

The Featherbedders

Frank Herbert, 1968

'Once there was a Slorin with a one-syllable name who is believed to have said: 'niche for every one of us and every one of us in Ms niche.'

- Folk saying of the *Scattership* People

There must be a streak of madness in a Slorin who'd bring his only offspring, an untrained and untried youth, on a mission as potentially dangerous as this one, Smeg told himself.

The rationale behind his decision remained clear: The colonial nucleus must preserve its elders for their detail memory. The youngest of the group was the logical one to be volunteered for this risk. Still ...

Smeg forced such thoughts out of his mind. They weakened him. He concentrated on driving the gray motor-pool Plymouth they'd signed out of the government garage in the state capital that morning. The machine demanded considerable attention.

The Plymouth was only two years old, but this region's red rock roads and potholes had multiplied those years by a factor of at least four. The steering was loose and assorted squeaks arose from front and rear as he negotiated a rutted down-grade. The road took them into a shadowed gulch almost bare of vegetation and across the rattling planks of a wooden bridge that spanned a dry creekbed. They climbed out the other side through ancient erosion gullies, past a row of scrub cottonwoods and onto the reaching flat land they'd been crossing for two hours.

Smeg risked a glance at Rick, his offspring, riding silently beside him. The youth had come out of the pupal stage with a passable human shape. No doubt Rick would do better next time - provided he had the opportunity. But he was well within the seventy-five percent accuracy limit the Slorin set for themselves. It was a universal fact that the untrained sentience saw what it *thought* it saw. The mind tended to supply the missing elements.

A nudge from the Slorin mind-cloud helped, of course, but this carried its own perils. The nudged mind sometimes developed powers of its own - with terrifying results. Slorin had learned long ago to depend on the directional broadcast of the mind's narrow band, and to locate themselves in a network limited by the band's rather short range.

However, Rick had missed none of the essentials for human appearance. He had a gentle, slender face whose contours were difficult to remember. His brown eyes were of a limpid softness that made human females discard all suspicions while the males concentrated on jealousy. Rick's hair was a coarse, but acceptable black. The shoulders were a bit high and the thorax somewhat too heroic, but the total effect aroused no probing questions.

That was the important thing: no probing questions.

Smeg permitted himself a silent sigh. His own shape - that of a middle-aged government official, gray at the temples, slightly paunchy and bent of shoulder, and with weak eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses - was more in the Slorin tradition.

Live on the margins, Smeg thought. Attract no attention.

In other words, don't do what they were doing today.

Awareness of danger forced Smeg into extreme contact with this body his plastic genes had fashioned. It was a good body, a close enough duplicate to interbreed with the natives, but he felt it now from the inside, as it were, a fabric of newness stretched over the ancient substance of the Slorin. It was familiar, yet bothersomely unfamiliar.

I am Sumctroxelunsmeg, he reminded himself. I am a Slorin of seven syllables, each

addition to my name an honor to my family. By the pupa of my jelly-sire whose name took fourteen thousand heartbeats to pronounce, I shall not fail!

There! That was the spirit he needed - the eternal wanderer, temporarily disciplined, yet without boundaries. 'If you want to swim, you must enter the water,' he whispered.

'Did you say something, Dad?' Rick asked.

Ahhh, that was very good, Smeg thought. Dad - the easy colloquialism.

'I was girding myself for the ordeal, so to speak,' Smeg said. 'We must separate in a few minutes.' He nodded ahead to where a town was beginning to hump itself out of the horizon.

'I think I should barge right in and start asking about their sheriff,' Rick said.

Smeg drew in a sharp breath, a gesture of surprise that fitted this body. 'Feel out the situation first,' he said.

More and more, he began to question the wisdom of sending Rick in there. Dangerous, damnably dangerous. Rick could get himself irrevocably killed, ruined beyond the pupa's powers to restore. Worse than that, he could be exposed. There was the real danger. Give natives the knowledge of what they were fighting and they tended to develop extremely effective methods.

Slorin memory carried a bagful of horror stories to verify this fact.

'The Slorin must remain ready to take any shape, adapt to any situation,' Rick said. 'That it!'

Rick spoke the axiom well, Smeg thought, but did he really understand it? How could he? Rick still didn't have full control of the behavior patterns that went with this particular body shape. Again, Smeg sighed. If only they'd saved the infiltration squad, the expendable specialists.

Thoughts such as this always brought the more disquieting question: *Saved them from what?*

There had been five hundred pupae in the *Scattership* before the unknown disaster. Now there were four secondary ancestors and one new offspring created on this planet. They were shipless castaways on an unregistered world, not knowing even the nature of the disaster which had sent them scooting across the void in an escape capsule with minimum shielding.

Four of them had emerged from the capsule as basic Slorin poly-morphs to find themselves in darkness on a steep landscape of rocks and trees. At morning, there'd been four additional trees there - watching, listening, weighing the newness against memories accumulated across a timespan in which billions of planets such as this one could have developed and died.

The capsule had chosen an excellent landing site: no nearby sentient constructions. The Slorin now knew the region's native label - central British Columbia. In that period of awakening, though, it had been a place of unknown dangers whose chemistry and organization required the most cautious testing.

In time, four black bears had shambled down out of the mountains. Approaching civilization, they'd hidden and watched - listening, always listening, never daring to use the mindcloud. Who knew what mental powers the natives might have? Four roughly fashioned hunters had been metamorphosed from Slorin pupae in a brush-screened cave. The hunters had been tested, refined.

Finally - the hunters had scattered.

Slorin always scattered.

'When we left Washington you said something about the possibility of a trap,' Rick said. 'You don't really think -'

'Slorin have been unmasked on some worlds,' Smeg said. 'Natives have developed

situational protective devices. This has some of the characteristics of such a trap.'

'Then why investigate? Why not leave it alone until we're stronger?'

'Rick!' Smeg shuddered at the youth's massive ignorance. 'Other capsules may have escaped,' he said.

'But if it's a Slorin down here, he's acting like a dangerous fool.'

