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So Bright the Vision

Clifford D. Simak

The showroom was in the decorous part of town, where Kemp Hart seldom found himself. It was a long way from his usual haunts and he was surprised to find that he had walked so far. In fact, he would not have walked at all if his credit had been good at the Bright Star bar where his crowd hung out.

As soon as he realized where he was he knew he should turn around and walk rapidly away, for he was out of place in this district of swank publishers, gold-plated warrens and famous eateries. But the showroom held him. It would not let him go. He stood in front of it in all his down-at-the-heels unkemptness, one hand thrust in a pocket, fugitively rubbing between thumb and finger the two small coins that still remained to him.

Behind the glass the machines were shining-wonderful, the sort of merchandise that belonged on this svelte and perfumed street. One machine in the corner of the showroom was bigger and shinier than the others and had about it a rare glint of competence. It had a massive keyboard for the feeding in of data and it had a hundred slots or so for the working tapes and films. It had a mood control calibrated more sensitively than any he had ever seen and in all probability a lot of other features that were not immediately apparent.

With a machine such as that, Hart told himself, a man could become famous almost automatically and virtually overnight. He could write anything he wished and he would write it well and the doors of the most snooty of the publishers would stand open to him.

But much as he might wish to, there was no use of going in to see it. There was nothing to be gained by even thinking about it. It was just something he could stand and look at from beyond the showroom's glass.

And yet, he told himself, he had a perfect right to go in and look it over. There was not a thing to stop him. Nothing, at least, beyond the sneer upon the salesman's face at the sight of him - the silent, polite, well-disciplined contempt when he turned and slunk away.

He looked furtively up and down the street and the street was empty. The hour was far too early for this particular street to have come to life, and it occurred to him that if he just walked in and asked to see the machine, it would be all right. Perhaps he could explain he did not wish to buy it, but just to look at it. Maybe if he did that they wouldn't sneer at him. Certainly no one could object. There must be a lot of people, even rich and famous people, who only come to look.

He edged along the showroom, studying the machines and heading for the door, telling himself that he would not go in, that it was foolish to go in, but secretly knowing that he would.

He reached the door and opened it and stepped inside. The salesman appeared almost as if by magic.

"The yarner in the corner," Hart said. "I wonder if I might - "

"Most certainly," said the salesman. "If you'll just come along with me."

In the corner of the showroom, the salesman draped his arm across the machine affectionately.

"It is our newest model," he said. "We call it the Classic, because it has been designed and engineered with but one thought in mind - the production of the classic. It is, we think, a vast improvement over our Best Seller Model, which, after all, is intended to turn out no better than best sellers - even though on occasion it has turned out certain minor classics. To be quite honest with you sir, I would suspect that in almost every one of those instances, it had been souped up a bit, I am told some people are very clever that way."

Hart shook his head. "Not me. I'm all thumbs when it comes to tinkering."

"In that case," said the salesman, "the thing for you to do is buy the best yarner that you can. Used intelligently, there's virtually no limit to its versatility. And in this particular model the quality factor is much higher than in any of the others. Although naturally, to get the best results you must be selective in your character film, and your narrative problem tapes. But that needn't worry you. We have a large stock of tapes and films and some new mood and atmosphere fixers that are quite unique. They come fairly high, of course, but - "

"By the way, just what is the price of this model?"

"Ifs only twenty-five thousand," the salesman told him brightly. "Don't you wonder, sir, how it can be offered at so ridiculous a figure? The engineering that went into it is remarkable. We worked on it for ten full years before we were satisfied. And during those ten years the specifications were junked and redrawn time and time again to keep pace with our developmental research."

He slapped the shiny machine with a jubilant hand. "I can guarantee you, sir, that nowhere can you get a product superior to this. It has everything. Millions of probability factors have been built into it, assuring you of sure-fire originality. No danger of stumbling into the stereotype, which is not true at all with so many of the cheaper models. The narrative bank alone is capable of turning out an almost infinite number of situations on any particular theme and the character developer has thousands of points of reference instead of the hundred or so you find in inferior models. The semantics section is highly selective and sensitive and you must not overlook - "

"It's a good machine," interposed Hart. "But it costs a bit too much. Now, if you had something else..."

"Most certainly, sir. We have many other models."

"Would you take a machine in trade?"

"Gladly. What kind of machine do you have, sir?"

"An Auto-Author Ninety-six."

The salesman froze just slightly. He shook his head, half sadly, half in bewilderment. "Well, now, I don't know if we could allow you much for that. It's a fairly old type of machine. Almost obsolete."

"But you could give me something?"

"I think so. Not a great deal, though."

"And time payment?"

"Yes, certainly. We could work something out. If you would give me your name."

Hart told him what it was.

The salesman jotted it down and said, "Excuse me a moment, sir."

Hart stood for a moment, looking after him. Then, like a sneak thief in the night, he moved softly to the front door and walked swiftly down the street.

There was no use in staying. No use at all of waiting for the salesman to come back and shake his hand and say, 'We're very sorry, sir.'

We're very sorry, sir, because we've looked up your credit rating and it's absolutely worthless. We checked your sales record and found you sold just one short story in the last six months.

"It was a mistake to go for a walk at all," Hart told himself, not without bitterness.

Downtown, in a section of the city far removed from the glamorous showroom, Hart climbed six flights of stairs because the elevator was out of whack again.

Behind the door that said IRVING PUBLICATIONS, the preoccupied receptionist stopped filing her nails long enough to make a motion with her thumb toward the inner office.

"Go on in and see him," she said.

Ben Irving sat behind a heaped-up desk cluttered with manuscripts, proofs and layout sheets. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and he wore an eyeshade. He always wore the eyeshade and that was one of the minor mysteries of the place, for at no time during the day was there light enough in his dingy office to blind a self-respecting bat.

He looked up and blinked at Hart.

"Glad to see you, Kemp," he said. "Sit down. What's on your mind today?"

Hart took a chair. "I was wondering. About that last story that I sent you - "

"Haven't got around to it yet," said Irving. He waved his hand at the mess upon his desk by way of explanation.

"Mary!" he shouted.

The receptionist stuck her head inside the door.

"Get Hart's manuscript," he said, "and let Millie have a look at it"

Irving leaned back in his chair. "This won't take long," he said. "Millie's a fast reader."

"I'll wait," said Hart.

"I've got something for you," Irving told him. "We're starting a new magazine, aimed at the tribes out in the Algol system. They're a primitive sort of people, but they can read, Lord love them. We had the devil's own time finding someone who could do the translations for us and it'll cost more than we like to pay to have the type set up. They got the damnedest alphabet you ever saw. We finally found a printer who had some in his fonts."

"What kind of stuff?" Hart asked.

"Simple humanoid," Irving replied. "Blood and thunder and a lot of spectacle. Life is tough and hard out there, so we have to give them something with plenty of color in it that's easy to read. Nothing fancy, mind you."

"Sounds all right."

"Good basic hack," said Irving. "See how it goes out there and if it goes all right we'll make translations for some of the primitive groups out in the Capella region. Minor changes, maybe, but none too serious."

He squinted meditatively at Hart.

"Not too much pay. But if it goes over we'll want a lot of it"

"I'll see what I can do," said Hart "Any taboos? Anything to duck?"

"No religion at all," the editor told him. "They've got it, of course, but it's so complicated that you'd better steer clear of it entirely. No mushy stuff. Love don't rate with them. They buy their women and don't fool around with love. Treasure and greed would be good. Any standard reference work will give you a line on that. Fantastic weapons - the more gruesome the better. Bloodshed, lots of it. Hatred, that's their dish. Hatred and vengeance and hell-for-leather living. And you simply got to keep it moving."

"I'll see what I can do."

"That's the second time you've said that."

"I'm not doing so good, Ben. Once I could have told you yes. Once I could have hauled it over by the ton."

"Lost the touch?"

"Not the touch. The machine. My yarner is haywire. I might just as well try to write my stories by hand."

Irving shuddered at the thought.

"Fix it up," he said, "Tinker with it."

"I'm no good at that. Anyhow, it's too old. Almost obsolete."

"Well, do the best you can. I'd like to go on buying from you."

The girl came in. Without looking at Hart she laid the manuscript down upon the desk. From where he sat, Hart could see the single word the machine had stamped upon its face: REJECTED.

"Emphatic," said the girl. "Millie almost stripped a gear."

Irving pitched the manuscript to Hart.

"Sorry, Kemp. Better luck next time."

Hart rose, holding the manuscript in his hand. "I'll try this other thing," he said.

He started for the door.

"Just a minute," Irving said, his voice sympathetic.

Hart turned back.

Irving brought out his billfold, stripped out two tens and held them out.

"No," said Hart, staring at the bills longingly.

"It's a loan," said the editor. "Damn it, man, you can take a loan. You'll be bringing me some stuff."

"Thanks, Ben. I'll remember this."

He stuffed the bills into his pocket and made a swift retreat.

Bitter dust burned in his throat and there was a hard, cold lump in the center of his belly.

Got something for you, Ben had said. Good basic hack.

\_Good basic hack.\_

So that was what he'd sunk to!

Angela Maret was the only patron in the Bright Star bar when Hart finally arrived there, with money in his pocket and a man-sized hankering for a glass of beer. Angela was drinking a weird sort of pink concoction that looked positively poisonous. She had her glasses on and her hair skinned back and was quite obviously on a literary binge. It was a shame, Hart thought. She could be attractive, but preferred not to be.

The instant Hart joined her Blake, the bartender, came over to the table and just stood there, with his fists firmly planted on his hips.

"Glass of beer," Hart told him.

"No more cuff," Blake said, with an accusing stare.

