interim registration at the local branch of the patent office.

The purchasing agent, however, was out when Whitely arrived; consequently Whitely had no choice but to sit in a state of miserable impatience for three hours. Trying to track the U.E. man down through the maze of buildings would only have resulted in Whitely's missing him altogether. Whitely found himself as he sat wishing rather wistfully that Grogan would invent a device for tracking down purchasing agents. But no, somehow Whitely felt in his bones that what Grogan would invent would always be something he needed, or found interesting.

Eventually, however, the man in question, a thin, forty-year-old by the name of Cooper McBray, returned.

"Ah, Spence," he said smoothly. "You wanted to see me?"

Whitely looked at this complacent, thinning-haired figure in its neat business suit of tweed; a vicious desire to ruffle the man's calm possessed him. "For three hours," he said. between clenched teeth, "I've

been sitting here with a device that can make five million a year for the firm that markets it—and you ask me if I want to see you."

"Now, now, Spence," said McBray, who was used to exaggerated claims, "haste makes waste, you know.

Come into the office, here." He led the way into the panelled room that was his headquarters.

"Now," he repeated, sitting down and waving Whitely into a chair, "what have you got, Spence? My secretary says you're with Grogan. Never met him, myself, but I understand he's a firecracker. What's the gimmick?"

"The gimmick, as you put it," said Whitely, leaning across the desk toward him, "is a temporal determinant."

"And what," asked McBray, "is a temporal determinant?"

For a moment, Whitely felt a small wistful desire to be able to swear in Low Dutch. Bravely, he squelched the wish. "To you," he said dryly, "a time machine "

McBray leaned back in his chair and laughed until tears glistened in his eyes.

"Well, well, well," he said. "So it's a time machine, is iP"

"Yes," said Whitely. "It is."

McBray leaned forward and wiped his eyes. "Come now, Spence," he said. "After all, my working day is rather a full one. And you've had your joke. Now, what is it you've really got there."

Whitely leaned forward and put the temporal determinant in McBray's hands. "Which way," he asked, "would you like to go. Forward in time? Or back?"

"Oh, let's say—back," answered McBray, with a chuckle. He was still chuckling when Spence set the dial for five minutes earlier.

From Spence's point of view, the proceedings were unspectacular. One minute, McBray was beaming with merriment; the next, he was sitting back abruptly in the chair behind his desk, his face grave, his forehead beaded with sweat.

Whitely leaned over and took the temporal deter-

minant from his unresisting hands. "Good Lord!" gasped McBray.

"You had to live through those last five minutes of your life all over again, didn't you?" said Whiteiy.

"I couldn't do anything about it—it was awful—" The purchasing agent began to pull himself together. He wiped his face with a shaking hand. "I'll concede you've got something valuable there, Spence. How much do you want for it?"

"It's not tor sale," replied Whiteiy, succinctly. "But we might be persuaded to license your manufacture of the temporal delerminant at a hundred thousand a year."

McBray started up out of his chair. "A hundred thou—you're crazy, man!"

Whilely shrugged; it felt good to be on the dominant side for a change. "You can see for yourself," he said, balancing the temporal determinant carelessly in one'hand, "there's nothing much to the manufacture of the device. And we guarantee it for seven hours and twenty-three minutes into the future, and as far as you wish into the past along your own lifeline. There's lots of small companies that would hock their eyeteeth to get the advantage over U.E. that this would give them."

"But a hundred thousand a year' I've got no authority to make that kind of deal."

"In that case," said Whiteiy, sweetly, "I suggest you take me to someone who has."

"Why—" spluttered McBray, "nobody but the President of the Board could—I'd be laughed out of my job if I took you to him with a proposal like that."

Whiteiy got to his feet. "In that case, I'd better be going."

McBray came swiftly around the desk to intercept him. "Never mind," he said grimly. "You know I can't take the risk of letting this get out of my hands. The whole matter will go to old Conninger, after his

TEMPUS NON FUOIT

191

office hours—and the blood of us both be on your head!"

Cyril P. Conninger, President of United Electronics, was a man who liked good food. He was also a man who, when he said a thing, meant it, people who did not recognize this fact were not long associated with Cynl P. Conninger.

Consequently, it was, that after having spent several tiresome hours in locating the President of the Board at his Golden Hills estate and driving out

there, Whiteiy Spence and McBray were further constrained to wait while Conninger finished a leisurely and extensive dinner. Conninger had made it a rule never to be interrupted at meals, the iron-faced butler informed McBray of this fact. McBray sat down with a sigh to wait. So, perforce, did Whiteiy.

Finally, at some indeterminate time after 8:30 (Whitely's watch, perhaps somewhat baffled by its experiences with Time, seemed to have given up running at all) he found himself face-to-face with his potential customer.

"Well, McBray," said Conninger, settling heavily into an overstuffed chair in the library. "Whozis? Hah?"

"Excuse us for butting in this way, Mr. Conninger," replied the purchasing agent, nervously. "But Mr. Spence here has a rather unusual item, the manufacture rights of which he wants to license to us for a rather high sum."

"Ho?" said the President of United Electronics. "Hah?" He looked at Whiteiy curiously, as if doubtful whether that individual wasn't something that the second maid should be called to sweep up and carry out on a dustpan.

"He has," said the perspiring McBray, "a time-traveling device."

"Heh?" ejaculated Conninger. startled. Then, as comprehension struck him—"Haw! Haw!"

"You can laugh," snapped Whitely, "But I've got it and it works. If some other company gets it they could put United Electronics out of business in one year."

Cyril P. Conninger's good humor evaporated somewhat suddenly. These were fighting words. "Ho?" he barked. "Izato? Lemmeseeit! Whatzit?"

Whitely exhibited the temporal determinant. "You can go either forward or backward in time." He smiled enticingly.

"Would you care for a demonstration?"

"Uh!" grunted Conninger, in vigorous affirmative.

Whitely thrust the device into the other man's hands. He twisted the dial.

"Ho—" began Conninger in alarm. He was cut off abruptly, sat perfectly motionless for a second, then began to tremble violently. His face had turned a decided green.

"Mr. Conninger!" cried McBray, alarmed. "Are you

all right?"

The President of the Board gulped, choked, swallowed, and finally found voice. "All right, you damn fool' All right, you stupid idiot! Of course I'm not all right. How would you feel if you had just eaten two full size dinners in a row?"

He groaned, massaging his ample stomach tenderly. Whitely took advantage of the diversion to repossess himself of the determinant.

"Hey!" cried Conninger, realizing his loss. "Gimme that here!"

"Not," said Whitely, smoothly, "until you've agreed to my terms."

"Terms? Hey! What terms?"

"One—one hundred thousand a year for manufacturing rights," quavered McBray.

"One hundred—gug!" choked Conninger. He quiv-

ered as if the temporal determinant had just made another assault on his stomach. Then, because he was after all a businessman, he said— "Five thousand."

"Goodbye," said Whitely.

"Sixty thousand."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"All right, blast you, sixty-five thousand."

Whitely came over and patted Cyril P. Conninger on the shoulder. Something that had never been done to him before in the memory of anyone connected with United Electronics.

"I realize," said Whitely, "that you're actually trying to make a deal. The trouble is just that you're too used to thinking in terms of these piddling little sums. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll drop my price to ninety-five thousand to show that small considerations don't weigh with me. Now you can tell the Board that you saved them some money."

Conninger purpled and opened his mouth. It turned out that he, also, could swear in Low Dutch—or at least something that soundeohremarkably like it.

"—and seventy-five thousand is my last offer. Not a tenth-credit more; and be damned to you!"

Whitely smiled- Actually, seventy-five thousand was far more than he had expected. He leaned forward and spoke very distinctly. "I'll take—" he began—

and disappeared.

It was night. The room was Grogan's room. He was
^ placidly smoking a pipe in one corner and listening
to Brahms' Second Symphony on his colorecorder.

"There you are finally," said Grogan. "You must
have gone forward to the full limit of the deter-
minant."

Whitely drew a deep, relieved breath. "What is the
limit?"

"Seven hours and twenty-three minutes—approx-

imately," said Grogan. "After that, the probability
index drops below the line of precise logical develop-
ment. I could show you the mathematics—but then
you wouldn't understand it, anyway. Of course you
can go as far back along your own lifeline as you
wish, although if you went too far back there might
be some practical considerations preventing your re-
turn. However—you'd better be getting back."

"Getting back?" echoed Whitely.

"Certainly," said Grogan. "Back to the point at
which you started your movements in time. It's now
nine o'clock at night. After you came from here this
afternoon, you talked to me for a couple of minutes
and then dashed out as if your tail was on fire."

"Where was I going?" asked Whitely.

"You didn't say," replied Grogan, dryly; and, reach-
ing over, twisted the dial back to its original position.

Then Whitely was back in the library of Cyril P
Conninger. "I'l! take seventy-five thousand," he said,
hastily.

Silence greeted this remark. Whitely looked from
President to purchasing agent, from Conninger to
McBray, and felt his heart sink as he noticed a subtle
and unfavorable difference in the attitudes of the two
facing him.

What had happened?

And then realization struck him. He had not come
back to the same moment that he had left. Instead,
he had been missing for a length of time equal to
that which his conversation with Grogan had re-
quired. And in that time—he could tell it by the sly
looks on their faces—Conninger and McBray had
cooked up something between them.

"Ho, ho," chortled Conninger.

"Heh, heh, heh," rasped McBray.

"Seventy-five thousand," echoed Conninger, "he says."

TEMPUS NON FUGIT

195

"Don't tell me you take our little joke seriously," said McBray -

"Yes," said Whitely, grimly. "I did and do. Do you want to talk business, or don't you?"

"Come now, Spence," said McBray. "You didn't really think that we'd pay seventy-five thousand a year for the rights to manufacture a mere toy?"

"Toy?" said Whitely.

"Toy," said McBray. "I imagine some people might find it entertaining to repeat small portions of their lives—but hardly at the cost of buying such an expensive gadget as this. But nobody in his senses would want to shorten his apparent life by hopping seven hours and some minutes into the future. I really can't think of any good commercial use for the determinant. And on the other hand, think of the uncertainty, the danger. Rather a dangerous gadget, don't you think, Mr. Conninger?"

"Absolutely, McBray," replied Conninger. "Ought to be a law. Dangerous plaything. No good use for it. Might write the papers about it myself if it shows up on the market."

"Of course, Spence," said McBray, delicately, "I suppose we could still buy it from you—merely as a curiosity for development in our own tabs. But the price would be closer to seven hundred and fifty than seventy-five thousand credits. That, I would say, is about what it's worth. Since we can't think of any practical use for it. Or can you, Spence?"

Whitely thought desperately.

Could he?

He could not.

"Well?" said McBray.

For once in Whitely's life anger got the better of his good nature and exploded out of him.

"No, I can't!" he snapped, jumping to his feet. "But I'll tell you one thing. Practical use, or no practical use, you're not getting your hands on this. And

196 Gordon R. Dickson

what's more, I'll bet there is a practical use, and I'm going to find it. And then if you want it, you're going to have to pay through the nose for it!"

And he stalked out.