'More reason to investigate. We could have a damaged pupa here, one who lost part of the detail memory. Perhaps he doesn't know how to act - except out of instincts.'

'Then why not stay out of the town and probe just a little bit with the mindcloud?'

Rick cannot be trusted with this job, Smeg thought. He's too raw, too full of the youthful desire to play with the mindcloud.

'Why not?' Rick repeated.

Smeg pulled the car to a stop at the side of the dirt road, opened his window. It was getting hot - be noon in about an hour. The landscape was a hardscrabble flatness marked by sparse vegetation and a clump of buildings about two miles ahead. Broken fences lined both sides of the road. Low cottonwoods off to the right betrayed the presence of the dry creekbed. Two scrofulous oaks in the middle distance provided shade for several steers. Away on the rim of the batland, obscured by haze, there was a suggestion of hills.

'You going to try my suggestion?' Rick asked.

'No.'

'Then why're we stopping? This as far as you go?'

'No.' Smeg sighed. 'This is as far as *you* go. I'm changing plans. You will wait. I will go into the village.'

'But I'm the younger. I'm - '

'And I'm in command here.'

'The others won't like this. They said -'

'The others will understand my decision.'

'But Slorin law says -'

'Don't quote Slorin law to me!'

'But-'

'Would you teach your grandfather how to shape a pupa?' Smeg shook his head. Rick must learn how to control the anger which flared in this bodily creation. 'The limit of the law is the limit of enforcement - the real limit of organized society. We're not an organized society. We're two Slorin - alone, cut off from our pitiful net. Alone! Two Slorin of widely disparate ability. You are capable of carrying a message. I do not judge you capable of meeting the challenge in this village.'

Smeg reached across Rick, opened the door.

'This is a firm decision?' Rick asked.

'It is. You know what to do?'

Rick spoke stiffly: 'I take that kit of yours from the back and I play the part of a soil engineer from the Department of Agriculture.'

'Not a *part*, Rick. You *are* a soil engineer.'

'But-'

'You will make real tests which will go into a real report and be sent to a real office with a real function. In the event of disaster, you will assume my shape and step into my niche.'

'I see.'

'I truly hope you do. Meanwhile, you will go out across that field. The dry creekbed is out there. See those cottonwoods?'

'I've identified the characteristics of this landscape.'

'Excellent. Don't deviate. Remember that you're the offspring of Sumctroxelunsmeg. Your jelly-sire's name took fourteen thousand heartbeats to pronounce. Live with pride.'

'I was supposed to go in there, take the risk of it -'

'There are risks and there are risks. Remember, make real tests for a real report. Never betray your niche. When you have made the tests, find a place in that creekbed to secrete yourself. Dig in and wait. Listen on the narrow band at all times. Listen, that is all you do. In the event of disaster, you must get word to the others. In the kit there's a dog collar with a tag bearing a promise of reward and the address of our Chicago drop. Do you know the greyhound shape?'

'I know the plan, Dad.'

Rick slid out of the car. He removed a heavy black case from the rear, closed the doors, stared in at his parent.

Smeg leaned across the seat, opened the window. It creaked dismally.

'Good luck, Dad,' Rick said.

Smeg swallowed. This body carried a burden of attachment to an offspring much stronger than any in previous Slorin experience. He wondered how the offspring felt about the parent, tried to probe his own feelings toward the one who'd created him, trained him, sealed his pupa into the *Scattership*. There was no sense of loss. In some ways, he *was* the parent. As different experiences changed him, he would become more and more the individual, however. Syllables would be added to his name. Perhaps, someday, he might feel an urge to be reunited.

'Don't lose your cool, Dad,' Rick said.

'The God of the Slorin has no shape,' Smeg said. He closed the window, straightened himself behind the steering wheel.

Rick turned, trudged off across the field toward the cotton-woods. A low cloud of dust marked his progress. He carried the black case easily in his right hand.

Smeg put the car in motion, concentrated on driving. That last glimpse of Rick, sturdy and obedient, had pierced him with unexpected emotions. Slorin parted, he told himself. It is natural for Slorin to part. An offspring is merely an offspring.

A Slorin prayer came into his mind: 'Lord, let me possess this moment without regrets and, losing it, gain it forever.'

The prayer helped, but Smeg still felt the tug of that parting. He stared at the shabby buildings of his target town. Someone in this collection of structures Smeg was now entering had not learned a basic Slorin lesson: *There is a reason for living; Slorin must not live in a way that destroys this reason*. Moderation, that was the key.

A man stood in the dusty sun glare toward the center of the town - one lone man beside the dirt road that ran unchecked toward the distant horizon. For one haunted moment Smeg had the feeling it was not a man, but a dangerous other-shaped enemy he'd met before. The feeling passed as Smeg brought the car to a stop nearby.

Here was the American peasant, Smeg realized - tall, lean, dressed in wash-faded blue bib overalls, a dirty tan shirt and tennis shoes. The shoes were coming apart to reveal bare toes. A ground green painter's hat with green plastic visor did an ineffective job of covering his yellow hair. The visor's rim was cracked. It dripped a fringe of ragged binding that swayed when the man moved his head.

Smeg leaned out his window, smiled: 'Howdy.'

'How do.'

Smeg's sense of hearing, trained in a history of billions of such encounters, detected the xenophobia and reluctant bowing to convention at war in the man's voice.

'Town's pretty quiet,' Smeg said.

'Yep.'

Purely human accents, Smeg decided. He permitted himself to relax somewhat, asked: 'Anything unusual ever happen around here?'

'You fum the gov'ment?'

'That's right.' Smeg tapped the motor-pool insignia on his door. 'Department of Agriculture.'

'Then you ain't part of the gov'ment conspiracy?'

'Conspiracy?' Smeg studied the man for a clue to hidden meanings. Was this one of those southern towns where anything from the government just had to be communist?

'Guess you ain't,' the man said.

'Of course not.'

'That there was a serious question you asked, then ... about unusual thing happening?'

'I ... yes.'

'Depends on what you call unusual.'

'What ... do *you* call unusual?' Smeg ventured.