"Who said anything about cuff? I'll pay for it."

Blake scowled. "Since you're loaded, how about paying on the bill?"

"I haven't got that kind of money. Do I get the beer or don't I?"

Watching Blake waddle back to the bar, Hart was glad he had had the foresight to stop and buy a pack of cigarettes to break one of the tens. Flash a ten and Blake would be on it in a second and have it chalked against his bill.

"Staked?" Angela asked sweetly.

"An advance," Hart told her, lying like a gentleman. "Irving has some stuff for me to do. He'll need a lot of it. It doesn't pay too well, of course."

Blake came with the beers and plunked it down on the table and waited pointedly for Hart to do the expected thing.

Hart paid him and he waddled off.

"Have you heard about Jasper?" Angela asked.

Hart shook his head. "Nothing recent," he said. "Did he finish his book?"

Angela's face lit up. "He's going on vacation. Can you imagine that? Him going on vacation!"

"I don't see why not," Hart protested. "Jasper has been selling. He's the only one of us who manages to stay loaded week after week."

"But that's not it, Kemp. Wait until I tell you - it simply is a scream. Jasper thinks he can write better if he goes off on vacation."

"Well, why not? Just last year Don went to one of those summer camps. That Bread Loaf thing, as they call it."

"All they do there," she said, "is brush up on mechanics. It's a sort of refresher course on the gadgetry of yarners. How to soup up the old heap so it'll turn out fresher stuff."

"I still don't see why Jasper can't take a vacation if he can afford it."

"You're so dense," said Angela. "Don't you get the point at all?"

"I get the point all right. Jasper thinks there's still a human factor in our writing. He's not entirely satisfied to get his facts out of a standard reference work or encyclopedia. He's not content to let the yarner define an emotion he has never felt or the color of a sunset he has

never seen. He was nuts enough to hint at that and you and the rest of them have been riding him. No wonder the guy is eccentric. No wonder he keeps his door locked all the time."

"That locked door," Angela said cattily, "is symbolic of the kind of man he is."

"I'd lock my door," Hart told her. "I'd be eccentric too - if I could turn it out like Jasper. I'd walk on my hands. I'd wear a sarong. I'd even paint my face bright blue."

"You sound like you believe the same as Jasper does."

He shook his head. "No, I don't think the way he does. I know better. But if he wants to think that way let him go ahead and think it."

"You do," she crowed at him. "I can see it in your face. You think it's possible to be independently creative."

"No, I don't. I know it's the machines that do the creating - not us. We're nothing but attic tinkers. We're literary mechanics. And I suppose that's the way it should be. There is, naturally, the yearning for the past. That's been evident in every age. The 'good old days' complex. Back in those days a work of fiction was writ by hand and human agony."

"The agony's still with us, Kemp."

He said, "Jasper's a mechanic. That's what's wrong with me. I can't even repair that junk-heap of mine and you should see the way Jasper has his clunk souped up."

"You could hire someone to repair it. There are firms that do excellent work."

"I never have the money." He finished his beer.

"What's that stuff you're drinking?" he asked. "Want another one?"

She pushed her glass away. "I don't like that mess," she said. "I'll have a beer with you, if you don't mind."

Hart signaled to Blake for two beers.

"What are you doing now, Angela?" he asked. "Still working on the book?"

"Working up some films," she said.

"That's what I'll have to do this afternoon. I need a central character for this Irving stuff. Big and tough and boisterous - but not too uncouth. I'll look along the riverfront."

"They come high now, Kemp," she said. "Even those crummy aliens are getting wise to us. Even the ones from way out. I paid twenty for one just the other day and he wasn't too hot, either."

"It's cheaper than buying made-up films."

"Yes, I agree with you there. But it's a lot more work."

Blake brought the beer and Hart counted out the change into his waiting palm.

"Get some of this new film," Angela advised. "It's got the old stuff beat forty different ways. The delineation is sharper and you catch more of the marginal factors. You get a more rounded picture of the character. You pick up all the nuances of the subject, so to speak. It makes your people more believable. I've been using it."

"It comes high, I suppose," he said.

"Yes, it's a bit expensive," she admitted.

"I've got a few spools of the old stuff. I'll have to get along with that."

"I've an extra fifty you can have."

He shook his head. "Thanks, Angela. I'll cadge drinks and bum meals and hit up for a cigarette, but I'm not taking a fifty you'll need yourself. There's none of us so solvent we can lend someone else a fifty."

"Well, I would have done so gladly. If you should change your mind - "

"Want another beer?" Hart asked, cutting her short.

"I have to get to work."

"So have I," said Hart.

Hart climbed the stairs to the seventh floor, then went down the corridor and knocked on Jasper Hansen's door.

"Just a minute," said a voice from within the room. He waited for three minutes. Finally a key grated in the lock and the door was opened wide.

"Sorry I took so long," apologized Jasper. "I was setting up some data and I couldn't quit. Had to finish it."

Hart nodded. Jasper's explanation was understandable. It was difficult to quit in the middle of setting up some data that had taken hours to assemble.

The room was small and littered. In one corner stood the yarner, a shining thing, but not as shiny as the one he'd seen that morning in the uptown showroom. A typewriter stood on a littered desk, half covered by the litter. A long shelf sagged with the weight of dog-eared reference works. Bright-jacketed books were piled helter-skelter in a corner. A cat slept on an unmade bed. A bottle of liquor stood on a cupboard beside a loaf of bread. Dirty dishes were piled high in the sink.

"Heard you're going on vacation, Jasper," Hart said.

Jasper gave him a wary look. "Yes, I thought I might."

"I was wondering, Jasper, if you'd do something for me.

"Just name it."

"When you're gone, could I use your yarner?"

"Well, now, I don't know, Kemp. You see - "

"Mine is busted and I haven't the cash to fix it. But I've got a line on something. If you'd let me use yours, I could turn out enough in a week or two to cover the repair bill."

"Well, now," said Jasper, "you know I'd do anything for you. Anything at all. But that yarner - I just can't let you use it. I got it jiggered up. There isn't a circuit in it that has remained the way it was originally. There isn't a soul but myself who could operate it. If someone else tried to operate it they might burn it out or kill themselves or something."

"You could show me, couldn't you?" Hart asked, almost pleadingly.

"It's far too complicated. I've tinkered with it for years," said Jasper.

Hart managed a feeble grin. "I'm sorry, I thought - "

Jasper draped an arm around his shoulder. "Anything else. Just ask me anything."

"Thanks," said Hart, turning to go.

"Drink?"

"No, thanks," said Hart, and walked out of the door.

He climbed two more flights to the topmost floor and went into his room. His door was never locked. There was nothing in it for anyone to steal. And for that matter, he wondered, what did Jasper have that anyone might want?

He sat down in a rickety chair and stared at his yarner. It was old and battered and ornery, and he hated it.

It was worthless, absolutely worthless, and yet he knew he would have to work with it. It was all he had. He'd slave and reason with it and kick it and swear at it and he'd spend sleepless nights with it. And gurgling and clucking with overweening gratitude, it would turn out endless reams of mediocrity that no one would buy.

He got up, and walked to the window. Far below lay the river and at the wharfs a dozen ships were moored, disgorging rolls of paper to feed the hungry presses that thundered day and night. Across the river a spaceship was rising from the spaceport, with the faint blue flicker of the ion stream wisping from the tubes. He watched it until it was out of sight.

There were other ships, with their noses pointed at the sky, waiting for the signal - the punched button, the flipped switch, the flicker of a piece of navigation tape - that would send them bounding homeward. First out into the blackness and then into that other place of weird other-worldness that annihilated time and space, setting at defiance the theoretic limit of the speed of light. Ships from many stars, all come to Earth for one thing only, for the one commodity that Earthmen had to sell.

He pulled his eyes from the fascination of the spaceport and looked across the sprawling city, the tumbled, canted, box-like rectangles of the district where he lived, while far to the north shone the faerie towers and the massive greatness of the famous and the wise.

A fantastic world, he thought. A fantastic world to live in. Not the kind of world that H. G. Wells and Stapledon had dreamed. With them it had been a far wandering and galactic empire, a glory and a greatness that Earth had somehow missed when the doors to space had finally been opened. Not the thunder of the rocket, but the thunder of the press. Not the great and lofty purpose, but the faint, quiet, persistent voice spinning out a yarn. Not the far sweep of new planets, but the attic room and the driving fear that the machine would fail you, that the tapes had been used too often, that the data was all wrong.

He went to the desk and pulled all three of the drawers. He found the camera in the bottom one beneath a pile of junk. He hunted for and found the film in the middle drawer, wrapped in aluminum foil.

Rough and tough, he thought, and it shouldn't be too hard to find a man like that in one of the dives along the riverfront, where the space crews on planet leave squandered their pay checks.

The first dive he entered was oppressive with the stink of a group of spidery creatures from Spica and he didn't stay. He grimaced distastefully and got out as fast as he could. The second was repellently patronized by a few cat-like denizens of Dahib and they were not what he was looking for.

But in the third he hit the jackpot, a dozen burly humanoids from Caph - great brawling creatures with a flair for extravagance in dress, a swashbuckling attitude and a prodigious appetite for lusty living. They were grouped about a large round table out in the center of the room and they were whooping it up. They were pounding the table with their tankards and chivvying the scuttling proprietor about and breaking into songs that they repeatedly interrupted with loud talk and argument.

Hart slipped into an unoccupied booth and watched the Caphians celebrate. One of them, bigger and louder and rowdier than the rest, wore red trousers, and a bright green shirt. Looped necklaces of platinum and outlandish alien gems encircled his throat and glittered on his chest, and his hair had not been trimmed for months. He wore a beard that was faintly satanic, and, startlingly enough, his ears were slightly pointed. He looked like an ugly customer to get into a fracas with. And so, thought Hart, he's just the boy I want.