On his way back to Grogan's, Whitely contemplated the temporal determinant sadly. It was ail very well to say confidently that he was going to find a use for it; but it was another matter entirely to go about doing so. He chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. McBray and Conninger's game was clear. They would start circulating the word that the T.D. was danger- ous and uncommercial, and that they had turned it down for that reason. With such a rumor circulating none of the smaller outfits would dare touch it. Of course, someone would take it eventually; but by that time the Conninger labs, briefed by McBray's skilled observation of the determinant Whitely had showed him, would be well on the way to coming out with their own determinant, with just enough change to get around the patent laws. Whitely's and Grogan's only hope was to get the determinant on the market first.

There must be some sort of practical use for the thing- Whitely knotted his brows. Perhaps he and Grogan could try manufacturing temporal determi- nants on a small scale themselves and selling them to retail outlets as curiosities . ..

"Grogan," said Whitely, coming into Grogan's room a few minutes later. "How much did it cost us to make the temporal determinant?"

Grogan was once more busy at the typer. "Don't interrupt me," he growled. "I'm having a small sci- entific discussion with one of these Europeans. What's a colloquia! phrase in German meaning "obstinate moron'?"

"Why, I don't know," said Whitely, caught off balance.

"I hate to use the word dummkopf again." reflected Grogan. "I've already used it twelve times in this one letter. Oh, well—"

His typer rattled busily for a moment, then stopped.

"Now," he said, turning to Whitely. "What was that? Oh, cost. Let me see—there, about four hun- dred and fifty credits worth of parts there, and of course my own time would be worth at least another thousand—insofar as you can put a price on time as valuable as mine."

"Four hundred and fifty credits worth of parts!" echoed Whitely weakly.

"Naturally," said Grogan. "I hate making anything out of cheap shoddy materials. That little round af- fair that looks like a button is really a bank of fifteen microcells matched to my specifications. And those

insulators, though you can't see them, are commercial diamonds because of their useful heat conductivity.

"Couldn't," quavered Whitely,. "couldn't the temporal determinant possibly be made out of material just a little less expensive?"

"What?" snorted Grogan, wrathfully. "I'd as soon cut off my right arm—and anyway, no, it couldn't."

Spence groaned and sat down heavily. "It's no good,then."

Grogan's beard bristled. "Something / made?" he thundered. "No good?"

Whitely quivered.

"What I mean is," he explained, "there's no commercial use for the T.D."

"Why in the devil's name should there be?"

"Look, Mr. Grogan," explained Whitely, desperately. "Nobody will pay us for the T.D. unless they think they can make money themselves off it." And

he toid Grogan about his interview with Conninger and McBray.

"Bah!" erupted Grogan, when he had finished. "People are imbeciles. I'll go talk to them. myself."

Whiteiy jumped to his feet, his face lighting up with hope. "Do you know a use for the T.D., then?"

"Of course not!" snapped Grogan. "But we've got to fly out to Conninger's place. I'll think up a use on the way."

Mr. Conninger and Mr. McBray were occupied, the impenetrable butler informed them when they arrived. It was too late and they had left orders not to be disturbed, particularly by any gentlemen whose initials were W. S. He regretted therefore, but—

"Don't," interrupted Grogan harshly, at this point in the conversation.

The butler raised his eyebrows with lofty scorn. "Don't?" he echoed, with amused tolerance.

"Don't regret it; because we're going in anyway," snapped Grogan. "Just scuttle on down the hall there and inform your Mr. Conninger that Hobart Grogan is here to see him."

Slowly, the iron visage of the butler crumpled and softened. A worshipful look came into his eyes. "Hobart Grogan?"

"The same," said Grogan.

"Not—not—" stammered the butler, "the Hobart Grogan who wrote the article entitled 'The Application of the Theory of Finite Discontinuity of Functions to States of Quantised Probability,' in the December issue of the Mathematical JoumaP"

"I am," said Grogan.

"Sir," said the butler, "may I have the honor of shaking your hand?"

"You may." said Grogan.

They shook hands.

"And now, sir," said the butler, "Mr. Conninger will see you in the library."

"But—but you said—" stammered Whiteiy.

"Sir." said the butler, simply, "there are in the world today, over eight hundred men equal in position and financial resources to Mr. Conninger; but there are only seventy-three bonafide butlers."

He inclined his head and stalked off down the hall. Inside of a couple of minutes he returned. "Mr. Conninger will see you now, gentlemen."

Whiteiy and Grogan went down the hall and into the library.

"Well?" demanded McBray, nastily, as they entered.

"Are you Conninger?" asked Grogan, looking at the purchasing agent inquiringly.

"No," answered McBray, "I'm—"

"Then what the devil are you interrupting the conversation for?" snapped Grogan. "I came here to talk to Conninger. Who's Conninger?"

"I am," said the President_of the Board of United Electronics.

"Whiteiy tells me you can't think of a use for my temporal determinant."

"I—" began Conninger.

"Shut up," said Grogan, peevishly. "Nobody has any manners these days—interrupting all the time. I should, of course, have foreseen this eventuality. Any „ businessman with imagination would hardly waste -(his time in business. The obvious solution to the problem of course is for you to market the temporal determinant under some such snappy title as the Handy Pocket Timesaver."

"But it doesn't save time," objected McBray.

"Ass!" roared Grogan, turning on the purchasing agent. "Of course it doesn't; Time is inelastic and permanent. No man has more of it than can be con-

tained in his lifetime. However, judicious use of the temporal determinant will allow people to make profitable use of time that is otherwise wasted. —Moron!" He glowered at McBray.

"Hey!" said Conninger, rousing himself to articulate speech. "How?"

Grogan drew a long, patient breath.

"For the benefit of your limited perceptions," he said, "I will diagram the procedure. One Sunday afternoon, you find yourself at home with nothing to do for four hours- So, with the temporal determinant you jump ahead to dinner time. On the following Monday, you find yourself with an interesting little problem in tensor calculus but not the time to work it out in. So you hop back to Sunday afternoon and fill in the vacant four hours with your problem, and whatever other small enthusiasms occur to you. If, of course, you had sat around doing nothing all Sunday afternoon, the time would be filled; and if then you went back via the temporal determinant, you would simply have to live through the period of sitting around, again. But, since you hopped over those four hours, they remain a blank space in time that you can later use for any activity you like."

McBray said, "Sure, I get it. And if you can expand the period, then we can put it on a more popular level. Say that a fellow's all ready to bring his girl friend a diamond ring—on, oh, April 11th. That is, he expects the cash in that day. Then he learns that it won't come through until April 25th.

"So he hops ahead to April 25th, picks up the dough and takes it back to the 11th. Then he can buy the ring when he planned, and he and his tootsie'U be happy."

There was a moment of silence in the library. Then Whitely spoke up. "And," he said, making no attempt to keep the triumph out of his voice, "we'll license the rights to manufacture to you for—"

"Four thousand, three hundred and nineteen credits," interrupted Grogan.

"No!" shrieked Whitely, "you—"

"Wasn't that the amount you said we needed?"

asked Grogan.

"Yes, but—" cried Whitely, "it's not enough. I—"

"Quite right!" said Grogan, "I'm glad you reminded me. My trip over here, and my valuable advice, will have to be charged for. Five thousand, three hundred and nineteen credits. Conninger."

"Done!" cried the President of United Electronics, leaping from his chair with surprising agility. "Here, I'll scratch down a temporary contract and you can sign over now. Got a pen, McBray? Gimme! Thanks."

"Very good," said Grogan, reading over Conninger's shoulder as the pen traveled furiously across the paper. "I'll be glad to sign. What are you choking for, Whitely? Nonsense, don't bother me now. How many times must I harp on the bad manners of interruptions. Take a lesson from me. I never interrupt. Courtesy, to my mind, is beyond price. —The pen? Thanks."

Grogan signed.

"A fine stroke of business," said Grogan, as they drove back to his house. "Even if I had to do it all myself. Simple enough to beat these businessmen at their own game if you simply keep your wits about you!"

"You—" stuttered Whitely, finally finding his voice. "They offered me seventy-five thousand for that license earlier today. And they would have paid eighty-five. That's what I was trying to tell you before you signed, but you kept shutting me up."

His words rang somewhat wildly in the close compartment of Grogan's helicopter, in which they were winging their way homeward through the night. At the controls, Grogan sat impassively, now and then touching the pitch controls with a delicate finger.

For a second after Whitely's words died away there was silence in the cab as Grogan peered thoughtfully out and down at the city beneath.

"Well, Whitely," he said, finally settling back in his seat. "What you say may be true; I would be the last person to accuse you of saying something that was not true. Indeed, I will admit we might possibly have squeezed a few more credits out of them. But that would have forced them to raise the price of temporal determinants beyond the reach of all but the very rich. By shrewdly lowering my own price, I maneuvered them into keeping theirs down. More sets will sell. There will be more money in circulation. They will make greater profits and consequently be able to lower their prices on other articles they manufacture. I will be able to buy equipment more cheaply."

And, satisfied with himself again, Grogan gazed happily out the helicopter window and hummed Brahms' Second Symphony contentedly to himself. In the other seat, over against the far window, Whitely said nothing. But he thought of a percentage commission check for ten thousand credits made out to himself, and his eyes filled with tears.

Cloak and Stagger

First it was just a haze of light. Then it was something distant and white, with a dark blob swimming against it. Then it all cleared; and the white was the ceiling and the blob was the face of a medician.

"Hello. Torm, boy," said the medician. "Easy, now. How's the head?"

Torm Lindsay reached up and felt a skullcap bandage smooth and tight under his fingers. "Whuzzat?" he said.

"I'll take it off now," said the medician. His hands went to Lindsay's head, and Torm could feel the bandage being peeled and rolled back. "Now how does it feel?"

"Feels fine," said Torm, his voice strengthening.

"Fine. Not the best operating conditions here, you know. How d'you feel?"

"Feel?" For a long moment Torm just lay silent, puzzling over this last question. Feel? How did he feel? He certainly felt different than he had ever felt before. Or had he once—a long time ago . . . ? The memory, if it was a memory, slipped from his mind's searching fingers and was gone.

"I feel fine," he said.

"Ataboy." The medician helped him up off the long, narrow table with its white cover. "Take it slow and easy now; the aliens have the oxygen up around the embassy again. Breathe slowly and naturally. Don't try to move too fast."

Torm tried it. The room and everything in it fciegan to settle around him once more. "Now what?"

"Room 243," said the medician. "She's waiting for you."

"Who's waiting?"

The medician peered at him. "Don't you know?"

Suddenly Torm remembered. It all blossomed out inside of him at once; and it seemed to him suddenly

that it was the best, the most wonderful, and the funniest thing he had ever known. He started to laugh and his laughter mounted until he was leaning helplessly on the medician and whooping in his ear.

"I'm a spy!" he yelped delightedly.

The medician's face went white. He glanced frantically around him. "For . . - Torm, you crazy fool! Keep it down! Keep your voice down!"

Turning the corner of the corridor leading to room 243 of the Human Embassy to the alien Federation of Peoples, on Arcturus Five (there was a peculiar feeling of dizziness accompanying the action, as if he had been turning corridors all morning—but not an unpleasant feeling at all; Torm Lindsay could hardly remember ever having felt so good) he came face to face with a mirror. From it, his own image beamed back at him, pug nose, blue eyes, all the normal attributes. He was wearing, he noted, his formal, one-piece suit of diplomatic black with the Green Earth emblem on the chest. A pleasant sight.