'Can't rightly say. And you?'

Smeg frowned, leaned out his window, looked up and down the street, studied each detail: the dog sniffing under the porch of a building labeled 'General Store,' the watchful blankness of windows with here and there a twitching curtain to betray someone peering out, the missing boards on the side of a gas station beyond the store - one rusty pump there with its glass chamber empty. Every aspect of the town spoke of heat-addled somnolence ... yet it was wrong. Smeg could feel tensions, transient emotional eddies that irritated his highly tuned senses. He hoped Rick already had a hiding place and was listening.

'This is Wadeville, isn't it?' Smeg asked.

'Yep. Used to be county seat 'fore the war.'

He meant the War Between The States, Smeg realized, recalling his studies of regional history. As always, the Slorin were using every spare moment to absorb history, mythology, arts, literature, science - You never knew which might be the valuable piece of information.

'Ever hear about someone could get right into your mind?' the man asked.

Smeg overcame a shock reaction, groped for the proper response. Amused disbelief, he decided, and managed a small chuckle. 'That the unusual thing you have around here?'

'Didn't say yes; didn't say no.'

'Why'd you ask then?' Smeg knew his voice sounded like crinkling bread wrapper. He pulled his head back into the car's shadows.

'I jes' wondered if you might be hunting fer a telepath?'

The man turned, hawked a cud of tobacco toward the dirt at his left. A vagrant breeze caught the spittle, draped it across the side of Smeg's car.

'Oh, dang!' the man said. He produced a dirty yellow bandanna, knelt and scrubbed with it at the side of the car.

Smeg leaned out, studied this performance with an air of puzzlement. The man's responses, the vague hints at mental powers -they were confusing, fitted no pattern in Slorin experience.

'You got somebody around here claiming to be a telepath?' Smeg asked.

'Can't say.' The man stood up, peered in at Smeg. 'Sorry about that there. Wind, you know. Accident. Didn't mean no harm.'

'Certainly.'

'Hope you won't say nothing to the sheriff. Got 'er all cleaned off your car now. Can't tell where I hit 'er.'

The man's voice carried a definite tone of fear, Smeg realized. He stared at this American peasant with a narrow, searching gaze. *Sheriff*, he'd said. Was it going to be this easy? Smeg wondered how to capitalize on that opening. Sheriff. Here was an element of the mystery they'd come to investigate.

As the silence drew out, the man said: 'Got 'er all clean. You can get out and look for yourself.'

'I'm sure you did, Mr ... ahhh ... '

'Painter, Josh'a Painter. Most folks call me Josh on account of my first name there, Josh'a Painter.'

'Pleased to meet you, Mr Painter. My name's Smeg, Henry Smeg.'

'Smeg,' Painter said with a musing tone. 'Don't rightly believe I ever heard that name before.'

'It used to be much longer,' Smeg said. 'Hungarian.'

'Oh.'

'I'm curious, Mr Painter, why you'd be afraid I might tell the sheriff because the wind blew a little tobacco juice on my car?'

'Never can tell how some folks'll take things,' Painter said. He looked from one end of Smeg's car to the other, back to Smeg. 'You a gov'ment man, this car an' all, reckoned I'd best be sure, one sensible man to another.'

'You've been having trouble with the government around here, is that it?'

'Don't take kindly to most gov'ment men hereabouts, we don't. But the sheriff, he don't allow us to do anything about that. Sheriff is a mean man, a certain mean man sometimes, and he's got my Barton.'

'Your barton,' Smeg said, drawing back into the car to conceal his puzzlement. *Barton?* This was an entirely new term. Strange that none of them had encountered it before. Their study of languages and dialects had been most thorough. Smeg began to feel uneasy about his entire conversation with this Painter. The conversation had never really been under control. He wondered how much of it he'd actually understood. There was in Smeg a longing to venture a mindcloud probe, to nudge the man's motives, make him *want* to explain.

'You one of them survey fellows like we been getting?' Painter asked.

'You might say that,' Smeg said. He straightened his shoulders. 'I'd like to walk around and look at your town, Mr Painter. May I leave my car here?'

'Tain't in the way that I can see,' Painter said. He managed to appear both interested and disinterested in Smeg's question. His glance flicked sideways, all around - at the car, the road, at a house behind a privet hedge across the way.

'Fine,' Smeg said. He got out, slammed the door, reached into the back for the flat-crowned western hat he affected in these parts. It tended to break down some barriers.

'You forgetting your papers?' Painter asked.

'Papers?' Smeg turned, looked at the man.

'Them papers full of questions you gov'ment people all us use.'

'Oh.' Smeg shook his head. 'We can forget about papers today.'

'You jes' going to wander around?' Painter asked.

'That's right.'

'Well, some folks'll talk to you,' Painter said. 'Got all kinds of different folks here.' He turned away, started to walk off.

'Please, just a minute,' Smeg said.

Painter stopped as though he'd run into a barrier, spoke without turning. 'You want something?'

'Where're you going, Mr Painter?'

'Jes' down the road a piece.'

'I'd ... ahhh, hoped you might guide me,' Smeg said. 'That is if you haven't anything better to do?'

Painter turned, stared at him. 'Guide? In Wadeville?' He looked around him, back to Smeg. A tiny smile tugged at his mouth.

'Well, where do I find your sheriff, for instance?' Smeg asked.

The smile disappeared. 'Why'd you want him?'

'Sheriffs usually know a great deal about an area.'

'You sure you actual' want to see him?'

'Sure. Where's his office?'

'Well now, Mr Smeg ... ' Painter hesitated, then: 'His office is just around the corner here, next the bank.'

'Would you show me?' Smeg moved forward, his feet kicking up dust puddles in the street. 'Which corner?'

'This'n right here.' Painter pointed to a field stone building at his left. A weed-grown lane led off past it. The corner of a wooden porch jutted from the stone building into the lane.

Smeg walked past Painter, peered down the lane. Tufts of grass grew in the middle and along both sides, green runners stretching all through the area. Smeg doubted that a wheeled vehicle had been down this way in two years - possibly longer.

