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Kindergarten

Clifford D. Simak

He went walking in the morning before the Sun was up, down past the old, dilapidated barn that was falling in upon itself, across the stream and up the slope of pasture ankle-deep with grass and summer flowers, when the world was wet with dew and the chill edge of night still lingered in the air.

He went walking in the morning because he knew he might not have too many mornings left; any day, the pain might close down for good and he was ready for it, he'd been ready for it for a long time now.

He was in no hurry. He took each walk as if it were his last and he did not want to miss a single thing on any of the walks - the turned-up faces of the pasture roses with the tears of dew running down their checks or the matins of the birds in the thickets that ran along the ditches.

He found the machine alongside the path that ran through a thicket at the head of a ravine. At first glance, he was irritated by it, for it was not only unfamiliar, but an incongruous thing as well, and he had no room in heart or mind for anything but the commonplace. It had been the commonplace, the expected, the basic reality of Earth and the life one lived on it that he had sought in coming to this abandoned farm, seeking out a place where he might stand on ground of his own choosing to meet the final day.

He stopped in the path and stood there, looking at this strange machine, feeling the roses and the dew and the early morning bird song slip away from him, leaving him alone with this thing beside the path which looked for all the world like some fugitive from a home appliance shop. But as he looked at it, he began to see the little differences and he knew that here was nothing he'd ever seen before or heard of - that it most certainly was not a wandering automatic washer or a delinquent dehumidifier.

For one thing, it shone - not with surface metallic lustre or the gleam of sprayed-on porcelain, but with a shine that was all the way through whatever it was made of. If you looked at it just right, you got the impression that you were seeing into it, though not clearly enough to be able to make out the shape of any of its innards. It was rectangular, at a rough guess three feet by four by two, and it was without knobs for one to turn or switches to snap on or dials to set - which suggested that it was not something one was meant to operate.

He walked over to it and bent down and ran his hand along its top, without thinking why he should reach out and touch it, knowing when it was too late that probably he should have left it alone. But it seemed to be all right to touch it, for nothing happened - not right away, at least. The metal, or whatever it was made of, was smooth to the hand and beneath the sleekness of its surface he seemed to sense a terrible hardness and a frightening strength.

He took his hand away and straightened up, stepped back.

The machine clicked, just once, and he had the distinct impression that it clicked not because it had to click to operate, not because it was turning itself on, but to attract attention, to let him know that it was an operating machine and that it had a function and was ready to perform it. And he got the impression that for whatever purpose it might operate, it would do so with high efficiency and a minimum of noise.

Then it laid an egg.

Why he thought of it in just that way, he never was able to explain, even later when he had thought about it.

But, anyhow, it laid an egg, and the egg was a piece of jade, green with milky whiteness running through it, and exquisitely carved with what appeared to be outré symbolism.

He stood there in the path, looking at the jade, for a moment forgetting in his excitement how it had materialized, caught up by the beauty of the jade itself and the superb workmanship that had wrought it into shape. It was, he told himself, the finest piece that he had ever seen and he knew exactly how its texture would feel beneath his fingers and just how expertly, upon close examination, he would find the carving had been done.

He bent and picked it up and held it lovingly between his hands, comparing it with the pieces he had known and handled for years in the museum. But now, even with the jade between his hands, the museum was a misty place, far back along the corridors of time, although it had been less than three months since he had walked away from it.

'Thank you,' he said to the machine and an instant later thought what a silly thing to do, talking to a machine as if it were a person.

The machine just sat there. It did not click again and it did not move.

So finally he left, walking back to the old farmhouse on the slope above the barn.

In the kitchen, he placed the jade in the centre of the table, where he could see it while he worked. He kindled a fire in the stove and fed in split sticks of wood, not too large, to make quick heat. He put the kettle on to warm and got dishes from the pantry and set his place. He fried bacon and drained it on paper towelling and cracked the last of the eggs into the skillet.

He ate, staring at the jade that stood in front of him, admiring once again its texture, trying to puzzle out the symbolism of its carving and finally wondering what it might be worth. Plenty, he thought - although, of all considerations, that was the least important.

The carving puzzled him. It was in no tradition that he had ever seen or of which he had ever read. What it was meant to represent, he could not

imagine. And yet it had a beauty and a force, a certain character, that tagged it as no haphazard doodling, but as the product of a highly developed culture.