"Hi, me," said Lindsay.

Looking beyond the mirror, down the corridor, he saw the doorway he was seeking and went on to and through it. Inside was an office with a tall, shapely

brunette in the gold and white of a research medician, standing with her back to him, searching through the spools of a filing cabinet.

"Rrrufff!" Coming up behind, Lindsay gathered her in his arms. For a moment it was touch and go; but then she managed to break away from him.

"No, Torm," she said, getting a desk between them. "Not now. You sit down over there."

"But I love you," said Torm. "I iove you madly, Selagh."

Selagh Maron, who had been about to say something, closed her mouth and swallowed a little convulsively. "This is no time to break the news to me."

"You mean I haven't told you before?" said Torm, frowning. "That's odd."

"Oh, is it?"

"Of course. I've loved you ever since they first sent you out from Earth."

"Torm, will you please sit down?"

Torm sat down. "Now," said Selagh, briskly, seat-

ing herself in turn behind the desk, "I want you to answer a few questions."

"Carry on."

"Name?"

"You know my name."

"Name?"

"Torm Alexander McTavish Lindsay."

"Age?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Position?"

"Junior attache, diplomatic, Embassy to the Federation, Arcturus Five."

"Present duty?"

"To reach by any possible means the planetary center of government, and bring our case to the attention of the higher authorities."

"And what is our case?"

"Ha!" said Torm. "We haven't one."

"Torm!" cried Selagh, sitting up in her chair. "Well, what do you think? They've got umpteen thousand races and half the galaxy. If they don't like us, how can we make them? If they don't want us. what can we do about it?" Torm scratched the tip of his nose. "Seems silly to me."

"Torm, that's not the point," retorted Selagh, swiftly. "The Representative they've assigned to deal with us is just being obstructionistic, that's all. Your job is just to find someone else that Ambassador Coran and Admiral Natek can take our case to."
"Ah, well . . ." Torm shrugged.
Selagh looked at him severely. "Got it?"
"Yup!" said Torm, with a yawn. "Makes no difference to me, anyhow."
"That's right." Selagh got up. "Come on now."

The guard at the entrance stood to one side, stiff in his maroon and gray uniform, and they went in. The office of the Human Ambassador to Arcturus was long and wide, lit by the same bright sourceless lighting that illuminated the whole interior of the embassy building. Around a table at the far end of the room sat three men.

No—not quite three. One had a curiously crippled look about him. On closer inspection, it could be seen that he did not have the outjutting shoulder bones that belong to the human skeleton- In their

place was something like a large double ball-and-socket joint into which his arms fitted at the top, but the details of which were hidden by the sort of loose smock he wore. This structural peculiarity, and the unvarying stillness of his expressionless face, tagged him as an alien of one of the races which together made up the humanly unknown numbers and extent of the Federation of Peoples.

"Oh, there you are," said Ambassador Coran, looking up, his thin, lined face under its gray hair alertly

upon Selagh and Torm as they came up to the table. He turned to the alien. "This, Representative, is the young man we're sending out."

The Federation Representative turned his unmoving face to Torm. His eyes were dark and lustrous, and seemed to burn with a deeply hidden light. He stared at Torm.

"Reading my mind?" asked Torm, cheerfully.

"Lindsay!" snapped Coran.

The Representative raised one hand, slowly. The hand, too, was very human, though somewhat long and fragile looking.

"It's all right. Ambassador," he said, in words lacking the faintest trace of any accent. "I've seen you before; you're Torm Lindsay, aren't vou."

"Right."

"I thought so. No, Torm, I wasn't reading your mind; I can't. We in the Federation, even the best of us, can receive only what is consciously projected to us. You people are not telepathicaily dumb, you know. Merely deaf—or rather, lacking in proper education. Now, Torm, you've been warned that going outside of the Embassy may be—to my mind, certainly will be—dangerous for you?"

"Check," said Lindsay.

"And you're going out of your own free will?"

"I am."

The alien's hand disappeared into the long sleeve of his smock and came out holding a small, metallic-looking capsule. He handed it to Torm, "Break this with your thumbnail."

Torm did; and a silver mist seemed to rise from the broken capsule, to flow about him and disappear.

"What's that?" asked Coran.

"Roughly the equivalent—but I should say a great

deal better than one of your space suits," answered the Representative. "It will ensure a constant physi-

cal environment for him. His own atmosphere, temperature, pressure, gravity, and so on."

The eyes of stocky Admiral Natek lit up eagerly, then the glow faded resignedly. He had tried prying loose technical improvements from the Representative before this; and with no success.

"Seiagh," said Ambassador Coran, "will you take Lindsay to the door and start him out? Then come back here. We're going to ... just come back."

"Yes, sir," said Seiagh.

She led Torm back out the door, down several levels and along a corridor that ended in a small door. At her touch it slid back, revealing a short ramp sloping down to a walkway that curved past the embassy building, and curved off to lose itself among further buildings of the great city—of which the humans, imprisoned in their embassy, knew next to nothing.

"There you are," Seiagh looked up into his face. "Take care of yourself." Suddenly she threw her arms around him and clung to him. "Oh, take care of yourself!"

"Hey . . ." began Torm. But before he could respond, she had kissed him quickly and pushed him out onto the ramp. The door closed between them;

and Lindsay was left staring foolishly at it.

"Well . . ." said Torm. "Well . . ." After a moment he shrugged his shoulders and turned away. He went down the slight slope of the ramp and turned to his right on the walkway.

II

s he stepped onto it, it seemed deserted. Aliens of all types, observation from the Embassy's windows had informed its human staff, seemed to prefer the simplicity of disappearing from one place and

appearing in another, to more ordinary and persona] methods of locomotion. However, Torm Lindsay, being only human, was finding an actual pleasure in stretching his legs; he strode along, whistling to himself.

He had, however, covered only a short distance

before he discovered that the walk itself was moving him along. When he stopped and looked down at his feet, they seemed to be firmly planted upon an immovable surface. When he looked at the low walls edging the walkway, he saw, however, that he was undeniably in motion. By way of experiment, Torm sat down; he proceeded as easily and comfortably as before.

"Marchons!" This reminded him of the Marsellaise, and he sang a couple of verses. "Allans," he said. "A I'estacion. Aus den bierstube. Rrrrapido—" he said, liking the sound of the rolling r's "conrrem los camros del ferrrrocamril."

The walk, apparently puzzled, slowed down and stopped. Torm patted it reassuringly. "That's all right, boy. Just take me to the nearest transportation center."

The walk picked up speed again.

"Faster," ordered Torm.

It went faster.

"Faster!" cried Torm.

The edging walls began to blur with the speed.

"Faster!"

The walk stopped abruptly—and somehow without snapping Lindsay's head off at the neck. But at the moment he was not so concerned with that as with its evident disobedience to his command.

"What is this farce? I said—faster!" The walk did not stir. "How will I ever get to ... oh."

He had just noticed that he was halted opposite a towering building that stretched impossibly up out of sight beside him.

"I am there? You are there!" he told himself. He

got to his feet with another charitable pat for the walkway. "Thanks—and pardon my misunderstanding."

He turned and headed for the building's wide entrance. Just inside the shadow of it stood a tall, bipedal alien with several extra joints in each of his arms and legs. It looked at him with large, spaniel-like brown eyes set in a high, bony forehead that was seamed with wrinkles.

"Hi," said Tom. "This the transportation center?" The alien continued to stare at him. Term produced a small cube of plastic. "My identification." The alien looked down at it. "Torm Lindsay, Human Embas—" The cube abruptly disappeared. Torm

stared at his empty fingers in some surprise.

The alien unexpectedly produced another pair of eyes from the wrinkles above the first pair. These four now surveyed Torm Lindsay with interest, then closed, one at a time, almost in cadence, from left to right, from top to bottom. Apparently blind, the alien turned and walked unerringly toward a small booth inside the doorway. Torm followed.

The door to the booth opened; the alien stepped inside; the door closed. Torm waited. After a few minutes he knocked.
The door opened. The booth was empty.
"Hmmmm?" Torm stepped inside the booth himself. Behind him the door closed. In the opposite side of the booth, another door opened. Torm stepped out and found that he was no longer in the lobby of the tall building. He was possibly on the top of it—at any rate, in some large, open area with what seemed to be a curtain of white light shimmering by itself off at some distance from him.

The many-jointed alien was not in sight; but nearby was what appeared to be an oversize Gila monster, or something very like it, with bushy black whiskers. The whiskers were just now in the process of being

retracted; as Lindsay watched, the alien split down the back.

A second later, the essential creature began to struggle out through the crack, leaving the heavy, di&- •• carded skin behind. ' -;

"Need a hand?" asked Torm politely.

The alien did not answer. It was almost completely • out of the old skin now, revealing a pink, semi-transparent new skin through which an assortment of organs could be seen dimly in palpitant motion.

"My congratulations," said Torm. "And now I wonder if you could direct me . . ." The alien abruptly disappeared. A moment later the old skin disappeared also.

"Ah. well," said Torm, philosophically, "it takes all kinds." He looked about him and saw at some distance away the shimmering wait ol luminescence. A number of aliens of all descriptions seemed to be coming and going from it.

"When in doubt," Torm Lindsay advised himself, "follow the crowd." He commenced to stroll off in the direction of the shimmering wall.

The walk to it was uneventful. Occasionally, he had to sidestep to avoid aliens of various shapes and sizes

who appeared in his path. He was almost trapped once, and was forced to detour, by a large hole that appeared before him for no apparent reason, and then as suddenly closed up again. And he stopped to watch what appeared to be a couple of twelve-foot grasshoppers fighting. It was a close match for a couple of minutes; then one of the grasshoppers got the head of the other between his enormous, bony jaws, and crushed it.

"The winnah, and new champeen!" applauded Torm. The winnah, however, like so many winnahs, appeared to have let success go to his head. For he ignored Lindsay and stalked off into the distance

with a lordly air. The loser, as might have been expected, disappeared.

Torm shook his head and continued on. As he approached the wall of luminescence, he discovered that it was not a solid unit—as it had seemed to be from a distance—but a long line of glowing capsules of light, in continuous movement from left to right. Every so often, one of the aliens standing in front of it would plunge forward into an empty capsule; the alien would then be carried off, fading as he went, until by the time the capsule he had entered had covered a dozen feet or so, it was once more empty. Occasionally, other aliens would appear in an otherwise-empty capsule, ride along for a short distance until they had acquired full solidity of definition;

and then pop out onto the floor. It was a busy scene.

"Eureka?" said Torm. "It doesn't look like an ordinary transport system. Still .. ."

Talking it over with himself, he stepped up to the line of capsules. A good share of them, he saw, were filled by aliens either dissolving or resolving. Occasionally there was an empty, however. He finally spotted one coming along between a capsule holding something that looked like a small, leafless bush, and another containing a sort of tuskless walrus.

"Heigh-ho, and here we go."

The capsule slid opposite.

"To the governing center of the planet, driver," said Torm, stepping into it. "And don't spare the . . ."

The lights went out.

Torm Lindsay was having a dream. He was dreaming that he was his own ancestor back on the border marches between Scotland and England. Appropriately dressed in kilt and broadsword, he was arguing with the Earl Douglas. His Scots accent was impeccable.