A row of objects on the porch caught his attention. He moved closer, studied them, turned back to Painter.

'What're all those bags and packages on that porch?'

'Them?' Painter came up beside Smeg, stood a moment, lips pursed, eyes focused beyond the porch.

'Well, what are they?' Smeg pressed.

'This here's the bank.' Painter said. 'Them's night deposits.'

Smeg turned back to the porch. Night deposits? Paper bags and fabric sacks left out in the open?

'People leaves 'em here if'n the bank ain't open,' Painter said. 'Bank's a little late opening today. Sheriff had 'em in looking at the books last night.'

Sheriff examining the bank's books? Smeg wondered. He hoped Rick was missing none of this and could repeat it accurately ... just in case. The situation here appeared far more mysterious than the reports had indicated. Smeg didn't like the feeling of this place at all.

'Makes it convenient for people who got to get up early and them that collects their money at night,' Painter explained.

'They just leave it right put in the open?' Smeg asked.

'Yep. 'Night deposit' it's called. People don't have to come around when -'

'I know what it's called! But ... right out in the open like that ... without a guard?'

'Bank don't open till ten thirty most days,' Painter said. 'Even later when the sheriff's had 'em in at night.'

'There's a guard,' Smeg said. 'That's it, isn't it?'

'Guard? What we need a guard fer? Sheriff says leave them things alone, they gets left alone.'

The sheriff again, Smeg thought. 'Who ... ahh, deposits money like this?' he asked.

'Like I said: the people who got to get up early and ... '

'But *who* are these people?'

'Oh. Well, my cousin Reb: He has the gas station down to the forks. Mr Seelway at the General Store there. Some farmers with cash crops come back late from the city. Folks work across the line at the mill in Anderson when they get paid late of a Friday. Folks like that.'

'They just ... leave their money out on this porch.'

'Why not?'

'Lord knows,' Smeg whispered.

'Sheriff says don't touch it, why - it don't get touched.'

Smeg looked around him, sensing the strangeness of this weed-grown street with its wide-open night depository protected only by a sheriff's command. Who was this sheriff? *What* was this sheriff?

'Doesn't seem like there'd be much money in Wadeville,' Smeg said. 'That gas station down the main street out there looks abandoned, looks like a good wind would blow it over. Most of the other buildings -'

'Station's closed,' Painter said. 'You need gas, just go out to the forks where my cousin, Reb - '

'Station failed?' Smeg asked.

'Kind of.'

'Kind of?'

'Sheriff, he closed it.'

'Why?'

'Fire hazard. Sheriff, he got to reading the state Fire Ordinance one day. Next day he told Jamison to dig up the gas tanks and cart 'em away. They was too old and rusty, not deep enough in the ground and didn't have no concrete on 'em. 'Sides that, the building's too old, wood all oily.'

'The sheriff ordered it ... just like that.' Smeg snapped his fingers.

'Yep. Said he had to tear down that station. Old Jamison sure was mad.'

'But if the sheriff says do it, then it gets done?' Smeg asked.

'Yep. Jamison's tearing it down - one board every day. Sheriff don't seem to pay it no mind long as Jamison takes down that one board every day.'

Smeg shook his head. One board every day. What did that signify? Lack of a strong time sense? He looked back at the night deposits on the porch, asked: 'How long have people been depositing their money here this way?'

'Been since a week or so after the sheriff come.'

'And how long has that been?'

'Ohhhhh ... four, five years maybe.'

Smeg nodded to himself. His little group of Slorin had been on the planet slightly more than

five years. This could be ... this could be - He frowned. But what if it wasn't?

The dull plodding of footsteps sounded from the main street behind Smeg. He turned, saw a tall fat man passing there. The man glanced curiously at Smeg, nodded to Painter.

'Mornin', Josh,' the fat man said. It was a rumbling voice.

'Morning', Jim,' Painter said.

The fat man skirted the Plymouth, hesitated to read the emblem on the car door, glanced back at Painter, resumed his plodding course down the street and out of sight.

'That was Jim,' Painter said.

'Neighbor?'

'Yep. Been over to the Widow McNabry's again ... all the whole dang' night. Sheriff's going to be mighty displeased believe me.'

'He keeps an eye on your morals, too?'

'Morals?' Painter scratched the back of his neck. 'Can't rightly say he does.'

'Then why would he mind if ... Jim -'

'Sheriff, he says it's a sin and a crime to take what don't belong to you, but it's a blessing to give. Jim, he stood right up to the sheriff, said he jes' went to the widow's to give. So -' Painter shrugged.

'The sheriff's open to persuasion, then?'

'Some folks seems to think so.'

'You don't?'

'He made Jim stop smoking and drinking.'

Smeg shook his head sharply, wondering if he'd heard correctly. The conversation kept darting around into seeming irrelevancies. *He* adjusted his hat brim, looked at his hand. It was a good hand, couldn't be told from the human original. 'Smoking and drinking?' he asked.

'Yep.'

'But why?'

'Said if Jim was taking on new ree-sponsibilities like the widow he couldn't commit suicide - not even slow like.'

Smeg stared at Painter who appeared engrossed with a nonexistent point in the sky. Presently. Smeg managed: 'That's the weirdest interpretation of the law I ever heard.'

'Don't let the sheriff hear you say that.'

'Quick to anger, eh?'

'Wouldn't say that.'

'What *would you* say?'

'Like I told Jim: Sheriff get his eye on you, that is it. You going to toe the line. Ain't so bad till the sheriff get his eye on you. When he see you - that is the end.'

'Does the sheriff have his eye on you, Mr Painter?'

Painter made a fist, shook it at the air. His mouth drew back in a fierce, scowling grimace. The expression faded. Presently, he relaxed, sighed. 'Pretty bad, eh?' Smeg asked.

'Dang conspiracy,' Painter muttered. 'Gov'ment got its nose in things don't concern it.'

'Oh?' Smeg watched Painter closely, sensing they were on productive ground. 'What does -'

'Dang near a thousand gallons a year!' Painter exploded.