The proprietor finally lumbered over to the booth.

"Beer," said Hart. "A big glass."

"Buster," said the man, "no one drinks beer here."

"Well, then, what have you got?"

"I got \_bocca\_ and \_igno\_ and \_hzbud\_ and \_greno\_ and - "

"\_Bocca\_," said Hart. He knew what \_bocca\_ was and he didn't recognize any of the others. Lord knows what some of them might do to the human constitution. \_Bocca\_, at least, one could survive.

The man went away and in a little while came back with a mug of \_bocca\_. It was faintly greenish and it sizzled just a little. What was worse, it tasted like a very dilute solution of sulphuric acid.

Hart squeezed himself back into the corner of the booth and opened his camera case. He set the camera on the table, no farther forward than was necessary to catch Green Shirt in the lens. Sighting through the finder, he got the Caphian in focus, and then quickly pressed the button that set the instrument in motion.

Once that was done, he settled down to drinking \_bocca\_.

He sat there, gagging down the \_bocca\_ and manipulating the camera. Fifteen minutes was all he needed. At the end of fifteen minutes Green Shirt would be on film. Probably not as good as if he had been using the new fangled spools that Angela was using, but at least he'd have him.

The camera ground on, recording the Caphian's physical characteristics, his personal mannerisms, his habits of speech, his thought processes (if any), his way of life, his background, his theoretic reaction in the face of any circumstance.

Not three-dimensional, thought Hart, not too concise, nor too distinctive, not digging deep into the character and analyzing him - but good enough for the kind of tripe he'd have to write for Irving.

Take this joker and surround him with a few other ruffians chosen haphazardly from the file. Use one of the films from the Deep Dark Villain reel, throw in an ingenious treasure situation and a glob of violence, dream up some God-awful background, and he'd have it, that is, if the yarner worked...

Ten minutes gone. Just five more to go. In five more minutes he'd stop the camera, put it back into its case, slip the case into his pocket and get out of the place as fast as he could. Without causing undue notice, of course.

It had been simple, he thought - much simpler than he could possibly have imagined.

\_They're getting on to us\_, Angela had said. \_Even these crummy aliens.\_

Only three more minutes to go.

A hand came down from nowhere, and picked up the camera. Hart swiveled around. The proprietor stood directly behind him, with the camera under his arm.

\_Good Lord\_, thought Hart, \_I was watching the Caphians so closely I forgot about this guy!\_

The proprietor roared at him: "So! You sneak in here under false pretences to get your film! Are you trying to give my place a bad name?"

Swiftly Hart flung himself out of the booth, one frantic eye on the door. There was just a chance that he might make it. But the proprietor stuck out an expert foot and tripped him. Hart landed on his shoulders and somersaulted. He skidded across the floor, smashed into a table and rolled half under it.

The Caphians had come to their feet and were looking at him. He could see that they were hoping he'd get his head bashed in.

The proprietor hurled the camera with great violence to the floor. It came apart with an ugly, splintering sound. The film rolled free and snaked across the floor. The lens wobbled crazily. A spring came unloose from somewhere and went \_zing\_. It stood out at an angle, quivering.

Hart gathered his feet beneath him, and leaped out from the table. The Caphians started moving in on him - not rushing him, not threatening him in any way. They just kept walking toward him and spreading out so that he couldn't make a dash for the door.

He backed away, step by careful step, and the Caphians still continued their steady advance.

Suddenly he leaped straight toward them in a direct assault on the center of the line. He yelled and lowered his head and caught Green Shirt squarely in the belly. He felt the Caphian stagger and lurch to one side, and for a split second he thought that he had broken free.

But a hairy, muscular hand reached out and grabbed him and flung him to the floor. Someone kicked him. Someone stepped on his fingers. Someone else picked him up and threw him - straight through the open door into the street outside.

He landed on his back and skidded, with the breath completely knocked out of him. He came to rest with a jolt against the curbing opposite the place from which he had been heaved.

The Caphians, the full dozen of them, were grouped around the doorway, roar with booming laughter. They slapped their thighs, and pounded one another on the back. They doubled over, shrieking. They shouted pleasantries and insults at him. Half of the jests he did not understand, but the ones that registered were enough to make his blood run cold.

He got up cautiously, and tested himself, He was considerably bruised and battered and his clothes were torn. But seemingly he had escaped any broken bones. He tried a few steps, limping. He tried to run and was surprised to find that he could.

Behind him the Caphians were still laughing. But there was no telling at what moment they might cease to think that his predicament was funny and start after him in earnest - for blood.

He raced down the street and ducked into an alley that led to a tangled square. He crossed the square into another street without pausing for breath and went running on. Finally he became satisfied that he was safe and sat down on a doorstep in an alley to regain his breath and carefully review the situation.

The situation, he realized, was bad. He not only had failed to get the character he needed; he had lost the camera, suffered a severe humiliation and barely escaped with his life.

There wasn't a thing that he could do about it. Actually, he told himself, he had been extremely lucky. For he didn't have a legal leg to stand on. He'd been entirely in the wrong. To film a character without the permission of the character's original was against the law.

It wasn't that he was a lawbreaker, he thought. It wasn't as if he'd deliberately set out to break the law. He'd been forced into it. Anyone who might have consented to serve as a character would have demanded money - more money than he was in a position to shell out.

But he did desperately need a character! He simply had to have one, or face utter defeat.

He saw that the sun had set, and that twilight was drifting in. The day, he thought, had been utterly wasted, and he had only himself to blame.

A passing police officer stopped and looked into the alley.

"You," he said to Hart. "What are you sitting there for?"

"Resting," Hart told him.

"All right. You're rested. Now get a move on."

Hart got a move on.

He was nearing home when he heard the crying in the areaway between an apartment house and a bindery. It was a funny sort of crying, a not-quite-human crying - perhaps not so much a crying as a sound of grief and loneliness.

He halted abruptly and stared around him. The crying had cut off, but soon it began again. It was a low and empty crying, a hopeless crying, a crying to one's self.

For a moment he stood undecided, then started to go on. But he had not gone three paces before he turned back. He stepped into the areaway and at the second step his foot touched something lying on the ground.

He squatted and looked at the form that lay there, crying to itself. It was a bundle - that described it best - a huddled, limp, sad bundle that moaned heartbrokenly.

He put a hand beneath it and lifted it and was surprised at how little weight it had. Holding it firmly with one hand, he searched with the other for his lighter. He flicked the lighter and the flame was feeble, but he saw enough to make his stomach flop. It was an old blanket with a face that once had started out to be humanoid and then, for some reason, had been forced to change its mind. And that was all there was - a blanket and a face.

He thumbed the lighter down and crouched in the dark, his breath rasping in his throat. The creature was not only an alien. It was, even by alien standards, almost incredible. And how had an alien strayed so far from the spaceport? Aliens seldom wandered. They never had the time to wander, for the ships came in, freighted up with fiction, and almost immediately took off again. The crews stayed close to the rocket berths, seldom venturing farther than the dives along the riverfront.

He rose, holding the creature bundled across his chest as one would hold a child - it was not as heavy as a child - and feeling the infant-like warmth of it against his body and a strange companionship. He stood in the areaway while his mind went groping back in an effort to unmask the faint recognition he had felt. Somewhere, somehow, it seemed he once had heard or read of an alien such as this. But surely that was ridiculous, for aliens did not come, even the most fantastic of them, as a living blanket with the semblance of a face.

He stepped out into the street and looked down to examine the face again. But a portion of the creature's blanket-body had draped itself across its features and he could see only a waving blur.

Within two blocks he reached the Bright Star bar, went around the corner to the side door and started up the stairs. Footsteps were descending and he squeezed himself against the railing to let the other person past.

"Kemp," said Angela Maret. "Kemp, what have you there?"

"I found it in the street," Hart told her.

He shifted his arm a little and the blanket-body slipped and she saw the face. She moved back against the railing, her hand going to her mouth to choke off a scream.

"Kemp! How awful!"

"I think that it is sick. It - "

'What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Hart said. "It was crying to itself. It was enough to break your heart. I couldn't leave it there."

"I'll get Doc Julliard."

Hart shook his head. "That wouldn't do any good. Doc doesn't know any alien medicine. Besides, he's probably drunk."

"No one knows any alien medicine," Angela reminded him. "Maybe we could get one of the specialists uptown." Her face clouded. "Doc is resourceful, though. He has to be down here. Maybe he could tell us - "

"All right," Hart said. "See if you can rout out Doc."

In his room he laid the alien on the bed. It was no longer whimpering. Its eyes were closed and it seemed to be asleep, although he could not be sure.

He sat on the edge of the bed and studied it and the more he looked at it the less sense it seemed to make. Now he could see how thin the blanket body was, how light and fragile. It amazed him that a thing so fragile could live at all, that it could contain in so inadequate a body the necessary physiological machinery to keep itself alive.

He wondered if it might be hungry and if so what kind of food it required. If it were really ill how could he hope to take care of it when he didn't know the first basic thing about it?

Maybe Doc - But no, Doc would know no more than he did. Doc was just like the rest of them, living hand to mouth, cadging drinks whenever he could get them, and practicing medicine without adequate equipment and with a knowledge that had stopped dead in its tracks forty years before.

He heard footsteps coming up the stairs - light steps and trudging heavy ones. It had to be Angela with Doc. She had found him quickly and that probably meant he was sober enough to act and think with a reasonable degree of coordination.

Doc came into the room, followed by Angela. He put down his bag and looked at the creature on the bed.