"Douglas," he was saying. "I gi' ye fair warning.

Dinna let yersel be cozened into gaein' tae Bannockburn. Yon Percy have a lean and hungry look."

"Hoot, awa wi' ye, Lindsay!" the Douglas retorted. "Wi' sic as yersel' and Montgomery beside me, there's nae danger. Danger! Hoot. Hoot! Hoooooot! Hooooooo ..."

Torm blinked his eyes open and sat up shakily. A few feet in front of him, the walrus-shaped alien was doing push-ups on his front flippers and hooting distressfully. As Torm Lindsay sat up, the other sank down, closed his eyes as if exhausted, and became silent.

Torm shook his head—in gingerly fashion. It had been a trifle sore to begin with; now, it had picked up a pounding ache. Moreover, to top it all off, he had the dirty, ragged-nerved feeling that follows on a case of severe shock; and he was most outrageously thirsty.

He looked around in search of something drinkable. There was no such something in sight. In fact, little less than what he saw could have been in sight. Besides himself and the walrus-shaped alien, (which Torm, in his own mind, nicknamed "the monster") there was to be seen only the plant-shaped alien that had occupied the adjoining bubble of light on Term's other side; and some evidently damaged contrivance of metal lying sprawled about. Elsewhere, as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing—nothing at all except a dead and level plain of sand. A blinding double sun burnt brightly overhead.

"Well," said Torm thoughtfully. "Well!"

"Hoot!" said the monster, suddenly. "Hoot. Hoot, hoot!"

Torm looked back at the fat alien and discovered him doing push-ups again. As far as it was possible to tell about such things, he seemed to be eyeing the plant. Torm got stiffly to his feet and went over to inspect this other companion in misfortune.

Unlike Lindsay himself and the monster, the plant appeared to be either still unconscious, or else done for altogether. It lay sprawled out on the sand, looking like something weeded from a garden and thrown on a rubbish heap for burning. Torm supposed that the monster was urging him to give it some kind of aid. At least, that was the natural assumption. But how do you go about—say—giving artificial respiration to a plant?

Torm scratched his head and fell, rather than sat,

down on the sand beside it to look at it. There was nothing in the way of clues about its anatomy. Generally speaking, it appeared to resemble a small scrawny bush, a little over a meter in height. Its limbs were leafless, short and sparse, sticking out straight from its body and ending in sharp, but delicate tips. At its base, several of what Lindsay took to be roots sprawled out limply. And just above these, at the base of the stem, there was a bulge of about the same size as a small grapefruit. Torm touched the bulge dubiously with one forefinger, in the rather forlorn hope of running into something resembling a heartbeat. But the bulge was hard and silent.

Torm went back to the monster. His knees felt shaky and he dropped onto the sand facing it.

"Well, I guess something went wrong."

"Hoot," said the monster, companionably.

"Sorry to drag you two into it."

"Hoot. Hoot!"

"Look here," said Torm, "we're obviously all stuck someplace we didn't intend to be; and our friend over there doesn't seem to be in any too good shape. Now, I think the first thing we better do is work out some kind of a code for communication purposes. To start off with, if you can understand me, hoot twice."

"Hoot. Hoot!" hooted the monster.

"Fine. Marvelous. Now—is our friend over there alive?"

"Hoot. Hoot!"

"Is there something I can do to him?"

"Hoot. Hoot!"

"Good," said Torm, pushing himself painfully to his feet. "I'll just go get him and bring him to you ..."

"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! Hoot—" the monster went off into a frenzy of trumpeting.

Torm paused, astonished. "Don't bring him over?"

"Hoot—"

"Leave him where he is?"

"Hoot! Hoot!"

Torm goggled at the monster. "But shouldn't we—"

"Hoot!"

"But you just said—you know," said Lindsay thoughtfully, "I'm beginning to wonder if you understand me after all."

"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!"

"Oh, fine; that explains everything." Torm glanced over at the plant. It was beginning to stir feebly. "Wait here," he told the monster. "I'll go see if I can't make a tittle more sense out of him than I can out of you."

Ignoring the busy hooting that the monster set up the minute he turned his back on it, Torm Lindsay walked over to the plant, which was making weak efforts to stand upright. He gave it a hand up; it pushed out with its roots, rocked dizzily for a moment and found its balance. Now that it was once more animated and erect, a lot of the scrubbing of its appearance seemed to have vanished. Vibrant and alive, it marched away on its roots for a few feet, turned and marched back, looking a little like a strutting dandy out of medieval Europe.

"Well, now," said Torm. "That's better. Can you understand me?"

The plant regarded him. Its top bent toward him and its limbs quivered slightly. It took a couple more

steps toward him and quivered again. It came on and started to climb up his leg.

"Here!" said Torm, detaching it—the root and limb ends were a little on the sharp and thorny side. "No. Stay down." The plant was evidently anything but amenable to suggestion—it was trying to climb his leg again. "No, I say! Stay on your own—er—base.'

He slapped it gently for emphasis. The plant retreated a few steps, dug its roots firmly into the sand, and began to quiver violently, as if with indignation. It occurred to Torm that possibly he was being told off.

"Well, I'm sorry," he said, soothingly. "Very probably you're one of the leading lights of the Federation. The point is, how am I to know? And I don't like you climbing on me like that. Gives me a prickly feeling."

"Hoot!" put in the monster.

"Another precinct heard from." Torm glanced over at the larger alien. "Now"—he turned back to the plant—"let's see if I can get into some kind of communication with you. At least one of the two of you ought to be telepathic."

The plant waved a few limbs and quivered expressively.

"I don't know what that's supposed to mean, but I'll take it for agreement. Now . . ." Lindsay sat down on the sand again. He found himself a trifle dizzy, and the dizziness seemed to subside a bit when he was closer to the ground. "Here's the situation as I see it. When I stepped into that—er—bubble, it threw something or other out of kilter. And as a result we're all both lost and stranded. Right?"

"Hoot," said the monster. Torm looked over at him; but it was impossible to tell whether the fat alien was agreeing, or merely felt like hooting. Torm inclined to the latter opinion. The monster was not a particularly impressive looking being; he looked like

a grounded sea-cow, and his hoot resembled the note of a querulous fog horn. Torm turned his attention back to the plant, whose continual nervous movement seemed to augur a more alert and intelligent nature.

"At any rate," he wound up, "the point is we're stuck here. And the question is—what to do about it? Any suggestions?"

The plant quivered and did a little one-two step.

"Well, don't either of you have any notion of how to get out of this fix?"

His two auditors preserved their uninformative attitudes.

"Now look," said Torm. "We can't just stay here indefinitely. For one thing, I'm thirsty; and there's no water in sight. And whatever you two eat or drink—"

The plant turned and began to move away, abruptly. It marched over to the damaged-looking metallic contrivance and began to climb over it.

"Hey," said Torm, getting to his feet, "is this the gimmick that does the transporting?" He walked over to the "gimmick." The plant retired about the distance of a meter and quivered busily at him.

"I wish I knew what you were trying to tell me." Torm looked down at the gimmick again. "It makes sense, though. This is the transporter, or whatever it was. And it's been damaged." He looked at the plant. "Are you trying to tell me we can fix it?"

Ill

The plant stamped twice with its roots, marched in a half circle around to Lindsay's flank; as he turned to face it, the plant quivered once again. Torm looked over at the monster. "What do you think?"

The monster was lying still with its flippers limp on the sand and its eyes closed. It did not answer.

Gordon R. Dickson

218

"Our friend yonder," said Torm to the plant, "doesn't seem to be mechanically inclined."

The plant turned half around, as if discovering the monster for the first time. For a second it merely quivered in the other's direction. Then, abruptly, it began to march toward the monster.

"That's right; wake him up."

The plant continued on its way, trundling along stiffly like a Napoleonic soldier on parade. When it was halfway to the monster, the latter suddenly opened his eyes. He took one look at the advancing plant and began to hoot violently, waving his flippers. His eyes were on Lindsay.

For a moment, Torm hesitated. "This doesn't make sense," he said. But the plant continued to advance and the monster continued to hoot.

Torm shook his head, walked over and caught up with the plant, and picked it up from behind. The monster's hooting abruptly ceased. The plant craned itself around in his hands, quivered energetically, and tried to climb his arm. It was unsuccessful.

Torm looked from it to the monster. "What's wrong

between you two?"

Neither answered. Torm Lindsay shook his head and put the plant down- It immediately lit out once more in the direction of the monster.

"No," said Torm, going around and getting in its way. "Whatever there is between you two, we're all in this thing together and we can't afford to take

picks at each other."

The plant was not convinced; it tried to go around Lindsay. Remembering a technique that had worked before, he slapped at it a couple of times, lightly. It retreated half a meter, dug itself perhaps twenty centimeters into the sand, and quivered violently for

a good minute.

"Consider me told off again," said Torm. The plant drooped rather limply. "You shouldn't excite your-

self that way. He"—Lindsay glanced over at the monster—"isn't doing any harm, just lying there that way."

"Hoot," said the monster.

"Of course, he isn't doing us any good either."

The monster closed his eyes and relaxed. The plant continued to droop.

"Perk up, son," Lindsay said to the plant, "and let's get back to business. You, at least, were making yourself useful on this gimmick business. Let's go back and see what can be done about getting it working again, eh?"

The plant made no response. After a minute, Torm dug the sand away from its roots, picked it up, and carried it back to the gimmick. It gave a couple of half-hearted quivers on the way over.

"Cheer up," said Torm. "Nothing is impossible-Now . . ." He sat down and placed the plant in front of him, between himself and the apparatus. "Let's see what we have here."

The plant walked off a meter's length or so and stood still. Lindsay poked interestedly at the gimmick.

In appearance, it was so simple as to appear easily understandable. There were several plates spaced along a narrow rod, which seemed to have been twisted somewhat out of plumb. There was a long coil of fine wire, attached to the bottom plate and trailing loosely off to one side. And there was a fine, colorful little object that would have made an excellent child's marble back on Earth if it had not been for the fact that it was ellipsoidal in shape, rather than spherical.

"Hmmmm." Torm lifted the long coil of wire. It draped nicely in length. "Where do you suppose this goes?"

It was a good question. The coil was too long to fit between the plates—unless Torm didn't mind having

a lot left over. But the loose end had an uncompleted look about it, as if it were supposed to fit somewhere.

"Hey!" Torm called, looking over at the plant. "Give me a hand, here."

The plant ignored him.

"Fine thing! I draw one alien who spends all his time snoozing when he isn't hooting his head off; and another who's a little bundle of temperament." He reached over and poked the stem of the plant, gently.

"Hey—"

The plant quivered briefly. That was all.
"Now look," said Lindsay, "what good's it going to do you to sulk? If this thing is completely unfixable, just wave your top back and forth a couple of times. If something can be done, just move a little closer to

me.

This request got him nowhere. The plant refused to

stir.

"I wouldn't bother you," said Torm. "But our friend yonder seems a little too bovine to be helpful. I've got a hunch you're the one with the brains in this

crowd."