'Uhhh -' Smeg said. He wet his lips with his tongue, a gesture he'd found to denote human

uncertainty.

'Don't care if you are part of the conspiracy,' Painter said. 'Can't do nothing to me now.'

'Believe me, Mr Painter, I have no designs on ... '

'I made some 'shine when folks wanted,' Painter said. 'Less'n a thousand gallons a year ... almost. Ain't much considering the size of some of them stills t'other side of Anderson. But them's across the line! 'Nother county! All I made was enough fer the folks 'round here.'

'Sheriff put a stop to it?'

'Made me bust up my still.'

'Made *you* bust up your still?'

'Yep. That's when he got my Barton.'

'Your ... ahhh ... barton?' Smeg ventured.

'Right from under Lilly's nose,' Painter muttered. His nostrils dilated, eyes glared. Rage lay close to the surface.

Smeg looked around him, searching the blank windows, the empty doorways. What in the name of all the Slorin furies was a barton?

'Your sheriff seems to hold pretty close to the law,' Smeg ventured.

'Hah!'

'No liquor,' Smeg said. 'No smoking. He rough on speeders?'

'Speeders?' Painter turned his glare on Smeg. 'Now, you tell me what we'd speed in, Mr Smeg.'

'Don't you have any cars here?'

'If my cousin Reb didn't have his station over to the forks where he get the city traffic, he'd be bust long ago. State got a law - car got to stop in jes' so many feet. Got to have jes' so many lights. Got to have windshield wiper things. Got to have tires which you can measure the tread on. Got to steer absolutely jes' right. Car don't do them things, it *is junk*. Junk! Sheriff, he make you sell that car for junk! Ain't but two, three folks in Wadeville can afford a car with all them things.'

'He sounds pretty strict,' Smeg said.

'Bible-totin' parson with hell fire in his eye couldn't be worse. I tell you, if that sheriff didn't have my Barton, I'd a run out long ago. I'd a ree-beled like we done in Sixty-one. Same with the rest of the folks here ... most of 'em.'

'He has their ... ahhh, bartons?' Smeg asked, cocking his head to one side, waiting.

Painter considered this for a moment, then: 'Well, now ... in a manner of speaking, you could call it that way.'

Smeg frowned. Did he dare ask what a barton was? No! It might betray too much ignorance. He longed for a proper Slorin net, all the interlocked detail memories, the Slorin spaced out within the limits of the narrow band, ready to relay questions, test hypotheses, offer suggestions. But he was alone except for one inexperienced offspring hiding out there across the fields ... waiting for disaster. Perhaps Rick had encountered the word, though. Smeg ventured a weak interrogative.

Back came Rick's response, much too loud: 'Negative.'

So Rick didn't know the word either.

Smeg studied Painter for a sign the man had detected the narrow band exchange. Nothing. Smeg swallowed, a natural fear response he'd noticed in this body, decided to move ahead more strongly.

'Anybody ever tell you you have a most unusual sheriff?' he asked.

'Them gov'ment survey fellows, that's what they say. Come here with all them papers and

all them questions, say they interested in our crime rate. Got no crime in Wade County, they say. Think they telling us something!

'That's what I heard about you,' Smeg offered. 'No crime.'

'Hah!'

'But there must be some crime,' Smeg said.

'Got no 'shine,' Painter muttered. 'Got no robbing and stealing, no gambling. Got no drunk drivers 'cepting they come from somewhere else and then they is mighty displeasured they drunk drove in WadeCounty. Got noy'w-venile dee-linquents like they talkabout in the city. Got no patent medicine fellows. Got nothing.'

'You must have a mighty full jail, though.'

'Jail?'

'All the criminals your sheriff apprehends.'

'Hah! Sheriff don't throw folks in jail, Mr Smeg. Not 'less they is from over the line and needs to sleep off a little ol' spree while they sobers up enough to pay the fine.'

'Oh!' Smeg stared out at the empty main street, remembering the fat man - Jim. 'He gives the local residents a bit more latitude, eh? Like your friend, Jim.'

'Jes' leading Jim along, I say.'

'What do you mean?'

'Pretty soon the widow's going to be in the family way. Going to be a quick wedding and a baby and Jim'll be jes' like all the rest of us.'

Smeg nodded as though he understood. It was like the reports which had lured him here ... but unlike them, too. Painter's 'survey fellows' had been amused by Wadeville and Wade County, so amused even their driest governmentese couldn't conceal it. Their amusement had written the area off - 'purely a local phenomenon.' Tough southern sheriff. Smeg was not amused. He walked slowly out to the main street, looked back along the road he'd traveled.

Rick was out there listening ... waiting.

What would the waiting produce?

An abandoned building up the street caught Smeg's attention. Somewhere within it a door creaked with a rhythm that matched the breeze stirring the dust in the street. A 'SALOON' sign dangled from the building on a broken guy wire. The sign swayed in the wind - now partly obscured by a porch roof, now revealed: 'LOON' ... 'SALOON' ... 'LOON' ... 'SALOON' ...

The mystery of Wadeville was like that sign, Smeg thought. The mystery moved and changed, now one thing, now another. He wondered how he could hold the mystery still long enough to examine it and understand it.

A distant wailing interrupted his reverie.

It grew louder - a siren.

'Here he come,' Painter said.

Smeg glanced at Painter. The man was standing beside him glaring in the direction of the siren.

'Here he sure do come,' Painter muttered.

Another sound accompanied the siren now - the hungry throbbing of a powerful motor.

Smeg looked toward the sound, saw a dust cloud on the horizon, something vaguely red within it.

'Dad! Dad!' That was Rick on the narrow band.

Before he could send out the questioning thought, Smeg felt it - the growing force of a mindcloud so strong it made him stagger.

Painter caught his arm, steadied him.

'Gets some folks that way the first time,' Painter said.

Smeg composed himself, disengaged his arm, stood trembling. Another Slorin! It had to be another Slorin. But the fool was broadcasting a signal that could bring down chaos on them all. Smeg looked at Painter. The natives had the potential - his own Slorin group had determined this. Were they in luck here? Was the local strain insensitive? But Painter had spoken of it getting some folks the first time. He'd spoken of telepaths.