He did not hear the young woman come up the steps and walk across the porch, but first knew that she was there when she rapped upon the door frame. He looked up from the jade and saw her standing in the open kitchen doorway and at first sight of her he found himself, ridiculously, thinking of her in the same terms he had been thinking of the jade.

The jade was cool and green and she was crisp and white, but her eyes, he thought, had the soft look of this wondrous piece of jade about them, except that they were blue.

'Hello, Mr Chaye,' she said.

'Good morning,' he replied.

She was Mary Mallet, Johnny's sister.

'Johnny wanted to go fishing,' Mary told him. 'He and the little Smith boy. So I brought the milk and eggs.'

'I am pleased you did,' said Peter, 'although you should not have bothered. I could have walked over later. It would have done me good.'

He immediately regretted that last sentence, for it was something he was thinking too much lately - that such and such an act or the refraining from an act would do him good when, as a matter of plain fact, there was nothing that would help him at all. The doctors had made at least that much clear to him.

He took the eggs and milk and asked her in and went to place the milk in the cooler, for he had no electricity for a refrigerator.

'Have you had breakfast?' he asked.

Mary said she had.

'It's just as well,' he said wryly. 'My cooking's pretty bad. I'm just camping out, you know.'

Arid regretted that one, too.

Chaye, he told himself, quit being so damn maudlin.

'What a pretty thing!' exclaimed Mary. 'Wherever did you get it?'

'The jade? Now, that's a funny thing. I found it.'

She reached a hand out for it.

'May I?'

'Certainly,' said Peter.

He watched her face as she picked it up and held it in both hands, carefully, as he had held it.

'You found this?'

'Well, I didn't exactly find it, Mary. It was given to me.'

'A friend?'

'I don't know.'

'That's a funny thing to say.'

'Not so funny. I'd like to show you the - well, the character who gave it to me. Have you got a minute?'

'Of course I have,' said Mary, 'although I'll have to hurry. Mother's canning peaches.'

They went down the slope together, past the barn, and crossed the creek to come into the pasture. As they walked up the pasture, he wondered if they would find it there, if it still was there or ever had been there.

It was.

'What an outlandish thing!' said Mary.

'That's the word exactly,' Peter agreed.

'What is it, Mr Chaye?'

'I don't know.'

'You said you were given the jade. You don't mean...'

'But I do,' said Peter.

'They moved closer to the machine and stood watching it. Peter noticed once again the shine of it and the queer sensation of being able to see into it - not very far, just part way, and not very well at that. But still the metal or whatever it was could be seen into, and that was somehow uncomfortable.

Mary bent over and ran her fingers along its top.

'It feels all right,' she said. 'Just like porcelain or -'

'The machine clicked and a flacon lay upon the grass.

'For you,' said Peter.

'For me?'

Peter picked up the tiny bottle and handed it to her. It was a triumph of glassblower's skill and it shone with sparkling prismatic colour in the summer sunlight.

'Perfume would be my guess,' he said. She worked the stopper loose.

'Lovely,' she breathed and held it out to him to smell. It was all of lovely.

She corked it up again.

'But, Mr Chaye...'

'I don't know,' said Peter. 'I simply do not know.'

'Not even a guess?' He shook his head.

'You just found it here.' 'I was out for a walk -'

'And it was waiting for you.'

'Well, now...' Peter began to object, but now that he thought about it, that seemed exactly right - he had not found the machine; it had been waiting for him.

'It was, wasn't it?'

'Now that you mention it,' said Peter, 'yes, I guess it was waiting for me.'

Not for him specifically, perhaps, but for anyone who might come along the path. It had been waiting to be found, waiting for a chance to go into its act, to do whatever it was supposed to do.

For now it appeared, as plain as day, that someone had left it there.

He stood in the pasture with Mary Mallet, farmer's daughter, standing by his side - with the familiar grasses and the undergrowth and trees, with the shrill of locust screeching across the rising heat of day, with the far-off tinkle of a cowbell - and felt the chill of the thought within his brain, the cold and terrible thought backgrounded by the black of space and the dim endlessness of time. And he felt, as well, a reaching out of something, of a chilly alien thing, towards the warmth of humanity and Earth.

'Let's go back,' he said.

They returned across the pasture to the house and stood for a moment at the gate.

'Isn't there something we should do?' asked Mary. 'Someone we should tell about it?'

He shook his head. 'I want to think about it first.'

'And do something about it?'

'There may be nothing that anyone can or should do.' He watched her go walking down the road, then turned away and went back to the house.