He waited; but flattery, it seemed, would also get

him nowhere.
"Very well," said Torm, rising. "You force me to

take my trade to the opposition." He gathered up rod and plates, coil and marble; and went over to the monster. He poked it in the region where in any reasonable scheme of bodily organization, it should

contain its ribs.

"Pardon me; but about this gimmick . . ."
The monster opened one eye, suspiciously.
"How do I fix this?" demanded Torm.
"Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot," said the monster

and apparently went back to sleep.
"Much obliged. But couldn't you be a little more

explicit?"
The monster lay quiescent.

"Ah well." Torm Lindsay sat down and resigned himself to fiddling with the apparatus alone. He tried wrapping the coil around the rod; he tried attaching it to the various plates; he searched for some evidence of a broken connection point. He picked up the marble and examined it.

"You wouldn't know this," he said confidentially to the motionless and silent monster, "but I'm supposed to be rather good at intuitive reasoning, according to the aptitude tests. Even with good intuitive reasoning, however—" he caught sight suddenly of the plant which was working around in a wide arc so as to come up behind the monster. He put the equipment down, struggled to his feet, and walked wearily over to confront the plant.

It stopped. "Son," said Torm, "this is unworthy of you."

The plant quivered.

"I know. He's probably one of your own trail herd;

or maybe he broke out of the pasture once and ate your uncle Otto by mistake. But I've already toid you I can't take chances on one of you doing something to the other. I'm just about positive I'm responsible for this situation we're in; and if I don't get both of you back in top shape, I can just imagine what kind of reaction I'll get from the authorities—whoever they happen to be. Now, will you go back a reasonable distance and sit down?"

The plant took half a step toward him.

"All right," said Lindsay, "you asked for it." He looked around for some way of immobilizing the plant without hurting it. With the exception of the monster and the equipment, nothing presented itself as providing a possible restraint. Finally, an idea occurred to him. He took off his one-piece suit of embassy black, and tied a leg of it around the plant's stem just above the bulge.

"There," said Torm. The plant swayed and strug-

gled against the weight of the suit. Dragging on the ground, the tangle of cloth made an effective hobble. Torm went over and got the equipment- He brought it back and sat down on one arm of the suit to work on it. The plant was neatly tethered. It quivered violently at Lindsay.

"Fortunes of war," said Torm, and got back to work.

It was a little hard to concentrate, he found. His headache was getting worse, and the desert seemed to shimmer and dance in the distance. When he tried to focus down on the metallic objects in his hands, these too seemed to waver and bend out of focus. It occurred to him, somewhat belatedly, that the contents of the capsule the Representative had given him to pop with his thumbnail, while "good as a spacesuit," might be somewhat lacking in protective qualities where the possibility of sunstroke was concerned. He looked over at the plant, which had dug itself into the sand and was, apparently, sulking again.

"You should grow some shade leaves," he told it.

The plant, however, showed no signs of obliging;

and Torm Lindsay went back to fiddling with the coil of wire. He tried it in every way he could think of—without success; wadded up, wound around the rod, festooned from the plates. No results.

He turned his attention to the marble again. He

tried it against both ends of the rod and against all of the plates, unsuccessfully. His eyes were seeing dots by this time; and he stopped to rest.

He would probably not make it, he thought. In a little while, he would pass out from sunstroke; the plant would get free and eat the monster—or vice-versa, which was more likely. The survivor would keel over in due time; and eventually sometime in the galactic future, a passerby would find them all, three bleached skeletons, in the sand. Alas, poor Lind-say, I knew him well. . .

CLOAK AND STAGGER

223

Torm squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head to clear it and opened his eyes again. Concentrate, he told himself.

"Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot," hooted the monster, suddenly waking up and doing an energetic series of push-ups.

"And a happy New Year to you," said Torm, look-ing over at him. He picked up the equipment and bent once more to his task.

Sometime later, quite by accident, he got his first break. He was twisting the coil around aimlessly, and without any great enthusiasm, when it suddenly clung to the rod, as if a sort of magnetic force had abruptly asserted itself. Torm rubbed his eyes and looked at it. Through the swimming dots, he made out that he had looped the coil in an arc; and the middle of it was apparently glued to the top tip of the rod, while the far end had caught and frozen itself tight to the near end, where it fastened to the rod's base. The whole thing now looked something like a directional antenna.

"Hey!" said Torm, pleased. He set the contraption upright on the sand and stared at it.

"Let's see now; suppose it is directional. Suppose it taps some kind of channel of power; and then when you think of where you want to go—" Torm Lindsay closed his eyes and thought devoutly of the spot he had last seen back on Arcturus Five.

He opened his eyes again. The desert still sur-rounded them.

Undiscouraged, he kept his eyes closed, thought of the Arcturian station, and carefully rotated the de-vice in a circle, on the sand.

No results.

He tried rotating it vertically.

No results.

He pondered the situation somewhat woozily for a few seconds; and then remembered that he'd forgot-

ten the marble. He hunted for it among the sand and swimming dots before him and finally found it.

"All right, little marble," he told it. "Where do you go?"

Shakily, but methodically, he set out at the top end of the rod, and commenced to run the marble over every possible inch of the apparatus. He progressed down the rod, and over the three plates, with no success. However, the moment he touched the wire coil where the two ends joined together against the rod, the marble stuck.

"Hallelujah!" Torm bent down to take a closer look at the marble and found to his surprise that it was not merely sticking to the wire; in some mysterious fashion, it had melted around the wire so that it was now strung on it like a bead on a string. Torm poked it with his finger. It slid freely on the wire.

"Well, whither now?" Torm slid the marble around the coils, moving it up along the rod. At the very tip, the marble froze, making, it seemed, a connection between the tip of the rod and the wire.

"What a clever little old diplomat you are, to be sure," said Torm, admiringly. "Subspatial transporters repaired, rebuil . . ." The sentence trailed off, uncompleted. He became conscious of the fact that the effort involved in finishing it was not worth the trouble. He swayed a little, where he sat on the sand. It was taking most of his strength now just to remain upright. In fact, thought Torm, looking affectionately at the inviting bed of sand stretching off to the horizon, why stay upright, anyhow? A little nap . . .

A slight tugging sensation brought him back for a moment to his full senses. With a great effort, he turned his head to look behind him—and stared blankly for a moment at the sight of his suit lying still and empty upon the sand. For a moment, he

gazed at it stupidly; then he remembered what it should, instead, have been occupied with.

He swiveled his head toward the monster. Sure enough. There was the plant, loose from the suit, already well on its way toward the rotund alien.

"Hey!" cried Torm, in a cracked voice. The plant paid no attention. Lindsay made a spasmodic effort to get to his feet and found that his legs were like strips of unbaked dough, with neither substance nor muscle to them. The plant marched on.

"Wait—wait—" mumbled Torm. Gazing around, his eye fell on the apparatus. Dizzily he fumbled for it.

"Now—" he said. "Got to—" He made a mighty effort with his mind. "Station—"

Nothing happened. He fumbled with it.

"Got to work—" he muttered. "Push? Pull? Some-thing—button to push? Button—" through waves of dizziness and swimming specks, and the nightmare marching of the plant bearing down on the silent monster, his attention was caught by the glitter of the marble.

"Button—" he mumbled; and, sliding his hand up the length of the rod, touched marble, wire, and rod, all at once.

There was a sort of colorless flash; and a black wave rose up over Tom Lindsay and swallowed him entirely.

IV

This time, he was very cautious about opening his eyes.

He lifted his right lid no more than a fraction of an inch and peered carefully through the tiny aperture. He saw a portion of white ceiling and the face of Setagh. Relieved, he opened both eyes.

Not oniy Selagh, but Ambassador Coran, Admiral Natek, and the alien Representative were standing looking down at him. He was lying in the same re-covery room where it had all started.

"Uh . . . hello," he said.

"Hello, Torm," said the Representative-

Torm Lindsay decided to sit up. He swung his legs over the edge of the narrow couchlike affair he was lying on and pushed himself up with his hands. Selagh hurried to help him. He was back in his suit, he noticed with some relief; and the medician that he had first talked with was hovering in the background. Ambassador Coran noticed the direction of Term's gaze.

"You can go now, Hartlye," he said. With an air of something very like relief, the medician nodded, went across to the door, and slipped out, closing it behind him. Coran turned back to Torm. "How do you feel?"

"Rocky," answered Torm. His head had come to life when he sat up; and now it seemed to be full of shooting pains.

"Anesthetics all out?" asked Coran, looking over at Selagh.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then," said the Ambassador, turning to the Representative, "I think we've proved our point. Lindsay has certainly returned unharmed; and since you were watching his progress on that screen of yours along with the rest of us, you must admit that he behaved successfully in his contacts with other members of your Federation."

"Perhaps, Mr. Coran, perhaps," replied the alien. "But you may have settled one point of objection only to raise another. Torm was operated on by your people before being turned loose. Suppose you explain that operation to me."

Coran nodded at Selagh. "Commandress . . ."

"A refinement of the old operation of prefrontal lobotomy," said Selagh.

"I don't understand."

"On our home planet, back in the days when psychiatry was young," explained Selagh, "it was found possible to relieve cases of chronic tension, by, in essence, cutting off a certain portion of the brain from its normal connection with the rest of it. The tension would be relieved. Unfortunately, the patient normally suffered a loss of will power at the same time. He would start eating, say, and keep at it until the food was all gone, or someone stopped him- Or he might start doing something like chopping wood;

and once started, keep at it until he was ordered to stop."

"Go on," said the Representative.

"Well, over the years, the technique was improved. The last innovation was a development of my own—the basis of my surgical thesis, in fact. What we did on Torm Lindsay was what you might call a selective topectomy, except that instead of cutting, we merely anesthetized to block off certain parts of his brain. When we finished, we hoped that we'd made him emotionally immune—that is, incapable of reacting emotionally to outside stimuli."

"I see," said the Representative, thoughtfully. He turned back to the cot. "You know about this, Torm?"

"Yes," said Lindsay, as cheerfully as he could with invisible little men probing through his head with white hot needles. "I volunteered."

"And how did you feel—after the operation?"

"Oh . . . fine, I guess. Good. Yes, I felt good."

"I see," said the Representative.

"Well?" demanded Coran. "You claim we humans aren't ready yet for contact with the rest of the races in your Federation. You offer to let us prove this to ourselves by sending a man out. You say that he will

find contact psychologically unacceptable." He waved a hand at Lindsay. "Here's our answer."

The alien looked at him. "My dear Ambassador, you insist on misunderstanding my objection to allowing your people to join our group of races. It is not that you are a young people, or a primitive people, for those are minor points. It is simply that you must be able to rise above all barriers of mistrust and prejudice. Now, just recently, Torm here did very well. He was not shocked by a being with double the number of eyes he had himself, and a different skeleton, nor by the sight of alien viscera in the case of the being changing his skin. He made no attempt to judge between the two members of the same race which he saw fight until one was killed at the transport center. But that was the result of your operation. While now . . ."

He turned abruptly, and put an impossibly fragile hand on Lindsay's shoulder, at the same time bringing his inhumanly still face up against Term's. In spite of himself, Torm started, and shrunk back slightly.

"You see?" said the alien, sadly, letting go. "Prejudice. Fear, suspicion, and disgust toward the strange and unfamiliar."

"I—" began Torm, miserably.