Something was very wrong in Wadeville ... and the mindcloud was enveloping him like a gray fog. Smeg summoned all his mental energy, fought free of the controlling force. He felt himself standing there then like an island of clarity and calm in the midst of that mental hurricane.

There were sharp sounds all around him now - window blinds snapping up, doors slamming. People began to emerge. They lined the street, a dull-eyed look of expectancy about them, an angry wariness. They appeared to be respectable humans all, Smeg thought, but there was a sameness about them he couldn't quite define. It had something to do with a dowdy, slump-shoulder look.

'You going to see the sheriff,' Painter said. 'That's for sure.'

Smeg faced the oncoming thunder of motor and siren. A long red fire truck with a blond young woman in green leotards astride its hood emerged from the dust cloud, hurtled down the street toward the narrow passage where Smeg had parked his car.

At the wheel of the truck sat what appeared to be a dark-skinned man in a white suit, dark blue shirt, a white ten-gallon hat. A gold star glittered at his breast. He clutched the steering wheel like a racing driver, head low, eyes forward.

Smeg, free of the mindcloud, saw the driver for what he was - a Slorin, still in polymorph, his shape approximating the human ... but not well enough ... not well enough at all.

Clustered around the driver, on the truck's seat, clinging to the sides and the ladders on top, were some thirty children. As they entered the village, they began yelling and laughing, screaming greetings.

'There's the sheriff,' Painter said. 'That unusual enough fer you?'

The truck swerved to avoid Smeg's car, skidded to a stop opposite the Lane where he stood with Painter. The sheriff stood up, looked back toward the parked car, shouted: 'Who parked that automobile there? You see how I had to swing way out to git past it? Somebody tear down my 'No Parking' sign again? Look out if you did! You know I'll find out who you are! Who did that?'

While the sheriff was shouting, the children were tumbling off the truck in a cacophony of greetings - 'Hi, Mama!' 'Daddy, you see me?' 'We been all the way to Comanche Lake swimming.' 'You see the way we come, Pa?' 'You make a pie for me, Mama? Sheriff says I kin have a pie.'

Smeg shook his head at the confusion. All were off the truck now except the sheriff and the blonde on the hood. The mindcloud pervaded the mental atmosphere like a strong odor, but it stopped none of the outcry.

Abruptly, there came the loud, spitting crack of a rifle shot. A plume of dust burst from the sheriff's white suit just below the golden star.

Silence settled over the street.

Slowly, the sheriff turned, the only moving figure in the frozen tableaux. He looked straight up the street toward an open window in the second story of a house beyond the abandoned service station. His hand came up; a finger extruded. He shook the finger, a man admonishing a naughty child.

'I warned you,' he said.

Smeg uttered a Slorin curse under his breath. The fool! No wonder he was staying in polymorph and relying on the mindcloud - the whole village was in arms against him. Smeg searched through his accumulated Slorin experience for a clue on how to resolve this situation. A whole village aware of Slorin powers! Oh, that sinful fool!

The sheriff looked down at the crowd of silent children, staring first at one and then another. Presently, he pointed to a barefoot girl of about eleven, her yellow hair tied in pigtails, a soiled blue and white dress on her gangling frame.

'You there, Molly Mae,' the sheriff said. 'You see what your daddy done?'

The girl lowered her head and began to cry.

The blonde on the truck's hood leaped down with a lithe grace, tugged at the sheriff's sleeve.

'Don't interrupt the law in the carrying out of its duties,' the sheriff said.

The blonde put her hands on her hips, stamped a foot. 'Tad, you hurt that child and I won't never speak to you, never again,' she said.

Painter began muttering half under his breath: 'No ... no ... no ... no -'

'Hurt Molly Mae?' the sheriff asked. 'Now, you know I won't hurt her. But she's got to go away, never see her kin again as long as she lives. You know that.'

'But Molly Mae didn't do you no hurt,' the young woman said. 'It were her daddy. Why can't you send him away?'

'There's some things you just can't understand,' the sheriff said. 'Grown up adult can only be taken from sinful, criminal ways a slow bit at a time 'less'n you make a little child of him. Now, I'd be doing the crime if I made a little child out of a grown-up adult. Little girl like Molly Mae, she's a child right now. Don't make much difference.'

So that was it, Smeg thought. That was the sheriff's real hold on this community. Smeg suddenly felt that a barton had to mean - a hostage.

'It's cruel,' the blond young woman said.

'Law got to be cruel sometimes,' the sheriff said. 'Law got to eliminate crime. Almost got it done. Only crimes we had hereabouts for months are crimes 'gainst me. Now, you all know you can't get away with crimes like that. But when you show that *dis*-regard for the majesty of the law, you got to be punished. You got to remember, all of you, that every part of a family is ree-sponsible for the whole entire family.'

Pure Slorin thinking, Smeg thought. He wondered if he could make his move without exposing his own alien origins. Something had to be done here and soon. Did he dare venture a probe of greeting into the fool's mind? No. The sheriff probably wouldn't even receive the greeting through that mindcloud noise.

'Maybe you're doing something wrong then,' the young woman said. 'Seems awful funny to me when the only crimes are put right on the law itself.'

A very pertinent observation, Smeg thought.

Abruptly, Painter heaved himself into motion, lurched through the crowd of children toward the sheriff.

The blond young woman turned, said: 'Daddy! You stay out'n this.'

'You be still now, you hear, Barton Marie?' Painter growled. 'You know you can't do anything,' she wailed. 'He'll only send me away.'

'Good! I say good!' Painter barked. He pushed in front of the young woman, stood glaring up at the sheriff.

'Now, Josh,' the sheriff said, his voice mild. They fell silent, measuring each other.

In this moment, Smeg's attention was caught by a figure walking toward them on the road into the village. The figure emerged from the dust - a young man carrying a large black case.

Rick!

Smeg stared at his offspring. The young man walked like a puppet, loose at the knees. His eyes stared ahead with a blank seeking.