"What have we here?" he asked and probably it was the first time in his entire career that the smug doctorish phrase made sense.

"Kemp found it in the street," said Angela quickly. "It's stopped crying now."

"Is this a joke?" Doc asked, half wrathfully. "If it is, young man, I consider it in the worst possible taste."

Hart shook his head. "It's no joke. I thought that you might know - "

"Well, I don't," said Doc, with aggressive bitterness.

He let go of the blanket edge and it quickly flopped back upon the bed.

He paced up and down the room for a turn or two. Then he whirled angrily on Angela and Hart.

"I suppose you think that I should do something," he said. "I should at least go through the motions. I should act like a doctor. I'm sure that is what you're thinking. I should take its pulse and its temperature and look at its tongue and listen to its heart. Well, suppose you tell me how I do these things. Where do I find the pulse? If I could find it, what is its normal rate? And if I could figure out some way to take its temperature, what is the normal temperature for a monstrosity such as this? And if you would be so kind, would you tell me how - short of dissection - I could hope to locate the heart?"

He picked up his bag and started for the door.

"Anyone else, Doc?" Hart pleaded, in a conciliatory tone. "Anyone who'd know?"

"I doubt it," Doc snapped.

"You mean there's no one who can do a thing? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Look, son. Human doctors treat human beings, period. Why should we be expected to do more?"

How often are we called upon to treat an alien? We're not expected to treat aliens. Oh, possibly, once in a while some specialist or researcher may dabble in alien medicine. But that is the correct name for it - just plain dabbling. It takes years of a man's life to learn barely enough to qualify as a human doctor. How many lifetimes do you think we should devote to curing aliens?"

"All right, Doc. All right."

"And how can you even be sure there's something wrong with it?"

"Why, it was crying and I quite naturally thought - "

"It might have been lonesome or frightened or grieving. It might have been lost."

Doc turned to the door again.

"Thanks, Doc," Hart said.

"Not at all." The old man hesitated at the door. "You don't happen to have a dollar, do you? Somehow, I ran a little short."

"Here," said Hart, giving him a bill.

"I'll return it tomorrow," Doc promised. He went clumping down the stairs.

Angela frowned. "You shouldn't have done that, Kemp. Now he'll get drunk and you'll be responsible."

"Not on a dollar," Hart said confidently. "That's all you know about it. The kind of stuff Doc drinks - "

"Let him get drunk then. He deserves a little fun." "But - " Angela motioned to the thing upon the bed.

"You heard what Doc said. He can't do anything. No one can do anything. When it wakes up - if it wakes up

- it may be able to tell us what is wrong with it. But I'm not counting on that."

He walked over to the bed and stared down at the creature. It was repulsive and abhorrent and not in the least humanoid. But there was about it a pitiful loneliness and an incongruity that made a catch come to his

throat.

"Maybe I should have left it in the areaway," he said. "I started to walk on. But when it began to cry again I went back to it. Maybe I did wrong bothering with it at all. I haven't helped it any. If I'd left it there it might have turned out better. Some other aliens may be looking for it by now."

"You did right," said Angela. "Don't start in fighting with windmills."

She crossed the room and sat down in a chair. He went over to the window and stared somberly out across the city.

"What happened to you?" she asked. "Nothing."

"But your clothes. Just look at your clothes."

"I got thrown out of a dive. I tried to take some film."

"Without paying for it."

"I didn't have the money."

"I offered you a fifty."

"I know you did. But I couldn't take it. Don't you understand, Angela? \_I simply couldn't take it.\_"

She said softly, "You're bad off, Kemp."

He swung around, outraged. She hadn't needed to say that. She had no right to say it. She - He caught himself up before the words came tumbling out

She had a right. She'd offered him a fifty - but that had been only a part of it. She had the right to say it because she knew that she could say it. No one else in all the world could have felt the way she did, about him.

"I can't write," he said. "Angela, no matter how I try, I can't make it come out right. The machine is haywire and the tapes are threadbare and most of them are patched."

"What have you had to eat today?"

"I had the beers with you and I had some \_bocca\_."

"That isn't eating. You wash your face and change into some different clothes and we'll go downstairs and get you some food."

"I have eating money."

"I know you have. You told me about the advance from Irving."

"It wasn't an advance."

"I know it wasn't, Kemp."

"What about the alien?"

"It'll be all right - at least long enough for you to get a bite to eat. You can't help it by standing here. You don't know how to help it."

"I guess you're right."

"Of course I am. Now get going and wash your dirty face. And don't forget your ears."

Jasper Hansen was alone in the Bright Star bar. They went over to his table and sat down. Jasper was finishing a dish of sauerkraut and pig's knuckles and was drinking wine with it, which seemed a bit blasphemous.

"Where's everyone else?" asked Angela. "There's a party down the street," said Jasper. "Someone sold a book."

"Someone that we know?"

"Hell, no," Jasper said. "Just someone sold a book. You don't have to know a guy to go to his party when he sells a book."

"I didn't hear anything about it."

"Neither did the rest of the bunch. Someone looked in at the door and hollered about the party and everyone took off. Everyone but me. I can't monkey with no party. I've got work to do."

"Free food?" asked Angela.

"Yeah. Don't it beat you, though. Here we are, honorable and respected craftsmen, and every one of us will break a leg to grab himself a sandwich and a drink."

"Times are tough," said Hart.

"Not with me," said Jasper. "I keep working all the time."

"But work doesn't solve the main problem."

Jasper regarded him thoughtfully, tugging at his chin.

"What else is there?" he demanded. "Inspiration? Dedication? Genius? Go ahead and name it. We are rmechanics, man. We got machines and tapes. We went into top production two hundred years ago. We mechanized so we could go into top production so that people could turn out books and stories even if they had no talent at all. We got a job to do. We got to turn out tons of drivel for the whole damn galaxy. We got to keep them drooling over what is going to happen next to sloe-eyed Annie, queen of the far-flung spaceways. And we got to shoot up the lad with her and patch him up and shoot him up and patch him up and..."

He reached for an evening paper, opened it to a certain page and thumped his fist upon it.

"Did you see this?" he asked. "The Classic, they call it. Guaranteed to turn out nothing but a classic."

Hart snatched the paper from him and there it was, the wondrous yarner he had seen that morning, confronting him in all its glory from the center of a full-page

"Pretty soon," said Jasper, "all you'll need to write is have a lot of money. You can go out and buy a machine like that and say turn out a story and press a button or flip a switch or maybe simply kick it and it'll cough out a story complete to the final exclamation point.

"It used to be that you could buy an old beat-up machine for, say, a hundred dollars and you could turn out any quantity of stuff - not good, but salable. Today you got to have a high-priced machine and an expensive camera and a lot of special tape and film. Someday," he said, "the human race will outwit itself. Someday it will mechanize to the point where there won't be room for humans, but only for machines."

"You do all right," said Angela.

"That's because I keep dinging my machine up all the time. It don't give me no rest. That place of mine is half study and half machine shop and I know as much about electronics as I do about narration."

Blake came shuffling over.

"What'll it be?" he growled.

"I've eaten," Angela told him. "All I want is a glass of beer."

He turned to Hart. "How about you" he demanded.

"Give me some of that stuff Jasper has - without the wine.

"No cuff," said Blake.

"Damn it, who said anything about cuff? Do you expect me to pay you before you bring it?"

"No," said Blake. "But immediately, after I bring it."

He turned and shuffled off.

"Some day," said Jasper, "there has to be a limit to it. There must be a limit to it and we must be reaching it. You can only mechanize so far. You can assign only so many human activities and duties to intelligent machines. Who, two hundred years ago, would have said that the writing of fiction could have been reduced to a matter of mechanics?"

"Who, two hundred years ago," said Hart, "could have guessed that Earth could gear itself to a literary culture? But that is precisely what we have today. Sure, there are factories that build the machines we need and lumbermen who cut the trees for pulp and farmers who grow the food, and

all the other trades and skills which are necessary to keep a culture operative. But by and large Earth today is principally devoted to the production of a solid stream of fiction for the alien trade."

"It all goes back to one peculiar trait," said Jasper. "A most unlikely trait to work - as it does - to our great advantage. We just happen to be the galaxy's only liars. In a mass of stars where truth is accepted as a universal constant, we are the one exception."

"You make it sound so horrible," protested Angela.

"I suppose I do, but that's the way it is. We could have become great traders and skinned all and sundry until they got wise to us. We could have turned our talent for the untruth into many different channels and maybe even avoided getting our heads bashed in. But instead we drifted into the one safe course. Our lying became an easy virtue. Now we can lie to our hearts' content and they lap it up. No one, nowhere, except right here on Earth, ever even tried to spin a yarn for simple entertainment, or to point a moral or for any other reason. They never attempted it because it would have been a lie, and we are the only liars in the universe of stars."

Blake brought the beer for Angela and the pig knuckles for Hart. Hart paid him out of hand.

"I've still got a quarter left," he said. "Have you any pie?"

"Apple."

"Here," said Hart, "I'll pay you in advance."

"First," went on Jasper, "it was told by mouth. Then it was writ by hand and now it's fabricated by machine."

But surely that's not the end of it. There must be something else. There must be another way, a better way. There must be another step."

"I would settle for anything," said Hart. "Any way at all. I'd even write by hand if I thought I could go on selling."

"You can't!" Angela told him, sharply. "Why, its positively indecent to even joke about it. You can say it as a joke just among the three of us, but if I ever hear you - "

Hart waved his hand. "Let it go. I'm sorry that I said it."

"Of course," said Jasper, "it's a great testimonial to the cleverness of Man, to the adaptability and resourcefulness of the human race. It is a somewhat ludicrous application of big business methods to what had always been considered a personal profession. But it works. Some day, I have no doubt, we may see the writing business run on production lines, with fiction factories running double shifts."