"Never mind," said the Representative. "Don't feel that you have to apologize. I was merely proving a point where your race as a whole is concerned. I do not blame you for your fault, but you must see why it bars you from acceptance by the rest of us.".

"But why isn't Term's operation the answer?" asked Coran.

"Because," sighed the Representative, "your cure is more crippling than your disease. It is no solution to stop a man scratching his nose by cutting off his nose. In the case of Lindsay, you rendered him immune to emotional upset over something he might

see or hear or experience. But the moral sense in all beings is based upon emotion; by removing emotion, you destroyed this, too. You created, in fact, a psy-

chopathic personality -

"I grant you he did not immediately act like one, but that was because his habit patterns reacted for him out of sheer momentum. Given time, he would have behaved very badly, indeed. He would have become a danger to any community. You remember I noticed something odd about him, when he came in to meet us before leaving. His actions and his speech—even then—showed evidence of a complete non-morality, and a complete unconcern for others." His glance singled out Selagh. "You," he said. "You noticed it."

Selagh blushed, and nodded.

"So you see," wound up the Representative, "by rendering yourself acceptable in one sense, you immediately render yourself unacceptable in another. In the galaxy, no race may judge another; but also no race may harm another. It is live and let live with a vengeance. If it had occurred to Torm to do damage to another individual, or to any thing, there would have been nothing within him to hold him back."

He looked around the room at the unhappy faces of the humans.

"Now wait," said Torm, suddenly. "Wait a minute—"

The Representative turned to him.

"If I'm so nonmoral," he said, "why was it that I had to be the one to keep the plant and monster from each other? They certainly weren't living and let living!"

He stared demandingly at the alien. He did not notice the looks of slight embarrassment on the faces of the other humans.

"Now, Torm," said Ambassador Coran, clearing his throat, "you jumped to the wrong conclusion about those two."

Torm Lindsay stared at him in surprise.

"Wrong conclusion?"

"My dear Torm," said the Representative. "The gadget was not what you thought it was. The monster was not—what you thought he was—but a rather nice old gentleman taking a botanical specimen home to his private laboratory."

"Specimen—oh," said Torm. "You mean, the plant—"

"Exactly," said the alien.

"But—but—"

"Yes, Torm?"

"But look here. How did it happen he was so helpless and frightened of the plant? Why did it have to be me who fixed the gimmick and got us home?"

"But you didn't/' replied the Representative. "You were picked up by a transport rescue crew, summoned by me, when we saw on our viewer what had happened; and also by the old gentleman himself, who sent out a mental call the moment he discovered what had happened to the three of you."

"But the gimmick?"

"It had nothing to do with the mechanisms of transport, Torm. It was a device for restraining the plant." He shook his head at Lindsay's puzzled face. "The plant," he explained, "requires moisture to live. On its native planet, it gets it by sucking the juices from other flora and fauna native to the place. Because it's actually rather a weak, slow-moving creature, it has developed a weapon. It is capable of broadcasting a rather limited mental stimulus that induces a paralyzing fear in its victims. The gimmick inhibited this capacity in it and kept it immobilized by a counter field. The gimmick was set up in a center capsule to keep the plant under control; and it was that capsule you stepped into with conflicting directions of destination, just as the unit of three capsules was about to discharge for the old gentleman's home planet."

"I see," said Torm. There was a short silence. "But why didn't the plant affect me?"

The alien chuckled. It was an odd sound to hear coming from his still face.

"How could it?" he answered. "You were anesthetized. Remember?" He chuckled again. "The plant has relatively little intelligence; but what it has must have been rather sorely tried by the way you reacted to its best attempts to immobilize you. You do deserve congratulations for putting the restraint back together though. It protected the old gentleman until the rescue squad arrived."

"Thanks," said Torm.

"Don't be bitter," replied the alien, kindly. "You did the best you could under the circumstances, and it turned out to be very good indeed, even if you were acting on false premises."

Off to one side, Ambassador Coran cleared his throat.

"All this . . ."

"Yes." The Representative turned toward him with

regret in his voice. "Al! this is beside the point. The situation stands that you cannot be accepted into the Federation of Peoples, for the reasons I have given you. You are still too rigid, too bound with prejudice; and Term's operation is not an acceptable way of mending that fault. You must be all that you are normally; and, in addition, be free of the tendency to judge from your own smalt basis of experience."

"I must again request," said Coran, stiffly, "that we be allowed to take this matter to higher authorities."

"There are no higher authorities," replied the alien. "From the day when your interstellar ship first entered this system, from the day of my first meeting with your people, you have been unable to accept the fact that I am literally what I call myself. I represent the Federation. I speak not for myself, but for every member of every race included in it. Believe me, if

you could question each one individually, he would say only what I say."

"I fee! I must doubt that," said Coran.

The Representative sighed. "This embassy building is yours. Free passage to this world, and to this spot, is yours. But the rest of the Federation is closed to you. You will not be allowed in any of its solar systems, or on any of its worlds. If you approach them, you will be turned back." He looked about at them. "But don't give up hope. Don't be discouraged. This fault is one that time will inevitably mend; and the scale is larger out here in the galaxy. What are ten, fifty, a hundred thousand years, if they have to be?"

"We can't stand still," cried Coran, desperately. "It isn't in us. We aren't built to stand still."

"I am sorry."

The Representative was turning and going away toward the door, his strange form oddly pyramidal under the robe he wore. Torm Lindsay felt a choking sensation in his throat, as if from something huge and desperate, clawing to get out. He opened his mouth, but no words came. Frantically, he tried again. "Wait . . ."

The Representative, almost to the door, paused and turned.

"Wait," said Torm, chokingly. "Listen . . ."

"I am listening."

"We aren't all prejudiced. We aren't ail like this. What wouid you say if we produced some people with an open mind? I mean—open completely?"

"Torm," said the alien, softly. "You don't under-
stand. They must be without a single prejudgment;

and yet unspoiled. And none of you are like that."

"But that's just it!" Torm cast a frantic look around
at his fellow humans. "We're all alike here. But I
noticed something. It was the way I felt, after the

operation; I couldn't put my finger on it until just
now. You see, it wasn't the first time I'd fett that
way—and for a while I couldn't remember when."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Coran,
harshly.

"What I remembered," said Torm. "I remembered
that once I was free and unbound. Once I could look
at anything new and accept it, and take it for granted
as being just what it seemed to be and nothing else.
You see? You understand?"

"No," said Coran.

"/ see," said the alien. "And I should have seen
before. But there is something about you people that
is different from all us others. You would say your
answer lies in the untouched minds of your children."

"Is that it? Am I right?"

"Perhaps . . ." In the alien eyes of the Representa-
tive, it seemed that a distant fire dimmed as some-
thing in him went away, and far far away, until
nothing but the shell of a being stood before them.
For a moment it stood, unguessable, and unknow-
able, facing them; and then slowly, gradually, he
began to come back. The light kindled again, and the
Representative was once more with them.

"Yes," he said. "It will be a long road for them and
a hard one- And you will have to let them travel it
alone and apart from you. But I think you have
found your answer."

His eyes moved from Torm and took them all in.
And they stood, the four humans and the one inhu-
man; caught then in a single crystal moment of a
hope of peace and final brotherhood, and dream of
greatness, future, everlasting. . . .

And Then There Was Peace

At nine hundred hours there were explosions off
to the right at about seven hundred yards. At
eleven hundred hours the stagger came by to pick up
the casualties among the gadgets. Charlie saw the
melting head at the end of its heavy beam going up
and down like the front end of a hardworking chicken
only about fifty yards west of his foxhole. Then if

worked its way across the battlefield for about ha!f an hour and, loaded down with melted forms of damaged robots, of all shapes and varieties, disappeared behind the low hill to the west, and left, of Charlie. It was a hot August day somewhere in or near Ohio, with a thunderstorm coming on. There was that yellow color in the air.

A;

At twelve hundred hours the chow gadget came ticking over the redoubt behind the foxhole. It crawled into the foxhole, jumped up on the large table and opened itself out to reveal lunch. The menu this day was liver and onions, whole corn, whipped potato and raspberries.

"And no whipped cream," said Charlie.
"You haven't been doing your exercises," said the chow gadget in a fine soprano voice.

"I'm a front-line soldier," said Charlie. "I'm an infantryman in a foxhole overlooking ground zero. I'll be damned if I take exercises."

"In any case, there is no excuse for not shaving."

"I'll be damned if I shave."

"But why not shave? Wouldn't it be better than having that itchy, scratchy beard—"

"No," said Charlie. He went around back of the chow gadget and began to take its rear plate off.

"What are you doing to me?" said the chow gadget.

"You've got something stuck to you here," said Charlie. "Hold still." He surreptitiously took a second out to scratch at his four-day beard. "There's a war on, you know."

"I know that," said the chow gadget. "Of course."

"Infantry men like me are dying daily."

"Alas," said the chow gadget, in pure, simple tones.

"To say nothing," said Charlie, setting the rear plate to one side, "of the expenditure of your technical devices. Not that there's any comparison between human lives and the wastage of machines."

"Of course not."

"So how can any of you, no matter how elaborate your computational systems, understand—" Charlie broke off to poke among the innards of the chow machine.

"Do not damage me," it said.

"Not if I can help it," said Charlie. "—understand what it feels like to a man sitting here day after day, pushing an occasional button, never knowing the results of his button pushing, and living in a sort of glass-case comfort except for the possibility that he may just suddenly be dead—suddenly, like that, before he knows it." He broke off to probe again. "It's no life for a man."

"Terrible, terrible," said the chow gadget. "But there is still hope for improvement."

"Don't hold your breath," said Charlie. "There's—ah!" He interrupted himself, pulling a small piece of paper out of the chow gadget.

"Is there something the matter?" said the chow gadget.

"No," said Charlie. He stepped over to the observation window and glanced out. The slagger was making its return. It was already within about fifty yards of the foxhole. "Not a thing," said Charlie. "As a matter of fact, the war's over."

"How interesting," said the chow gadget-

"That's right," said Charlie- "Just let me read you this little billet-doux I got from Foxhole thirty-four. Meet you back at the bar. Charlie. It's all over. Your hunch that we could get a message across was the clear quill. Answer came today the same way, through the international weather reports. They want to quit as well as we do. Peace is agreed on, and the gadgets—" Charlie broke off to look at the chow gadget. "That's you, along with the rest of them."

"Quite right. Of course," said the chow gadget.

"—have already accepted the information. We'll be out of here by sundown. And that takes care of the

war.

"It does indeed," said the chow gadget. "Hurrah! And farewell."

"Farewell?" said Charlie.

"You will be returning to civilian life," said the chow gadget. "I will be scrapped."

"That's right," said Charlie. "I remember the preprogramming for the big units. This war's to be the last, they were programmed. Well—" said Charlie. For a moment he hesitated. "What d'you know? I may end up missing you a little bit, after all."

He glanced out the window- The slagger was almost to the dugout.

"Well, well," he said. "Now that the time's come

... we did have quite a time together, three times a day- No more string beans, huh?"

"I bet not," said the chow gadget with a little laugh.

"No more caramel pudding."

"I guess so."

Just then the slagger halted outside, broke the thick concrete roof off the dugout and laid it carefully aside.