The mindcloud, Smeg thought. Rick was young, weak. He'd been calling out, wide open when the mindcloud struck. The force that had staggered a secondary ancestor had stunned the young Slorin. He was coming now blindly toward the irritation source.

'Who that coming there?' the sheriff called. 'That the one parked this car illegal?'

'Rick!' Smeg shouted.

Rick stopped.

'Stay where you are!' Smeg called. This time, he sent an awakening probe into the youth.

Rick stared around him, awareness creeping into his eyes. He focused on Smeg, mouth falling open.

'Dad!'

'Who're you?' the sheriff demanded, staring at Smeg. A jolt from the mindcloud jarred Smeg.

There was only one way to do this, Smeg realized. Fight fire with fire. The natives already had felt the mindcloud.

Smeg began opening the enclosing mental shields, dropped them abruptly and lashed out at the sheriff. The Slorin polymorph staggered back, slumped onto the truck seat. His human shape twisted, writhed.

'Who're you?' the sheriff gasped.

Shifting to the Slorin gutturals, Smeg said: 'I will ask the questions here. Identify yourself.'

Smeg moved forward, a path through the children opening for him. Gently, he moved Painter and the young woman aside.

'Do you understand me?' Smeg demanded.

'I ... understand you.' The Slorin gutturals were, rough and halting, but recognizable.

In a softer tone, Smeg said: 'The universe has many crossroads where friends can meet. Identify yourself.'

'Min ... I think. Pzilimin.' The sheriff straightened himself on the seat, restored some of his human shape to its previous form. 'Who are you?'

'I am Sumctroxelunsmeg, secondary ancestor.'

'What's a secondary ancestor?'

Smeg sighed. It was pretty much as he had feared. The name, Pzilimin, that was the primary clue - a tertiary ancestor from the *Scattership*. But this poor Slorin had been damaged, somehow, lost part of his detail memory. In the process, he had created a situation here that might be impossible to rectify. The extent of the local mess had to be examined now, though.

'I will answer your questions later,' Smeg said. 'Meanwhile -'

'You know this critter?' Painter asked. 'You part of the conspiracy?'

Shifting to English, Smeg said: 'Mr Painter, let the government handle its own problems. This man is one of our problems.'

'Well, he sure is a problem and that's the truth.'

'Will you let me handle him?'

'You sure you can do it?'

'I ... think so.'

'I sure hope so.'

Smeg nodded, turned back to the sheriff. 'Have you any idea what you've done here?' he asked in basic Slorin.

'I ... found myself a suitable official position and filled it to the best of my ability. Never betray your niche. I remember that. Never betray your niche.'

'Do you know what you are?'

'I'm ... a Slorin?'

'Correct. A Slorin tertiary ancestor. Have you any idea how you were injured?'

'I ... no. Injured?' He looked around at the people drawing closer, all staring curiously. 'I ... woke up out there in the ... field. Couldn't ... remember -'

'Very well, we'll - '

'I remembered one thing! We were supposed to lower the crime rate, prepare a suitable society in which ... in which ... I ... don't know.'

Smeg stared across the children's heads at Rick who had come to a stop behind the truck, returned his attention to Pzilimin.

'I have the crime rate here almost down to an irreducible minimum,' the Slorin sheriff said.

Smeg passed a hand across his eyes. Irreducible minimum! He dropped his hand, glared up at the poor fool. 'You have made these people aware of Slorin,' he accused. 'You've made them aware of themselves, which is worse. You've started them thinking about what's behind the law. Something every native law enforcement official on this planet knows by instinct, and you, a Slorin -injured or not - couldn't see it.'

'See what?' Pzilimin asked.

'Without crime there's no need for law enforcement officers! We are here to prepare niches in which Slorin can thrive. And you begin by doing yourself out of a job! The first rule in any position is to maintain enough of the required activity for that job to insure your continued employment. Not only that, you must increase your scope, open more such positions. This is what is meant by not betraying your niche.'

'But ... we're supposed to create a society in which ... in which -'

'You were supposed to reduce the incidence of violence, you fool! You must channel the crime into more easily manageable patterns. You left them violence! One of them shot at you.'

'Oh ... they've tried worse than that.' Smeg looked to his right, met Painter's questioning gaze.

'He another Hungarian?' Painter asked.

'Ah-h-h, yes!' Smeg said, leaping at this opportunity. 'Thought so, you two talking that foreign language there.' Painter glared up at Pzilimin. 'He oughta be dee-ported.'

'That's the very thing,' Smeg agreed. 'That's why I'm here.'

'Well, by gollies!' Painter said. He sobered. 'I better warn you, though. Sheriff, he got some kind of machine sort of that scrambles your mind. Can't hardly think when he turns it on. Carries it in his pocket, I suspect.'

'We know all about that,' Smeg said. 'I have a machine of the same kind myself. It's a defense secret and he had no right to use it.'

'I'll bet you ain't Department of Agriculture at all,' Painter said. 'I bet you're with the CIA.'

'We won't talk about that,' Smeg said. 'I trust, however, that you and your friends won't mention what has happened here.'

'We're true blue Americans, all of us, Mr Smeg. You don't have to worry about us.'

'Excellent,' Smeg said. And he thought: *How convenient. Do they think me an utter fool?* Smoothly, he turned back to Pzilimin, asked: 'Did you follow all that?'

'They think you're a secret agent.'

'So it seems. Our task of extracting you from this situation has been facilitated. Now tell me, what have you done about their children?'

'Their children?'

'You heard me.'

'Well ... I just erased all those little tracks in their little minds and put 'em on a train headed north, the ones I sent away to punish their folks. These creatures have a very strong protective instinct toward the young. Don't have to worry about their -'

'I know about their instincts, Pzilimin. We'll have to find those children, restore them and return them.'

'How'll we find them?'

'Very simple. We'll travel back and forth across this continent, listening on the narrow band. We will listen for you, Pzilimin. You cannot erase a mind without putting your own patterns in it.'

'Is that what happened when I tried to change the adult?'