"No," Angela said. "No, you're wrong there, Jasper. Even with the mechanization, it's still the loneliest business on Earth."

"It is," agreed Jasper. "But I don't regret the loneliness part. Maybe I should, but I don't."

"It's a lousy way to make a living," said Angela, with a strange half-bitterness in her voice. "What are we contributing?"

"You are making people happy - if you can call some of our readers people. You are supplying entertainment."

"And the noble ideas?"

"There are even a few of those."

"It's more than that," said Hart. "More than entertainment, more than great ideas. It's the most innocent and the deadliest propoganda in all of human history. The old writers, before the first space flight, glorified far wandering and galactic conquest and I thing that they were



justified. But they missed the most important development completely. They couldn't possibly foresee the way we would do it - with books, not battleships. We're softening up the galaxy with a constant stream of human thought. Our words are reaching farther than our spaceships ever could."

"That's the point I want to make," Jasper said, triumphantly. "You hit the point exactly. But if we are to tell the galaxy a story it must be a human story. If we sell them a bill of goods it must be a human bill of goods. And how can we keep it human if we relegate its telling to machines?"

"But they're human machines," objected Angela.

"A machine can't be purely human. Basically a machine is universal. It could be Caphian as well as human, or Aldebaran or Draconian or any other race. And that's not all. We let the machine set the norm. The one virtue of mechanics is that it sets a pattern. And a pattern is deadly in literary matters. It never changes. It keeps on using the same old limp plots in many different guises.

"Maybe at the moment it makes no difference to the races who are reading us, for as yet they have not developed anything approaching a critical faculty. But it should make some difference to us. It should make some difference in the light of a certain pride of workmanship we are supposed to have. And that is the trouble with machines. They are destroying the pride in us. Once writing was an art. But it is an art no longer. It's machine-produced, like a factory chair. A good chair, certainly. Good enough to sit on, but not a thing of beauty or of craftsmanship or - "

The door crashed open and feet pounded on the floor.

Just inside the door stood Green Shirt and behind him, grinning fiendishly, his band of Caphians.

Green Shirt advanced upon them happily, with his arms flung wide in greeting. He stopped beside Hart's chair and clapped a massive hand upon his shoulder.

"You recall me, don't you?" he asked in slow and careful English.

"Sure," Hart said, gulping. "Sure, I remember you. This is Miss Maret and over there is Mr. Hansen."

Green Shirt said, with precise bookishness, "So happy, I assure you."

"Have a seat," said Jasper.

"Glad to," said Green Shirt, hauling out a chair. His necklaces jingled musically as he sat down.

One of the other Caphians said something to him in a rapid-fire alien tongue. Green Shirt answered curtly and waved toward the door. The others marched outside.

"He is worried," Green Shirt said. "We will slow - how do you say it - we will slow the ship. They cannot leave without us. But I tell him not to worry. The captain will be glad we slow the ship when he see what we bring back."

He leaned forward and tapped Hart upon the knee. "I look for you," he said. "I look high and wide."

"Who is this joker?" Jasper asked.

"Joker?" asked Green Shirt, frowning.

"A term of great respect," Hart hastily assured him. "So," said Green Shirt. "You all write the stories?"

"Yes. All three of us."

"But you write them best."

"I wouldn't say that exactly. You see - "

"You write the wild and woolly stories? The bang-bangs?"

"Yeah. I guess I'm guilty."

Green Shirt looked apologetic. "Had I known, we would not from the tavern have thrown you out. It was just big fun. We did not know you write the stories. When we find out who you are we try to catch you. But you run and hide."

"Just what is going on here, anyhow?" Angela demanded.

Green Shirt whooped for Blake.

"Set them up," he shouted. "These are my friends. Set up the best you have."

"The best I have," Blake said icily, "is Irish whiskey and that costs a buck a shot."

"I got the cash," said Green Shirt. "You get this name I cannot say, and you will get your cash."

He said to Hart, "I have a surprise for you, my friend. We love the writers of the bang-bangs. We read them always. We get much stimulation."

Jasper guffawed.

Green Shirt swung about in amazement, his bushy brows contracting.

"He's just happy," Hart explained, quickly. "He likes Irish whiskey."

"Fine," said Green Shirt, beaming. "You drink all you wish. I will give the cash. It is - how do you say - on me."

Blake brought the drinks and Green Shirt paid him.

"Bring the container," he said.

"The container?"

"He means the bottle."

"That'll be twenty dollars," said Blake.

"So," said Green Shirt, paying him.

They drank the whiskey and Green Shirt said to Hart, "My surprise is that you come with us."

"You mean in the ship?"

"We have never had a real live writer on our planet. You will have a good time. You will stay and write for us.

'Well," said Hart, "I'm not sure - "

"You try to take the picture. The tavern man explain it all to us. He say it is against the law. He say if I complain it will come big trouble."

"You can't do it, Kemp," protested Angela. "Don't let this big hyena bluff you. We'll pay your fine."

"We not complain," said Green Shirt, gently. "We just with you mop up the condemned place."

Blake brought the bottle and thumped it down in the center of the table. Green Shirt picked it up and filled their glasses to the brim.

"Drink up," he said and set a fine example.

He drank and Green Shirt filled his glass again. Hart picked up his glass and twirled it in his fingers.

There had to be a way out of this mess, he told himself. It was absurd that this thundering barbarian from one of the farther suns should be able to walk into a bar and tell a man to come along with him.

However, there was no percentage in stirring up a fight - not with ten or eleven Caphians waiting just outside.

"I explain it to you," said Green Shirt. "I try hard to explain it well so that you will - so that you will - "

"Understand," supplied Jasper Hansen.

"I thank you, Hansen man. So you will understand. We get the stories only shortly ago. Many of the other races got them long ago, but with us it is new and most wonderful. It takes us - how would you say - out of ourselves. We get many things from other stars, useful things, things to hold in the hand, things to see and use. But from you we get the going of far places, the doing of great deeds, the thinking of great thoughts."

He filled the glasses all around again. "You understand?" Green Shirt asked. They nodded.

"And now we go."

Hart rose slowly to his feet. "Kemp, you can't!" screamed Angela. "You shut the mouth," said Green Shirt.

Hart marched through the door and out into the street. The other Caphians oozed out of dark alleyways and surrounded him.

"Off we go," said Green Shirt, happily. "It gives big time on Caph."

Halfway to the river, Hart stopped in the middle of the street.

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

"Can't do what?" asked Green Shirt, prodding him along.

"I let you think," said Hart, "that I was the man you wanted. I did it because I'd like to see your planet. But it isn't fair. I'm not the man you want."

"You write the bang-bangs, do you not? You think up the wild and woollies?"

"Certainly. But not really good ones. Mine aren't the kind where you hang on every word. There's another man who can do it better."

"\_This\_ man we want," said Green Shirt. "Can you tell us where to find him?"

"That's easy. The other man at the table with us. The one who was so happy when you ordered whiskey."

"You mean the Hansen man?"

"He is the one, exactly."

"He write the bang-bangs good?"

"Much better than I do. He's a genius at it." Green Shirt was overcome with gratitude. He hugged Hart to him in an extravagant expression of good will.

"You fair," he said. "You fine. It was nice of you to tell us."

A window banged up in a house across the street and a man stuck his head out.

"If you guys don't break it up," he bellowed, "I'll call the cops."

"We shatter the peace," sighed Green Shirt "It is a queer law you have."

The window banged down again.

Green Shirt put a friendly hand upon Hart's shoulder. "We love the wild and woollies," he said gravely. "'We want the very best. We thank you. We find this Hansen man."

He turned around and loped back up the street, followed by his ruffians.

Hart stood on the corner and watched them go. He drew a deep breath and let it slowly out.

It had been easy, he told himself, once you got the angle. And it had been Jasper, actually, who had given him the angle. Truth Is regarded as a universal constant, Jasper had said. We are the only liars.

It had turned out tough on Jasper - a downright dirty trick. But the guy wanted to go on vacation, didn't he? And here was the prospect of a travel jaunt which would be really worthwhile. He'd refused the use of his machine and he had guffawed insultingly when Green Shirt had asked about the wild and woollies. If ever a guy had it coming to him, Jasper Hansen was that guy.

And above and beyond all that, he always kept his door locked - which showed a contemptible suspicion of his fellow writers.

Hart swung about and walked rapidly away in an opposite direction. Eventually he'd go back home, he told himself. But not right now. Later on he'd go, when the dust had settled slightly.

It was dawn when Hart climbed the stairs to the seventh floor and went down the corridor to Jasper Hansen's door. The door was locked as usual. But he took out of his pockets a thin piece of spring steel he'd picked up in a junkyard and did some judicious prying. In the matter of seconds, the lock clicked back and the door swung open.

The yarner squatted in its corner, a bright and lovely sight.

Jiggered up, Jasper had affirmed. If someone else ever tried to use it, it would very likely burn out or kill him. But that had been just talk, just cover-up for his pig-headed selfishness.

Two weeks, Hart told himself. If he used his head he should be able to operate it without suspicion for at least two weeks. It would be easy. All he'd have to say was that Jasper had told him that he could borrow it any time he wished. And if he was any judge of character, Jasper would not be returning soon.

But even so, two weeks would be all the time he'd need. In two weeks, working day and night, he could turn out enough copy to buy himself a new machine.

He walked across the room to the yarner and pulled out the chair that stood in front of it. Calmly he sat down, reached out a hand and patted the instrument panel. It was a good machine. It turned out a lot of stuff - good stuff. Jasper had been selling steadily. Good old yarner, Hart said.