He got out the lawn mower and cut the grass. After the lawn was mowed, he pottered in the flower-bed. The zinnias were coming along fine, but something had got into the asters and they weren't doing well. And the grass kept creeping in, he thought. No matter what he did, the grass kept creeping into the bed to strangle out the plants.

After lunch, he thought, maybe I'll go fishing. Maybe going fishing will do me - He caught the thought before he finished it.

He squatted by the flower-bed, dabbing at the ground with the point of his gardening trowel, and thought about the machine out in the pasture.

I want to think about it, he'd told Mary, but what was there to think about? Something that someone had left in his pasture - a machine that clicked

and laid a gift like an egg when you patted it.

What did that mean?

Why was it here?

Why did it click and hand out a gift when you patted it?

Response? The way a dog would wag its tail?

Gratitude? For being noticed by a human?

Negotiation?

Friendly gesture?

Booby trap?

And how had it known he would have sold his soul for a piece of jade one-half as fine as the piece it had given him?

How had it known a girl would like perfume?

He heard the running footsteps behind him and swung around and there was Mary, running across the lawn.

She reached him and went down on her knees beside him and her hands clutched his arm.

'Johnny found it, too,' she panted. 'I ran all the way. Johnny and that Smith boy found it. They cut across the pasture coming home from fishing...'

'Maybe we should have reported it,' said Peter.

'It gave them something, too. A rod and reel to Johnny and a baseball bat and mitt to little Augie Smith.'

'Oh, good Lord!'

'And now they're telling everyone.'

'It doesn't matter,' Peter said. 'At least, I don't suppose it matters.'

'What is that thing out there? You said you didn't know. But you have some idea. Peter, you must have some idea.'

'I think it's alien,' Peter reluctantly and embarrassedly told her. 'It has a funny look about it, like nothing I've ever seen or read about, and Earth machines don't give away things when you lay a hand on them. You have to feed them coins first. This isn't - isn't from Earth.'

'From Mars, you mean?'

'Not from Mars,' said Peter. 'Not from this solar system. We have no reason to think another race of high intelligence exists in this solar system and whoever dreamed up that machine had plenty of intelligence.'

'But... not from this solar system...' 'From some other star.'

'The stars are so far away!' she protested.

So far away, thought Peter. So far out of the reach of the human race. Within the reach of dreams, but not the reach of hands. So far away and so callous and uncaring. And the machine - 'Like a slot machine,' he said, 'except it always pays in jackpots and you don't even need a coin. That is crazy, Mary. That's one reason it isn't of this Earth. No Earth machine, no Earth inventor, would do that.'

'The neighbours will be coming,' Mary said.

'I know they will. They'll be coming for their handouts.'

'But it isn't very big. It could not carry enough inside it for the entire neighbourhood. It does not have much more than room enough for the gifts it's already handed out.'

'Mary, did Johnny want a rod and reel?'

'He'd talked of practically nothing else.'

'And you like perfume?'

'I'd never had any good perfume. Just cheap stuff.' She laughed nervously. 'And you? Do you like jade?'

'I'm what you might call a minor expert on it. It's a passion with me.'

'Then that machine...'

'Gives each one the thing he wants,' Peter finished for her.

'It's frightening,' said Mary.

And it seemed strange that anything at all could be frightening on such a day as this - a burnished summer day, with white clouds rimming the western horizon and the sky the colour of pale blue silk, a day that had no moods, but was as commonplace as the cornfield earth.

After Mary had left, Peter went in the house and made his lunch. He sat by the window, eating it, and watched the neighbours come. They came by twos and threes, tramping across the pasture from all directions, coming to his pasture from their own farms, leaving the haying rigs and the cultivators, abandoning their work in the middle of the day to see the strange machine. They stood around and talked, tramping down the thicket where he had found the machine, and at times their high, shrill voices drifted across to him, but he could not make out what they said, for the words were flattened and distorted by the distance.

From the stars, he'd said. From some place among the stars.

And if that be fantasy, he said, I have a right to it.

First contact, he thought. And clever!

Let an alien being arrive on Earth and the women would run screaming for their homes and the men would grab their rifles and there'd be hell to pay.

But a machine - that was a different matter. What if it was a little different? What if it acted a little strangely? After all, it was only a machine. It was something that could be understood.

And if it handed out free gifts, that was all the better.

After lunch, he went out and sat on the steps and some of the neighbours came and showed him what the machine had given them. 'They sat around and talked, all of them excited and mystified, but not a single one of them was scared.