Smeg goggled at him, senses reeling. Pzilimin couldn't have done that, Smeg told himself. He couldn't have converted a native into a Slorin-patterned, full-power broadcast unit and turned it loose on this planet. No Slorin could be that stupid! 'Who?' he managed.

'Mr McNabry.'

McNabry? McNabry? Smeg knew he'd heard the name somewhere. *McNabry? Widow McNabry!*

'Sheriff, he say something about Widow McNabry?' Painter asked. 'I thought I heard him -'

'What happened to the late Mr McNabry?' Smeg demanded, whirling on Painter.

'Oh, he drowned down south of here. In the river. Never did find his body.'

Smeg rounded on Pzilimin. 'Did you - '

'Oh no! He just ran off. We had this report he drowned and I just -'

'In effect, you killed a native.'

'I didn't do it on purpose.'

'Pzilimin, get down off that vehicle and into the rear seat of my machine over here. We will forget that I'm illegally parked, shall we?'

'What're you going to do?'

'I'm going to take you away from here. Now, get down off of there!'

'Yes sir.' Pzilimin moved to obey. There was a suggestion of rubbery, nonhuman action to his knees that made Smeg shudder.

'Rick,' Smeg called. 'You will drive.'

'Yes, Dad.'

Smeg turned to Painter. 'I hope you all realize the serious consequences to yourselves if any of this should get out?'

'We sure do, Mr Smeg. Depend on it.'

'I am depending on it,' Smeg said. And he thought: *Let them analyze that little statement ... after we're gone.* More and more he was thanking the Slorin god who'd prompted him to change places with Rick. One wrong move and this could've been a disaster. With a curt nod

to Painter, he strode to his car, climbed into the rear beside Pzilimin. 'Let's go, Rick.'

Presently, they were turned around, headed back toward the state capital. Rick instinctively was pressing the Plymouth to the limit of its speed on this dirt road. Without turning, he spoke over his shoulder to Smeg:

'That was real cool, Dad, the way you handled that. We go right back to the garage now?'

'We disappear at the first opportunity,' Smeg said.

'Disappear?' Pzilimin asked.

'We're going pupa, all of us, and come out into new niches.'

'Why?' Rick said.

'Don't argue with me! That village back there wasn't what it seemed.'

Pzilimin stared at him. 'But you said we'd have to find their children and -'

'That was for their benefit, playing the game of ignorance. I suspect they've already found their children. Faster, Rick.'

'I'm going as fast as I dare right now, Dad.'

'No matter. They're not going to chase us.' Smeg took off his western hat, scratched where the band had pressed into his temples.

'What was that village. Dad?' Rick asked.

'I'm not sure,' Smeg said. 'But they made it too easy for us to get Pzilimin out of there. I suspect they are the source of the disaster which set us down here without our ship.'

'Then why didn't they just ... eliminate Pzilimin and -'

'Why didn't Pzilimin simply eliminate those who opposed him?' Smeg asked. 'Violence begets violence, Rick. This is a lesson many sentient beings have learned. They had their own good reasons for handling it this way.'

'What'll we do?' Rick asked.

'We'll go to earth, like foxes, Rick. We will employ the utmost caution and investigate this situation. That is what we'll do.'

'Don't they know that ... back there?'

'Indeed, they must. This should be very interesting.'

Painter stood in the street staring after the retreating car until it was lost in a dust cloud. He nodded to himself once.

A tall fat man came up beside him, said: 'Well, Josh, it worked.'

'Told you it would,' Painter said. 'I knew dang well another capsule of them Slorin got away from us when we took their ship.'

The blond young woman moved around in front of them, said: 'My dad sure is smart.'

'You listen to me now, Barton Marie,' Painter said. 'Next time you find a blob of something jes' lyin' in a field, you leave it alone, hear?'

'How was I to know it'd be so strong?' she asked.

'That's jes' it!' Painter snapped. 'You never know. That's why you leaves such things alone. It was you made him so dang strong, pokin' him that way. Slorin aren't all that strong 'less'n you ignite'em, hear?'

'Yes, Dad.'

'Dang near five years of him,' the fat man said. 'I don't think I coulda stood another year. He was gettin' worse all the time.'

'They always do,' Painter said.

'What about that Smeg?' the fat man asked.

'That was a wise ol' Slorin,' Painter agreed. 'Seven syllables if I heard his full name rightly.'

'Think he suspects?'

'Pretty sure he does.'

'What we gonna do?'

'What we allus do. We got their ship. We're gonna move out for a spell.'

'Oh-h-h, not again!' the fat man complained.

Painter slapped the man's paunch. 'What you howling about, Jim? You changed from McNabry into this when you had to. That's the way life is. You change when you have to.'

'I was just beginning to get used to this place.'

Barton Marie stamped her foot. 'But this is such a nice body!'

'There's other bodies, child,' Painter said. 'Jes' as nice.'

'How long you think we got?' Jim asked.

'Oh, we got us several months. One thing you can depend on with Slorin, they are cautious. They don't do much of anything very fast.'

'I don't want to leave,' Barton Marie said.

'It won't be forever, child,' Painter said. 'Once they give up hunting for us, we'll come back. Slorin make a planet pretty nice for our kind. That's why we tolerates 'em. Course, they're pretty stupid. They work too hard. Even make their own ships ... for which we can be thankful. They haven't learned how to blend into anything but a bureaucratic society. But that's their misfortune and none of our own.'

'What did you do about the government survey people?' Smeg asked Pzlimin, bracing himself as the car lurched in a particularly deep rut.

'I interviewed them in my office, kept it pretty shadowy, wore dark glasses,' Pzlimin said. 'Didn't use the ... mindcloud.'

'That's a blessing,' Smeg said. He fell silent for a space, then: 'A damn poem keeps going through my head. Over and over, it just keeps going around in my head.'

'A poem, you said?' Rick asked.

'Yes. It's by a native wit ... Jonathan Swift, I believe his name was. Read it during my first studies of their literature. It goes something like this - 'A flea hath smaller fleas that on him prey; and these have smaller still to bite 'em; and so proceed ad infinitum'.'