He dropped his finger to the switch and flipped it over. Nothing happened. Startled, he flipped it back, flipped it on again. Still nothing happened.

He got up hastily to check the power connection. There was no power connection! For a shocked moment, he stood rooted to the floor.

Jiggered up, Jasper had said. Jiggered up so ingeniously that it could dispense with power?

It just wasn't possible. It was unthinkable. With fumbling fingers, he lifted the side panel,

and peered inside.

The machine's innards were a mess. Half of the tubes were gone. Others were burned out, and the wiring had been ripped loose in places. The whole relay section was covered with dust. Some of the metal, he saw, was rusty. The entire machine was just a pile of junk.

He replaced the panel with suddenly shaking fingers, reeled back blindly and collided with a table. He clutched at it and held on tight to still the shaking of his hands, to steady the mad roaring in his head.

Jasper's machine wasn't jiggered up. It wasn't even in operating condition...

No wonder Jasper had kept his door locked. He lived in mortal fear that someone would find out that he wrote by hand!

And now, despite the dirty trick he'd played on a worthy friend, Hart was no better off than he had been before. He was faced with the same old problems, with no prospect of overcoming them. He still had his own beaten-up machine and nothing more. Maybe it would have been better if he had gone to Caph.

He walked to the door, paused there for an instant, and looked back. On the littered desk he could see Jasper's typewriter carefully half-buried by the litter, and giving the exact impression that it was never used.

Still, Jasper sold. Jasper sold almost every word he wrote. He sold - hunched over his desk with a pencil in his hand or hammering out the words on a muted typewriter. He sold without using the yartner at all, but keeping it all bright and polished, an empty, useless thing. He sold by using it as a shield against the banter and the disgust of all those others who talked so glibly and relied so much upon the metal and the magic of the ponderous contraption.

\_First it was told by mouth\_, Jasper had said that very evening. \_Then it was writ by hand. Now it's fabricated by machine.\_

And what's next, he'd asked - as if he had never doubted that there would be something next.

\_What next?\_ thought Hart. Was this the end and all of Man - the moving gear, the clever glass and metal, the adroit electronics?

For the sake of Man's own dignity - his very sanity - there \_had\_ to be a next. Mechanics, by their very nature, were a dead end. You could only get so clever. You could only go so far.

Jasper knew that. Jasper had found out. He had discarded the mechanistic aid and gone back to hand again.

Give a work of craftsmanship some economic value and Man would find a way to turn it out in quantity. Once furniture had been constructed lovingly by artisans who produced works of art that would last with pride through many generations. Then the machine had come and Man had turned out furniture that was purely functional, furniture that had little lasting value and no pride at all.

And writing had followed the same pattern. It had pride no longer. It had ceased to be an art, and become a commodity.

But what was a man to do? What \_could\_ he do? Lock his door like Jasper and work through lonely hours with the bitter taste of nonconformity sharp within his mind, tormenting him night and day?

Hart walked out of the room with a look of torment in his eyes. He waited for a second to hear the lock click home. Then he went down the hall and slowly climbed the stairs.

The alien - the blanket and the face - was still lying on the bed. But now its eyes were open and it stared at him when he came in and closed the door behind him.

He stopped just inside the door and the cold mediocrity of the room - all of its meanness and its poverty - rose up to clog his nostrils. He was hungry, sick at bean and lonely, and the yarner in the corner seemed to mock him.

Through the open window he could hear the rumble of a spaceship taking off across the river and the hooting of a tug as it warped a ship into a wharf.

He stumbled to the bed.

"Move over, you," he said to the wide-eyed alien, and tumbled down beside it. He turned his back to it and drew his knees up against his chest and lay huddled there.

He was right back where he'd started just the other morning. He still had no tape to do the job that Irving wanted. He still had a busted up haywire machine. He was without a camera and he wondered where he could borrow one - although there would be no sense of borrowing one if he didn't have the money to pay a character. He'd tried once to take a film by stealth and he wouldn't try again. It wasn't worth the risk of going to prison for three or four years.

\_We love the wild and woollies\_, Green Shirt had said. \_From them we get the going of far places.\_

And while with Green Shirt it would be the bang-bangs and the wild and woollies, with some other race it would be a different type of fiction - race after race finding in this strange product of Earth a new world of enchantment. The far places of the mind, perhaps - or the far places of emotion. The basic differences were not too important

Angela had said it was a lousy way to make a living.

But she had only been letting off steam. All writers at times said approximately the same thing. In every age men and women of every known profession at some time must have said that theirs was a lousy way to make a living. At the moment they might have meant it, but at other times they knew that it was not lousy because it was important.

And writing was important, too - tremendously important. Not so much because it meant the "going of far places," but because it sowed the seed of Earth - the seed of Earth's thinking and of Earth's logic - among the myriad stars.

They are out there waiting, Hart thought, for the stories that he would never write.

He would try, of course, despite all obstacles. He might even do as Jasper had done, scribbling madly with a sense of shame, feeling anachronistic and inadequate, dreading the day when someone would ferret out his secret, perhaps by deducing from a certain eccentricity of style that it was not machine-written.

For Jasper was wrong, of course. The trouble was not with the yarners nor with the principle of mechanistic writing. It was with Jasper himself - a deep psychopathic quirk that made a rebel of him. But even so he had remained a fearful and a hidden rebel who locked his door and kept his yarner polished, and carefully covered his typewriter with the litter on his desk so no one would suspect that he ever used it.

Hart felt warmer now and he seemed to be no longer hungry and suddenly he thought of one of those far places that Green Shirt had talked about. It was a grove of trees and a brook ran through the grove. There was a sense of peace and calm and a touch of majesty and for-everness about it. He heard birdsong and smelled the sharp, spice-like scent of water running in its mossy banks. He walked among the trees and the Gothic shape of them made the place seem like a church. As he walked he formed words within his mind - words put together so feelingly and so rightly and so carefully that no one who read them could mistake what he had to say. They would know not only the sight of the grove itself, but the sound and the smell of it and the foreverness that filled it to overflowing.

But even in his exaltation he sensed a threat within the Gothic shape and the feeling of foreverness. Some lurking intuition told him that the grove was a place to get away from. He tried for a moment to remember how he had gotten there, but there was no memory. It was as if he had

become familiar with the grove only a second or two before and yet he knew that he had been walking beneath the sun-dappled foliage for what must have been hours or days.

He felt a tingling on his throat and raised a hand to brush it off and his hand touched something small and warm that brought him upright out of bed.

His hand tightened on the creature's neck. He was about to rip it from his chest when suddenly he recalled, full-blown, the odd circumstance he had tried to remember just the night before.

His grip relaxed and he let his hand drop to his side. He stood beside the bed, in the warm familiarity of the room, and felt the comfort of the blanket-creature upon his back and shoulders and around his throat.

He wasn't hungry and he wasn't tired and the sickness that he'd felt had somehow disappeared. He wasn't even worried and that was most unusual, for he was customarily worried.

Twelve hours before he had stood in the areaway with the blanket creature in his arms and had sought to pry out of a suddenly stubborn mind an explanation for the strange sense of recognition he'd experienced - the feeling that somewhere he had read or heard of the crying thing he'd found. Now, with it clasped around his back and clinging to his throat, he knew.

He strode across the room, with the blanket creature clinging to him, and took a book down from a narrow, six foot shelf. It was an old and tattered book, worn smooth by many hands, and it almost slipped from his clasp as he turned it over to read the title on the spine:

\_Fragments from Lost Writings.\_

He reversed the volume and began to leaf through its pages. He knew now where to find what he was looking for. He remembered exactly where he had read about the thing upon his back.

He found the pages quickly enough - a few salvaged paragraphs from some story, written long ago and lost,

He skipped the first two pages, and came suddenly upon the paragraphs he wanted:

\_Ambitious vegetables, the life blankets waited, probably only obscurely aware of what they were waiting for. But when the humans came the long, long wait was over. The life blanket made a deal with men. And in the last analysis they turned out to be the greatest aid to galactic exploration that had ever been discovered.\_

And there it was, thought Hart - the old, smug, pat assurance that it would be the humans who would go into the galaxy to explore it and make contact with its denizens and carry to every planet they visited the virtues of the Earth.

\_With a life blanket draped like a bobtailed cloak around his shoulders, a man had no need to worry about being fed, for the life blanket had the strange ability to gather energy and convert it into food for the body of its host.

It became, in fact, almost a second body - a watchful, fussy, quasiparental body that watched over the body of its host, keeping metabolism in balance despite alien conditions, rooting out infections, playing the role of mother, cook and family doctor combined.

But in return the blanket became, in a sense, the double of its host. Shedding its humdrum vegetable existence, it became vicariously a man, sharing all of its host's emotions and intelligence, living the kind of life it never could have lived if left to itself.

And not content with this fair trade, the blankets threw in a bonus, a sort of dividend of gratitude. They were storytellers and imaginers. They could imagine anything - literally anything

at all. They spent long hours spinning out tall yarns for the amusement of their hosts, serving as a shield against boredom and loneliness.\_

There was more of it, but Hart did not need to read on. He turned back to the beginning of the fragment and he read: \_Author Unknown. Circa 1956.\_

Six hundred years ago! Six hundred years - and how could any man in 1956 have known?

The answer was he couldn't.

There was no way he could have known. He'd simply \_dreamed\_ it up. And hit the truth dead center! Some early writer of science fiction had had an inspired vision!

There was something coming through the grove and it was a thing of utter beauty. It was not humanoid and it was not a monster. It was something no man had ever seen before. And yet despite the beauty of it, there was a deadly danger in it and something one must flee from.