"Excuse me," it said, its cone-shaped melting head nodding politely some fifteen feet above Charlie. "The war's over."

"I know," said Charlie.

"Now there will be peace. There are orders that all instruments of war are to be slagged and stockpiled for later peaceful uses." It had a fine baritone voice- "Excuse me," it said, "but are you finished with that chow gadget there?"

"You haven't touched a bite," said the chow gadget. "Would you like just a small spoonful of raspberries?"

"I don't think so," said Charlie, slowly. "No, I don't think so."

"Then farewell," said the chow gadget. "I am now expendable."

The melting head of the slagger dipped toward the chow gadget. Charlie opened his mouth suddenly, but before he could speak, there was a sort of invisible flare from the melting head and the chow gadget became a sort of puddle of metal which the melting head picked up magnetically and swung back to the hopper behind it.

"Blast it!" said Charlie with feeling. "I could just as well have put in a request to keep the darn thing for a souvenir."

The heavy melting head bobbed apologetically back.

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be possible," it said. "The

order allows no exceptions. All military instruments

are to be slagged and stockpiled."

"Well—" said Charlie. But it was just about then that he noticed the melting head was descending toward him.

The Catch

<?tf0ure, Mike- Gee!" said the young Tolfian ex~

43citedly, and went dashing off from the space-ship in the direction of the temporary camp his local people had set up at a distance of some three hundred yards across the grassy turf of the little valley. Watching him go, Mike Wellsbauer had to admit that in motion he made a pretty sight, scooting along on his hind legs, his sleek black-haired otterlike body leaning into the wind of his passage, and his wide, rather paddle-shaped tail extended behind him to balance the weight of his erected body. All the same . . .

"I don't like it," Mike murmured. "I don't like it one bit."

"First signs of insanity," said a female and very human voice behind him. He turned about.

"All right, Penny," he said. "You can laugh. But this could turn out to be the most unfunny thing that ever happened to the human race. Where is the rest of the crew?"

Peony Matsu sobered, the small gamin grin fading from her pert face, as she gazed up at him.

"Red and Tommy are still trying to make commu-

239

240 Gordon R. Dickson

nication contact with home base," she said. "Alvin's out checking the flora—he can't be far." She stared at him curiously. "What's up now?"

"I want to know what they're building."

"Something for us, I'll bet."

"That's what I'm afraid of. I've just sent for the local squire." Mike peered at the alien camp. Workers were still zipping around it in that typical Tolfian fashion that seemed to dictate that nobody went anywhere except at a run. "This time he's going to give me a straight answer."

"I thought," said Penny, "he had."

"Answers," said Mike, shortly. "Not necessarily straight ones." He heaved a sudden sigh, half of exhaustion, half of exasperation. "That young squirt was talking to me right now in English. In English!

What can you do?"

Penny bubbled with laughter in spite of herself.

"All right, now hold it!" snapped Mike, glaring at her. "I tel! you that whatever this situation is, it's serious- And letting ourselves be conned into making a picnic out of it may be just what they want."

"All right," said Penny, patting him on the arm. "I'm serious. But I don't see that their learning English is any worse than the other parts of it—"

"It's the whole picture," growled Mike, not waiting for her to finish. He stumped about to stand half-turned away from her, facing the Tolfian camp, and she gazed at his short, blocky, red-haired figure with tolerance and a scarce-hidden affection. "The first intelligent race we ever met. They've got science we can't hope to touch for nobody knows how long, they belong to some Interstellar Confederation or other with races as advanced as themselves—and they fall all over themselves learning English and doing every little thing we ask for. 'Sure, Mike!'— that's what he said to me just now . . . 'Sure, Mike!' I tell you, Penny—"

THE CATCH
'Here they come now," she said.

241

A small procession was emerging from the camp. It approached the spaceship at a run, single file, the tallest Tolfian figure in the lead, and the others grading down in size behind until the last was a half-grown alien that was pretty sure to be the one Mike had sent on the errand.

"If we could just get through to home base back on Altair A—" muttered Mike; and then he could mutter no more, because the approaching file was already dashing into hearing distance. The lead Tolfian raced to the very feet of Mike and sat down on his tail. His muzzle was gray with age and authority and the years its color represented had made him almost as tall as Mike.

"Mike!" he said, happily.

The other Tolfians had dispersed themselves in a semicircle and were also sitting on their tails and looking rather like a group of racetrack fans on shooting sticks.

"Hello, Moral," said Mike, in a pleasantly casual tone. "What're you building over there now?"

"A terminal—a transport terminal, I suppose you'd call it in English, Mike," said Moral. "It'll be finished in a few hours. Then you can all go to Barzalac."

"Oh, we can, can we?" said Mike. "And where is

Barzalac?"

"I don't know if you know the sun, Mike," said Moral, seriously. "We call it Aimna. It's about a hundred and thirty light-years from ours. Barzalac is the Confederation center—on its sixth planet."

"A hundred and thirty light-years?" said Mike, staring at the Tolfian.

"Isn't that right?" said Moral, confusedly. "Maybe I've got your terms wrong. I haven't been speaking your language but since yesterday—"

"You speak it just fine. Just fine," said Mike. "Nice of you all to go to the trouble to learn it."

"Oh, it wasn't any trouble," said Moral. "And for you humans—well," he smiled, "nothing's too good, you know."

He said the last words rather shyly, and ducked his head for a second as if to avoid Mike's eyes-

"That's very nice," said Mike. "Now, would you mind it I asked you again why nothing's too good?'

"Oh, didn't I make myself clear before?" said Moral, in distressed tones. "I'm sorry—the thing is, we've met others of your people before."

"I got that, all right," said Mike. "Another race of humans, some thousands or dozens of thousands of years ago. And they aren't around any more?"

"I am very sorry," said Moral with tears in his eyes. "Very, very sorry—"-

"They died off?"

"Our loss—the loss of all the Confederation—was deeply felt. It was like losing our own, and more than our own."

"Yes," said Mike. He locked his hands behind his back and took a step up and down on the springy turf before turning back to the Tolfian squire. "Well, now, Moral, we wouldn't want that to happen to us."

"Oh, no!" cried Moral. "It mustn't happen. Somehow—we must insure its not happening."

"My attitude, exactly," said Mike, a little grimly. "Now, to get back to the matter at hand—why did you people decide to build your transportation center right here by our ship?"

"Oh, it's no trouble, no trouble at all to run one up," said Moral. "We thought you'd want one convenient here."

"Then you have others?"

"Of course," said Moral. "We go back and forth among the Confederation a lot." He hesitated. "I've

arranged for them to expect you tomorrow—if it's all right with you."

"Tomorrow? On Barzalac?" cried Mike.

"If it's all right with you."

"Look, how fast is this . . . transportation, or whatever you call it?"

Moral stared at him.

"Why, I don't know, exactly," he said. "I'm just a sort of a rural person, you know. A few millionths of a second, I believe you'd say, in your terms?"

Mike stared. There was a moment's rather uncomfortable silence. Mike drew a deep breath.

"I see," he said.

"I have the honor of being invited to escort you," said Moral, eagerly. "If you want me, that is. I ... I rather look forward to showing you around the museum in Barzalac. And after all, it was my property you landed on."

"Here we go again," said Mike under his breath. Only Penny heard him. "What museum?"

"What museum?" echoed Moral, and looked blank. "Oh, the museum erected in honor of those other humans. It has everything," he went on eagerly, "artifacts, pictures—the whole history of these other people, together with the Confederation. Of course"—he hesitated with shyness again—"there'll be experts around to give you the real details. As I say, I'm only a sort of rural person—"

"All right," said Mike, harshly. "I'll quit beating around the bush. Just why do you want us to go to Barzalac?"

"But the heads of the Confederation," protested Moral. "They'll be expecting you."

"Expecting us?" demanded Mike. "For what?"

"Why to take over the Confederation, of course,". said Moral, staring at him as if he thought the human had taken leave of his senses. "You are going to, aren't you?"

Half an hour later, Mike had a council of war going in the lounge of Exploration Ship 29XJ. He paced up and down while Penny, Red Sommers, Tommy Anotu,

and Alvin Longhand sat about in their gimballed armchairs, hstening-

". . . The point's this," Mike was saying, "we can't get through to base at all because of the distance. Right, Red?"

"The equipment just wasn't designed to carry more than a couple of light-years, Mike," answered Red. "You know that. To get a signal from here to Altair we'd need a power plant nearly big enough to put this ship in its pocket."

"All right," said Mike. "Point one—we're on our own. That leaves it up to me. And my duty as captain of this vessel is to discover anything possible about an intelligent life-form like this—particularly since the human race's never bumped into anything much brighter than a horse up until now."

"You're going to go?" asked Penny.

"That's the question. It all depends on what's be-hind the way these Tolfians are acting. That trans-porter of theirs could just happen to be a fine little incinerating unit, for all we know. Not that I'm not expendable—we all are. But the deal boils down to whether I'd be playing into alien hands by going along with them, or not."

"You don't think they're telling the truth?" asked Alvin, his lean face pale against the metal bulkhead behind him.

"I don't know!" said Mike, pounding one fist into the palm of his other hand and continuing to pace. "I just don't know. Of all the fantastic stories—that there are, or have been, other ethnic groups of hu-mans abroad in the galaxy! And that these humans were so good, so wonderful that their memory is revered and this Confederation can't wait to put our

own group up on the pedestal the other bunch vacated!"

"What happened to the other humans, Mike?" asked Tommy.

"Moral doesn't know, exactly. He knows they died off, but he's hazy on the why and how. He thinks a small group of them may have just pulled up stakes and moved on—but he thinks maybe that's just a legend. And that's (';." He pounded his fist into his palm again.

"What's it?" asked Penny.

"The way he talked about it—the way these Tolfians are," said Mike. "They're as bright as we are. Their

science—and they know it as well as we do—is miles ahead of us. Look at that transporter, if it's true, that can whisk you light-years in millisecond intervals. Does it make any sense at all that a race that advanced—let alone a bunch of races that advanced—would want to bow down and say 'Master' to us?"

Nobody said anything.

"All right," said Mike. more calmly, "you know as well as I do it doesn't. That-leaves us right on the spike. Are they telling the truth, or aren't they? If they aren't, then they are obviously setting us up for something. If they are—then there's a catch in it somewhere, because the whole story is just too good to be true. They need us like an idiot uncle, but they claim that now that we've stumbled on to them, they can't think of existing without us. They want us to take over. Us!"

Mike threw himself into his own chair and threw his arms wide.

"All right, everybody," he said. "Let's have some opinions."

There was a silence in which everybody looked at everybody else.

"We could pack up and head for home reai sudden-like," offered Tommy.

"No." Mike gnawed at his thumb. "If they're this good, they could tell which way we went and maybe track us. Aiso, we'd be popping off for insufficient reason. So far we've encountered nothing obviously inimical."

"This planet's Earthiike as they come," offered Alvin—and corrected himself, hastily. "I don't mean that perhaps the way it sounded, I mean it's as close to Earth conditions as any of the worlds we've colo-nized extensively up until now."

"I know," muttered Mike. "Moral says the Confed-eration worlds are all that close—and that I can be-lieve. Now that we know that nearly all suns have planets, and if these people can really hop dozens of light-years in a wink, there'll be no great trouble in finding a good number of Earthiike worlds in this part of the galaxy."