Among the gifts were wrist-watches and floor lamps, typewriters and fruit juicers, sets of dishes, chests of silver, bolts of drapery materials, shoes, shotguns, carving sets, book ends, neckties, and many other items. One youngster had a dozen skunk traps and another had a bicycle.

A modern Pandora's box, thought Peter, made by an alien intelligence and set clown upon the Earth.

Apparently the word was spreading, for now the people came in cars. Some of them parked by the road and walked down to the pasture and others came into the barnyard and parked there, not bothering to ask for permission.

After a time, they would come back loaded with their loot and drive away. Out in the pasture was a milling throng of people. Peter, watching it, was reminded of a county fair or a village carnival.

By chore-time, the last of them had gone, even the neighbours who had come to say a few words with him and to show him what they'd gotten, so he left the house and walked up the pasture slope.

The machine still was there and it was starting to build something. It had laid out around it a sort of platform of a stone that looked like marble, as if it were laying a foundation for a building. The foundation was about ten feet by twelve and was set level against the pasture's slope, with footings of the same sort of stone going down into the ground.

He sat down on a stump a little distance away and looked out over the peace of the countryside. It seemed more beautiful, more quiet and peaceful than it had ever seemed before, and he sat there contentedly, letting the evening soak into his soul.

The sun had set not more than half an hour ago. The western sky was a delicate lemon fading into green, with here and there the pink of wandering clouds, while beneath the horizon the land lay in the haze of a blue twilight, deepening at the edges. The liquid evensong of birds ran along the hedges and the thickets and the whisper of swallows' wings came down from overhead.

This is Earth, he thought, the peaceful, human Earth, a landscape shaped by an agricultural people. This is the Earth of plum blossom and of proud red barns and of corn rows as straight as rifle barrels.

For millions of years, the Earth had lain thus, without interference; a land of soil and life, a local corner of the Galaxy engaged in its own small strivings.

And now?

Now, finally, there was interference.

Now, finally, someone or something had come into this local corner of the Galaxy and Earth was alone no longer.

'To himself, he knew, it did not matter. Physically, there was no longer anything that possibly could matter to him. All that was left was the morning brightness and the evening peace and from each of these, from every hour of each day that was left to him, it was his purpose to extract the last bit of joy in being alive.

But to the others it would matter - to Mary Mallet and her brother Johnny, to the little Smith boy who had got the baseball bat and mitt, to all the people who had visited this pasture, and to all the millions who had not visited or even heard of it.

Here, in this lonely place in the midst of the great cornlands, had come, undramatically, a greater drama than the Earth had yet known. Here was the pivot point.

He said to the machine: 'What do you intend with us?'

There was no answer.

He had not expected one.

He sat and watched the shadows deepen and the lights spring up in the farm houses that were sprinkled on the land. Dogs barked from far away and others answered them and the cowbells rang across the hills like tiny vesper notes.

At last, when he could see no longer, he walked slowly back to the house.

In the kitchen, he found a lamp and lit it. He saw by the kitchen clock that it was almost nine o'clock - time for the evening news.

He went into the living-room and turned on the radio. Sitting in the dark, he listened to it.

There was good news.

There had been no polio deaths in the state that day and only one new case had been reported.

'It is too soon to hope, of course,' the newscaster said, 'but it definitely is the first break in the epidemic. Up to the time of broadcast, there have been no new cases for more than twenty hours. The state health director said...'

He went on to read what the health director said, which wasn't much of anything, just one of those public statements which pretty generally add up to nothing tangible.

It was the first day in almost three weeks, the newscaster had said, during which no polio deaths had been reported. But despite the development, he said, there still was need of nurses. If you are a nurse, he added, won't you please call this number? You are badly needed.

He went on to warm over a grand jury report, without adding anything really new. He gave the weather broadcast. He said the Emmett murder trial had been postponed another month.

Then he said: 'Someone has just handed me a bulletin. Now let me see...'

You could hear the paper rustling as he held it to read it through, could hear him gasp a little.

'It says here,' he said, 'that Sheriff Joe Burns has just now been notified that a Flying Saucer has landed on the Peter Chaye farm out near Mallet Corners. No one seems to know too much about it. One report is that it was found this morning, but no one thought to notify the sheriff. Let me repeat - this is just a report. We don't know any more than what we've told you. We don't know if it is true or not. The sheriff is on his way there now. We'll let you know as soon as we learn anything. Keep tuned to this...'