He turned around to flee and found himself in the center of the room.

"All right," he said to the blanket. "Let's cut it out for now. We can go back later."

\_We can go back later and we can make a story of it and we can go many other planes and make stories of them, too. I won't need a yarner to write those kind of stories, for I can recapture the excitement and splendor of it, and link it all together better than a yarner could. I have been there and lived it, and that's a setup you can't beat.\_

And there it was! The answer to the question that Jasper had asked, sitting at the table in the Bright Star bar.

What next?

And this was next: a symbiosis between Man and an alien thing, imagined centuries ago by a man whose very name was lost.

It was almost, Hart thought, as if God had placed His hand against his back and propelled him gently onward, for it was utterly fantastic that he should have found the answer crying in an areaway between an apartment house and a bindery.

But that did not matter now. The important thing was that he'd found it and brought it home - not quite knowing why at the time and wondering later why he had even bothered with it.

The important thing was that \_now\_ was the big pay...

He heard footsteps coming up the stairs and turning down the hall. Alarmed by their rapid approach he reached up hastily and snatched the blanket from his shoulders. Frantically he looked about for a place to hide the creature. Of course! His desk. He jerked open the bottom drawer and stuffed the blanket into it, ignoring a slight resistance. He was kicking the drawer shut when Angela came into the room.

He could see at once that she was burned up.

"That was a lousy trick," she said. "You got Jasper into a lot of trouble."

Hart stared at her in consternation. "Trouble? You mean he didn't go to Caph?"

"He's down in the basement hiding out. Blake told me he was there. I went down and talked to him."

"He got away from them?" Hart appeared badly shaken.

"Yes. He told them they didn't want a man at all. He told them what they wanted was a machine



and he told them about that glittering wonder - that Classic model - in the shop uptown."

"And so they went and stole it."

"No. If they had it would have been all right. But they bungled it. They smashed the glass to get at it, and that set off an alarm. Every cop in town came tearing after them."

"But Jasper was all - "

"They took Jasper with them to show them where it was."

Some of the color had returned to Hart's face. "And now Jasper's hiding from the law."

"That's the really bad part of it. He doesn't know whether he is or not. He's not sure the cops even saw him. What he's afraid of is that they might pick up one of those Caphians and sweat the story out of him. And if they do, Kemp Hart, you have a lot to answer for."

"Me? Why, I didn't do a thing - "

"Except tell them that Jasper was the man they wanted. How did you ever make them believe a line like that?"

"Easy. Remember what Jasper said. Everyone else tells the truth. We're the only ones who lie. Until they get wise to us, they'll believe every word we say. Because, you see, no one else tells anything but the truth and so -"

"Oh, shut up!" Angela said impatiently.

She looked around the room. "Where's that blanket thing?" she asked.

"It must have left. Maybe it ran away. When I came home it wasn't here."

"Haven't you any idea what it was?"

Hart shook his head. "Maybe it's just as well it's gone," he said. "It gave me a queasy feeling."

"You and Doc! That's another thing. This neighborhood's gone crazy. Doc is stretched out dead drunk under a tree in the park and there's an alien watching him. It won't let anyone come near him. It's as if it were guarding him, or had adopted him or something."

"Maybe it's one of Doc's pink elephants come to actual life. You know, dream a thing too often and - "

"It's no elephant and it isn't pink. It's got webbed feet that are too big for it and long, spindly legs. It's some thing like a spider, and its skin is warts. It has a triangular head with six horns. It fairly makes you crawl just to look at it."

Hart shuddered. Ordinary aliens could be all right but a thing like that - "Wonder what it wants of Doc." "Nobody seems to know. It won't talk." "Maybe it can't talk." "You know all aliens talk. At least enough of our language to make themselves understood. Otherwise they wouldn't come here."

"It sounds reasonable," said Hart. "Maybe It's acquiring a second-hand jag just sitting there beside Doc."

"Sometimes," said Angela, "your sense of humor is positively disgusting."

"Like writing books by hand."

"Yes," she said. "Like writing books by hand. You know as well as I do that people just don't talk about writing anything by hand. It's like - well, it's like eating with your fingers or belching in public or going without clothes."

"All right," he said, "all right. I'll never mention it again."

After she had left, Hart sat down and gave some serious thought to his situation.

In many ways he'd be a lot like Jasper, but he wouldn't mind if he could write as well as Jasper.

He'd have to start locking his door. He wondered where his key was. He never used it and now he'd have to look through his desk the first chance he got, to see if he couldn't locate it. If he couldn't find it, he'd have to have a new key made, because he couldn't have people walking in on him unexpectedly and catching him wearing the blanket or writing stuff by hand.

Maybe, he thought, it might be a good idea to move. It would be hard at times to explain why all at once he had started to lock his door. But he hated the thought of moving. Bad as it was, he'd gotten used to this place and it seemed like home.

Maybe, after he started selling, he should talk with Angela and see how she felt about moving in with him. Angela was a good kid, but you couldn't ask a girl to move in with you when you were always wondering where the next meal was coming from. But now, even if he didn't sell, he'd never have to worry where his next meal was coming from. He wondered briefly if the blanket could be shared as a food provider by two persons and he wondered how in the world he'd ever manage to explain it all to Angela.

And how had that fellow back in 1956 ever thought of such a thing? How many of the other wild ideas concocted out of tortuous mental efforts and empty whiskey bottles might be true as well? -

A dream? An idea? A glimmer of the future? It did not matter which, for a man had thought of it and it had come true. How many of the other things that Man had thought of in the past and would think of in the future would also become the truth?

The idea scared him.

That "going of far places." The reaching out of the imagination. The influence of the written word, the thought and power behind it. It was deadlier than a battleship, he'd said, How everlastingly right he had been.

He got up and walked across the room and stood in front of the yarner. It leered at him. He stuck out his tongue at it.

"That for you," he said,

Behind him he heard a rustle and hastily whirled about.

The blanket had somehow managed to ooze out of the desk drawer and it was heading for the door, reared upon the nether folds of its flimsy body. It was slithering along in a jerky fashion like a wounded seal.

"Hey, you!" yelled Hart and made a grab at it. But he was too late. A being - there was no other word for it - stood in the doorway and the blanket reached it and slithered swiftly up its body and plastered itself upon its back.

The thing in the doorway hissed at Hart: "I lose it. You are so kind to keep it. I am very grateful."

Hart stood transfixed.

The creature was a sight. Just like the one which Angela had seen guarding Doc, only possibly a little uglier. It had webbed feet that were three times too big for it, so that it seemed to be wearing snowshoes, and it had a tail that curved ungracefully halfway up its back.

It had a melon-shaped head with a triangular face, and six horns and there were rotating eyes

on the top of each and every horn.

The monstrosity dipped into a pouch that seemed to be part of its body, and took out a roll of bills.

"So small a reward," it piped and tossed the bills to Hart.

Hart put out a hand and caught them absentmindedly.

"We go now," said the being. "We think kind thoughts of you."

It had started to turn around, but at Hart's bellow of protest it swiveled back.

"Yes, good sir?"

"This - blanket - this thing I found. What about it?"

"We make it."

"But it's alive and - "

The thing grinned a murderous grin. "You so clever people. You think it up. Many times ago."

"That story!"

"Quite so. We read of it. We make it. Very good idea."

"You can't mean you actually - "

"We biologist. What you call them - biologic engineers."

It turned about and started down the hall.

Hart howled after it. "Just a minute! Hold up there! Just a min - "

But it was going fast and it didn't stop. Hart thundered after it. When he reached the head of the stairs and glanced down it was out of sight. But he raced after it, taking the stairs three at a time in defiance of all the laws of safety.

He didn't catch it. In the street outside he pulled to a halt and looked in all directions but there was no sign of it. It had completely disappeared.

He reached into his pocket and felt the roll of bills he had caught on the fly. He pulled the roll out and it was bigger than he remembered it. He snapped off the rubber band, and examined a few of the bills separately. The denomination on the top bill, in galactic credits, was so big it staggered him. He riffled through the entire sheaf of bills and all the denominations seemed to be the same.

He gasped at the thought of it, and riffled through them once again. He had been right the first time - all the denominations were the same. He did a bit of rapid calculation and it was strictly unbelievable. In credits, too - and a credit was convertible, roughly, into five Earth dollars.

He had seen credits before, but never actually held one in his hand. They were the currency of galactic trade and were widely used in interstellar banking circles, but seldom drifted down into general circulation. He held them in his hand and took a good look at them and they sure were beautiful.

The being must have immeasurably prized that blanket, he thought - to give him such a fabulous sum simply for taking care of it. Although, when you came to think of it, it wasn't necessarily so. Standards of wealth differed greatly from one planet to another and the fortune he held in his hands might have been little more than pocket money to the blanket's owner.

He was surprised to find that he wasn't too thrilled or happy, as he should have been. All he seemed to be able to think about was that he'd lost the blanket.

He thrust the bills into his pocket and walked across the street to the little park. Doc was awake and sitting on a bench underneath a tree. Hart sat down beside him.

"How you feeling, Doc?" he asked.

"I'm feeling all right, son," the old man replied.

"Did you see an alien, like a spider wearing snowshoes?"

"There was one of them here just a while ago. It was here when I woke up. It wanted to know about that thing you'd found."

"And you told it."

"Sure. Why not? It said it was hunting for it. I figured you'd be glad to get it off your hands."

The two of them sat silently for a while.

Then Hart asked, "Doc, what would you do if you had about a billion bucks?"

"Me," said Doc, without the slightest hesitation, "I'd drink myself to death. Yes, sir, I'd drink myself to death real fancy, not on any of this rotgut they sell in this end of town."