"Maybe that's it. Maybe it's just a natural thing for life-forms on worlds so similar to hang together," offered Red.

"Sure," said Mike. "Suppose that was true, and suppose we were their old human-style buddies come back. Then there'd be a reason for a real welcome. But we aren't."

"Maybe they think we're just pretending not to be their old friends," said Red.

"No." Mike shook his head. "They can take one look at our ship here and see what we've got. Their old buddies wouldn't come back in anything as old-fashioned as a spaceship; and they'd hardly be wanted if they did. Besides, welcoming an old friend and inviting him to take over your home and business are two different things."

"Maybe—" said Red, hesitantly, "it's ail true, but they've got it in for their old buddies for some reason, and all this is just setting us up for the ax."

Mike slowly lifted his head and exchanged a long glance with his Communications officer.

"That does it," he said. "Now you say it. That, my friends, was the exact conclusion I'd come to myself. Well, that ties it."

"What do you mean, Mike?" cried Penny.

"I mean that's it," said Mike. "If that's the case, I've got to see it through and find out about it- In other words, tomorrow I go to Barzalac. The rest of you stay here; and if I'm not back in two days, blast off for home."

"Mike," said Penny, as the others stared at him. "I'm going with you."

"No," said Mike.

"Yes, I am," said Penny. "I'm not needed here, and—"

"Sorry," said Mike. "But I'm captain. And you stay, Penny."

"Sorry, captain," retorted Penny. "But I'm the biologist. And if we're going to be running into a number of other alien life-forms—" She let the sentence hang.

Mike threw up his hands in helplessness.

The trip through the transporter was, so far as Mike and Penny had any way of telling, instantaneous and painless. They stepped through a door-shaped opaqueness and found themselves in a city.

The city was even almost familiar. They had come out on a sort of plaza or court laid out on a liltie rise, and they were able to look down and around them at a number of low buildings. These glowed in all manners of colors and were remarkable mainly for the fact that they had no roofs as such, but were merely obscured from overhead view by an opaqueness similar to that in the transporter. The streets on which

they were set stretched in all directions, and streets and buildings were clear to the horizon.

"The museum." said Moral, diffidently, and the two humans turned about to find themselves facing a

low building fronting on the court that stretched wide to the left and right and far before them. Its interior seemed split up into corridors.

They followed Moral in through the arch of an entrance that stood without respect to any walls on either side and down a corridor. They emerged into a central interior area dominated by a single large statue in the area's center. Penny caught her breath, and Mike stared. The statue was, indubitably, that of a human—a man.

The stone figure was dressed only in a sort of kilt. He stood with one hand resting on a low pedestal beside him; gazing downward in such a way that his eyes seemed to meet those of whoever looked up at him from below. The eyes were gentle, and the lean, middle-aged face was a little tired and careworn, with its high brow and the sharp lines drawn around the corners of the thin mouth. Altogether, it most nearly resembled the face of a man who is impatient with the time it is taking to pose for his sculptor.

"Moral! Moral!" cried a voice; and they all turned to see a being with white and woolly fur that gave him a rather polar-bear look, trotting across the polished floor toward them. He approached in upright fashion, and was as four-limbed as Moral—and the humans themselves, for that matter.

"You are Moral, aren't you?" demanded the newcomer, as he came up to them. His English was impeccable. He bowed to the humans—or at least he inclined the top half of his body toward them. Mike, a little uncertainly, nodded back. "I'm Arrjhanik."

"Oh, yes . . . yes," said Moral. "The Greeter. These are the humans, Mike Wellsbauer and Peony Matsu. May I ... how do you put it ... present Arrjhanik a Bin. He is a Siniloid, one of the Confederation's older races."

"So honored," said Arrjhanik.

"We're both very pleased to meet you," said Mike,

feeling on firmer ground. There were rules for this kind of alien contact.

"Would you . . . could you come right now?" Arrjhanik appealed to the humans. "I'm sorry to prevent you from seeing the rest of the museum at this time"—Mike frowned; and his eyes narrowed a little—

"but a rather unhappy situation has come up. One of our Confederate heads—the leader of one of the races that make up our Confederation—is dying. And he would like to see you before . . . you understand."

"Of course," said Mike.

"If we had known in advance— But it comes rather suddenly on the Adrii—" Arrjhanik led them off toward the entrance of the building and they stepped out into sunlight again. He led them back to the transporter from which they had just emerged.

"Wait a minute," said Mike, stopping. "We aren't going back to Tolfi, are we?"

"Oh, no. No," put in Moral from close behind him. "We're going to the Chamber of Deputies." He gave Mike a gentle push; and a moment later they had stepped through into a small and pleasant room half-filled with a dozen or so beings each so different one from the other that Mike had no chance to sort them out and recognize individual characteristics.

Arrjhanik led them directly to the one piece of furniture in the room which appeared to be a sort of small table incredibly supported by a single wire-thin leg at one of the four corners. On the surface of this lay a creature or being not much bigger than a seven-year-old human child and vaguely catlike in form. It lay on its side, its head supported a little above the table's surface by a cube of something transparent but apparently not particularly soft, and large colorless eyes in its head focused on Mike and Penny as they approached.

Mike looked down at the small body. It showed no

signs of age, unless the yellowish-white of the thin hair covering its body was a revealing shade. Certainly the hair itself seemed brittle and sparse.

The Adri—or whatever the proper singular was—stirred its head upon its transparent pillow and its pale eyes focused on Mike and Penny. A faint, drawn out rattle of noise came from it.

"He says," said Arrjhanik, at Mike's elbow, " "You cannot refuse. It is not in you.' "

"Refuse what?" demanded Mike, sharply. But the head of the Adri lolled back suddenly on its pillow and the eyes filmed and glazed. There was a little murmur that could have been something reverential from all the beings standing about; and without further explanation the body of the being that had just died thinned suddenly to a ghostly image of itself, and was gone.

"It was the Confederation," said Arrjhanik, "that he knew you could not refuse."

"Now wait a minute," said Mike. He swung about so that he faced them all, his stocky legs truculently apart. "Now, listen—you people are acting under a misapprehension. / can't accept or refuse anything. I haven't the authority. I'm just an explorer, nothing

more.

"No, no," said Arrjhanik, "there's no need for you to say that you accept or not, and speak for your whole race. That is a formality. Besides, we know you will not refuse, you humans. How could you?"

"You might be surprised," said Mike. Penny hastily jogged his elbow.

"Temper!" she whispered. Mike swallowed, and when he spoke again, his voice sounded more reasonable.

"You'll have to bear with me," he said. "As I say, I'm an explorer, not a diplomat. Now, what did you all want to see me about?"

"We wanted to see you only for our own pleasure,"

said Arrjhanik. "Was that wrong of us? Oh, and yes—to tell you that if there is anything you want, anything the Confederation can supply you, of course you need only give the necessary orders—"

"It is so good to have you here," said one of the other beings.

A chorus of voices broke out in English all at once, and the aliens crowded around. One large, rather walruslike alien offered to shake hands with Mike, and actually did so in a clumsy manner.

"Now, wait. Wait!" roared Mike. The room fell silent. The assembled aliens waited, looking at him in an inquiring manner.

"Now, listen to me!" snapped Mike. "And answer one simple question. What is all this you're trying to give to us humans?"

"Why, everything," said Arrjhanik. "Our worlds, our people, are yours. Merely ask for what you want. In fact—please ask. It would make us feel so good to serve you, few though you are at the moment here."

"Yes," said the voice of Moral, from the background. "If you'll forgive me speaking up in this assemblage—they asked for nothing back on Tolfi, and I was forced to exercise my wits for things to supply them with. I'm afraid I may have botched the job."

"I sincerely hope not," said Arrjhanik, turning to look at the Tolfian. Moral ducked his head, embar-

rassed ly.

"Mike," said Arrjhanik, turning back to the humans, "something about all this seems to bother you. If you would just tell us what it is—"

"All right," said Mike. "I will." He looked around at all of them. "You people are all being very generous. In fact, you're being so generous it's hard to believe. Now, I accept the fact that you may have had contact with other groups of humans before us. There's been speculation back on our home world that our race might have originated elsewhere in the

galaxy, and that would mean there might well be other human groups in existence we don't even know of. But even assuming that you may have reached all possible limits of love and admiration for the humans you once knew, it stiil doesn't make sense that you would be willing to just make us a gift of all you possess, to bow down to a people who—we're not blind, you know—possess only a science that is child-like compared with your own."

To Mike's surprise, the reaction to this little speech was a murmur of admiration from the group.

"So analytical. So very human!" said the walrus-like alien warmly in tones clearly pitched to carry to Mike's ear.

"Indeed," said Arrjhanik, "we understand your doubts. You are concerned about what, in our offer, is ... you have a term for it—"

"The catch," said Mike grimly and bluntly. "What's the catch?"

"The catch. Yes," said Arrjhanik. "You have to excuse me. I've only been speaking this language of yours for—"

"Just the last day or so, I know," said Mike sourly.

"Well, no. Just for the last few hours, actually. But—" went on Arrjhanik, "while there's no actual way of putting your doubts to rest, it really doesn't matter. More of your people are bound to come. They will find our Confederation open and free to all of them. In time they will come to believe. It would be presumptuous of us to try to convince you by argument."

"Well, just suppose you try it anyway," said Mike, unaware that his jaw was jutting out in a manner which could not be otherwise than belligerent.

"But we'd be only too happy to!" cried Arrjhanik, enthusiastically- "You see"—he placed a hand or paw. depending on how you looked at it, gently on Mike's arm—"all that we have nowadays, we owe to our

former humans. This science you make such a point of—they developed it in a few short thousand years. The Confederation was organized by them. Since they've been gone—"

"Oh, yes," interrupted Mike. "Just how did they go? Mind telling me that?"

"The strain—the effort of invention and all—was too much for them," said Arrjhanik, sadly. He shook his head. "Ah." he said, "they were a great people—you are a great people, you humans. Always striving. always pushing, never giving up. We others are but pale shadows of your kind. I am afraid, Mike, that your cousins worked themselves to death, and for our sake. So you see, when you think we are giving you something that is ours, we are really just returning what belongs to you, after all."

"Very pretty," said Mike. "I don't believe it. No race could survive who just gave everything away for nothing. And somewhere behind all this is the catch I spoke of. That's what you're not telling me—what all of you will be getting out of it, by turning your Confederation over to us."

"But . . . now I understand!" cried Arrjhanik. "You didn't understand. We are the ones who will be getting. You humans will be doing ail the giving. Surely you should know that! It's your very nature that ensures that, as our friend who just died said. You humans can't help yourselves, you can't keep from it!"

"Keep from what?" yelled Mike, throwing up his hands in exasperation.

"Why," said Arrjhanik, "I was sure you understood. Why from assuming all authority and responsibility, from taking over the hard and dirty job of running our Confederation and making it a happy, healthy place for us all to live, safe and protected from any enemies. That is what all the rest of us have been saddled with these thousands of years since

that other group of your people died, and I can't tel! you"—Arrjhanik, his eyes shining, repeated his last words strongly and emphatically—"I can't tell you how badly things have gone to pot, and how very, very glad we are to turn it all over to you humans, once again!"