And that was the way it went, thought Hart. Doc would drink himself to death. Angela would go in for arty salons and the latest styles. Jasper more than likely would buy a place out in the mountains where he could be away from people.

And me, thought Hart, what will I do with a billion bucks - give or take a million?

Yesterday, last night, up until a couple of hours ago, he would have traded in his soul on the Classic yarner.

But now it seemed all sour and offbeat.

For there was a better way - the way of symbiosis, the teaming up of Man and an alien biologic concept.

He remembered the grove with its Gothic trees and its sense of foreverness and even yet, in the brightness of the sun, he shivered at the thought of the thing of beauty that had appeared among the trees.

That was, he told himself, a surely better way to write - to know the thing yourself and write it, to live the yarn and write it.

But he had lost the blanket and he didn't know where to find another. He didn't even know, if he found the place they came from, what he'd have to do to capture it.

An alien biologic concept, and yet not entirely alien, for it had first been thought of by an unknown man six centuries before. A man who had written as Jasper wrote even in this day, hunched above a table, scribbling out the words he put together in his brain. No yarner there - no tapes, no films, none of the other gadgets. But even so that unknown man had reached across the mists of time and space to touch another unknown mind and the life blanket had come alive as surely as if Man himself had made it.

And was that the true greatness of the human race - that they could imagine something and in time it would be so?

And if that were the greatness, could Man afford to delegate it to the turning shaft, the spinning wheel, the clever tubes, the innards of machines?

"You wouldn't happen," asked Doc, "to have a dollar on your'

"No," said Hart, "I haven't got a dollar."

"You're just like the rest of us," said Doc. "You dream about the billions and you haven't got a dime."

Jasper was a rebel and it wasn't worth it. All the rebels ever got were the bloody noses and the broken heads.

"I sure could use a buck," said Doc.

It wasn't worth it to Jasper Hansen and it wasn't worth it to the others who must also lock their doors and polish up their never-used machines, so that when someone happened to drop in they'd see them standing there.

\_And it isn't worth it to me\_, Kemp Hart told himself. Not when by continuing to conform he could become famous almost automatically and virtually overnight.

He put his hand into his pocket and felt the roll of bills and knew that in just a little while he'd go uptown and buy that wonderful machine. There was plenty in the roll to buy it. With what there was in that roll he could buy a shipload of them.

"Yes, sir," said Doc harking back to his answer to the billion dollar question. "It would be a pleasant death. A pleasant death, indeed."

A gang of workmen were replacing the broken window when Hart arrived at the uptown showroom, but he scarcely more than glanced at them and walked straight inside.

The same salesman seemed to materialize from thin air.

But he wasn't happy. His expression was stern and a little pained.

"You've come back, no doubt," he said, "to place an order for the Classic."

"That is right," said Hart and pulled the roll out of his pocket.

The salesman was well-trained. He stood walleyed for just a second, then recovered his composure with a speed which must have set a record.

"That's fine," he said. "I knew you'd be back. I was telling some of the other men this morning that you would be coming in."

\_I just bet you were\_, thought Hart.

"I suppose," he said, "that if I paid you cash you would consider throwing in a rather generous supply of tapes and films and some of the other stuff I need."

"Certainly, sir. I'll do the best I can for you."

Hart peeled off twenty-five thousand and put the rest back in his pocket.

"Won't you have a seat," the salesman urged. "I'll be right back. I'll arrange delivery and fix up the guarantee..,"

"Take your time," Hart told him, enjoying every minute of it.

He sat down in a chair and did a little planning. First he'd have to move to better quarters and as soon as he had moved he'd have a dinner for the crowd and he'd rub Jasper's nose in it. He'd certainly do it - if Jasper wasn't tucked away in jail. He chuckled to himself, thinking of Jasper cringing in the basement of the Bright Star bar.

And this very afternoon he'd go over to Irving's office and pay him back the twenty and explain how it was he couldn't find the time to write the stuff he wanted.

Not that he wouldn't have liked to help Irving out.

But it would be sacrilege to write the kind of junk that Irving wanted on a machine as talented as the Classic.

He heard footsteps coming hurriedly across the floor behind him and he stood up and turned around, smiling at the salesman.

But the salesman wasn't smiling. He was close to apoplexy.

"You!" said the salesman, choking just a little in his attempt to remain a gentleman. "That money! We've had enough from you, young man."

"The money," said Hart. "Why, it's galactic credits. It..."

"It's play money," stormed the salesman. "Money for the kids. Play money from the Draconian federation. It says so, right on the face of it. In those big characters."

He handed Hart the money.

"Get out of here!" the salesman shouted.

"But," Hart pleaded, "are you sure? It can't be! You must be mistaken - "

"Our teller says it is. He has to be an expert on all sorts of money and \_he says it is!\_"

"But you took it. You couldn't tell the difference."

"I can't read Draconian. But the teller can."

"That damn alien!" shouted Hart in sudden fury. "Just let me get my hands on him!"

The salesman softened just a little.

"You can't trust those aliens, sir. They are a sneaky lot..."

"Get out of my way," Hart shouted. "I've got to find that alien!"

The man at the Alien bureau wasn't very helpful.

"We have no record," he told Hart, "of the kind of creature you describe. You wouldn't have a photo of it, would you?"

"No," said Hart. "I haven't got a photo."

The man started piling up the catalogs he had been looking through.

"Of course," he said, "the fact we have no record of him doesn't mean a thing. Admittedly, we can't keep track of all the various people. There are so many of them and new ones all the time. Perhaps you might inquire at the spaceport. Someone might have seen your alien."

"I've already done that. Nothing. Nothing at all. He must have come in and possibly have gone back, but no one can remember him. Or maybe they won't tell."

"The aliens hang together," said the man. "They don't tell you nothing."

He went on stacking up the books. It was near to quitting time and he was anxious to be off.

The man said, jokingly, "You might go out in space and try to hunt him up."

"I might do just that," said Hart and left, slamming the door behind him.

Joke: You might go out in space and find him. You might go out and track him across ten thousand light-years and among a million stars. And when you found him you might say I want to have a blanket and he'd laugh right in your face.

But by the time you'd tracked him across ten thousand light-years and among a million stars you'd no longer need a blanket, for you would have lived your stories and you would have seen your characters and you would have absorbed ten thousand backgrounds and a million atmospheres.

And you'd need no yarner and no tapes and films, for the words would be pulsing at your fingertips and pounding in your brain, shrieking to get out.

Joke: Toss a backwoods yokel a fistful of play money for something worth a million. The fool wouldn't know the difference until he tried to spend it. Be a big shot cheap and then go off in a corner by yourself and die laughing at how superior you are.

And who had it been that said humans were the only liars?

Joke: Wear a blanket around your shoulders and send your ships to Earth for the drivel that they write there - never knowing, never guessing that you have upon your back the very thing that's needed to break Earth's monopoly on fiction.

\_And that\_, said Hart, \_is a joke on you.\_

\_If I ever find you, I'll cram it down your throat.\_

Angela came up the stairs bearing an offering of peace. She set the kettle on the table. "Some soup," she said. "I'm good at making soup."

"Thanks, Angela," he said. "I forgot to eat today."

"Why the knapsack, Kemp? Going on a hiker?"

"No, going on vacation."

"But you didn't tell me."

"I just now made up my mind to go. A little while ago."

"I'm sorry I was so angry at you. It turned out all right. Green Shirt and his gang made their getaway."

"So Jasper can come out."

"He's already out. He's plenty sore at you."

"That's all right with me. I'm no pal of his." She sat down in a chair and watched him pack. "Where are you going, Kemp?"

"I'm hunting for an alien."

"Here in the city? Kemp, you'll never find him."

"Not in the city. I'll have to ask around."

"But there aren't any aliens - "

"That's right."

"You're a crazy fool," she cried. "You can't do it, Kemp. I won't let you. How will you live? What will you do?"

"I'll write."

"Write? You can't write! Not without a yarner."

"I'll write by hand. Indecent as it may be, I'll write by hand because I'll know the things I

write about. It'll be in my blood and at my fingertips. I'll have the smell of it and the color of it and the taste of it!"

She leaped from the chair and beat at his chest with tiny fists.

"It's filthy! It's uncivilized! It's - "

"That's the way they wrote before. All the millions of stories, all the great ideas, all the phrases that you love to quote. And that is the way it should have stayed. This is a dead-end street we're on."

"You'll come back," she said. "You'll find that you are wrong and you'll come back."

He shook his head at her. "Not until I find my alien."

"It isn't any alien you are after. It is something else. I can see it in you."

She whirled around and raced out the door and down the stairs.

He went back to his packing and when he had finished, he sat down and ate the soup. Angela, he thought, was right. She was good at making soup.

And she was right in another thing as well. It was no alien he was seeking.

For he didn't need an alien. And he didn't need a blanket and he didn't need a yarner.

He took the kettle to the sink and washed it beneath the tap and dried it carefully. Then he set it in the center of the table where Angela, when she came, would be sure to see it.

Then he took up the knapsack and started slowly down the stairs.

He had reached the street when he heard the cry behind him. It was Angela and she was running after him. He stopped and waited for her.

"I'm going with you, Kemp."

"You don't know what you're saying. It'll be rough and hard. Strange lands and alien people. And we haven't any money."

"Yes, we have. We have that fifty. The one I tried to loan you. It's all I have and it won't go far, I know. But we have it."

"You're looking for no alien."

"Yes, I am. I'm looking for an alien, too. All of us, I think, are looking for your alien."

He reached out an arm and swept her roughly to him, held her close against him.

"Thank you, Angela," he said.

Hand in hand they headed for the spaceport, looking for a ship that would take them to the stars.