Peter got up and turned off the radio. Then he went into the kitchen to bring in the lamp. He set the lamp on a table and sat down again to wait for Sheriff Burns.

He didn't have long to wait.

'Folks tell me,' said the sheriff, 'this here Flying Saucer landed on your farm.'

'I don't know if it's a Flying Saucer, Sheriff.'

'Well, what is it, then?'

'I wouldn't know,' said Peter.

'Folks tell me it was giving away things,' the Sheriff said wryly.

'It was doing that, all right.'

'If this is some cockeyed advertising stunt,' the sheriff said, 'I'll have someone's neck for it.'

'I'm sure it's not an advertising stunt.'

'Why didn't you notify me right off? What you mean by holding out on a thing like this?'

'I didn't think of notifying you,' Peter told him. 'I wasn't trying to hold out on anything.'

'You new around here, ain't you?' asked the sheriff. 'I don't recollect seeing you before. Thought I knew everyone.'

'I've been here three months.'

'Folks tell me you ain't farming the place. Tell me you ain't got no family. Live here all by yourself, just doing nothing.'

'That's correct,' said Peter.

The sheriff waited for the explanation, but Peter offered none. The sheriff looked at him suspiciously in the smoky lamplight.

'Can you show us this here Flying Saucer?'

By now Peter was a little weary of the sheriff, so he said, 'I can tell you how to find it. You go down past the barn and cross the brook...'

'Why don't you come with us, Chaye?'

'Look, Sheriff, I was telling you how to find it. Do you want me to

continue?'

'Why, sure,' the sheriff said. 'Of course I do. But why can't you...'

'I've seen it twice,' said Peter. 'I've been overrun by people all the afternoon.'

'All right, all right,' the sheriff said. 'Tell me how to find it.'

He told him and the sheriff left, followed by his two deputies.

The telephone rang.

Peter answered it. It was the radio station he'd been listening to.

'Say,' asked the radio reporter, 'you got a Saucer out there?'

'I don't think so,' Peter said. 'I do have something out here, though. The sheriff is going to take a look at it.'

'We want to send out our mobile TV unit, but we wanted to be sure there was something there. It be all right with you if we send it out?'

'No objections. Send it along.'

'You sure you got something there?'

'I told you that I had.'

'Well, then suppose you tell me ...'

Fifteen minutes later, he hung up.

The phone rang again.

It was the Associated Press. The man at the other end of the wire was wary and sceptical.

'What's this I hear about a Saucer out there?'

Ten minutes later, Peter hung up.

The phone rang almost immediately.

'McClelland of the Tribune,' said a bored voice. 'I heard a screwball story...'

Five minutes. The phone rang again. It was the United Press.

'Hear you got a Saucer. Any little men in it?'

Fifteen minutes.

The phone rang.

It was an irate citizen.

'I just heard on the radio you got a Flying Saucer. What kind of gag you trying to pull? You know there ain't any Flying Saucers...'

'Just a moment, sir,' said Peter.

He let the receiver hang by its cord and went out to the kitchen. He found a pair of clips and came back. He could hear the irate citizen still chewing him out, the voice coming ghostlike out of the dangling receiver.

He went outside and found the wire and clipped it. When he came back in again, the receiver was silent. He hung it carefully on the hook.

Then he locked the doors and went to bed.

To bed, but not immediately to sleep. He lay beneath the covers, staring up into the darkness and trying to quiet the turmoil of speculation that surged within his brain.

He had gone walking in the morning and found a machine. He had put his hand upon it and it had given him a gift. Later on, it had given other gifts.

'A machine came, bearing gifts,' he said into the darkness.

A clever, calculated, well-worked-out first contact.

Contact them with something they will know and recognize and need not be afraid of, something to which they can feel superior.

Make it friendly - and what is more friendly than handing out a gift?

What is it?

Missionary?

Trader?

Diplomat?

Or just a mere machine and nothing more?

Spy? Adventurer? Investigator? Surveyor?

Doctor? Lawyer? Indian chief?

And why, of all places, had it landed here, in this forsaken farmland, in his pasture on his farm?

And its purpose?

What had been the purpose, the almost inevitable motive, of those fictional alien beings who, in tales of fantasy, had landed on Earth?

To take over, of course. If not by force, then by infiltration or by friendly persuasion and compulsion; to take over not only Earth, but the human race as well.

The man from the radio station had been excited, the Associated Press man had been indignant that anyone should so insult his intelligence, the Tribune man had been bored and the United Press man flippant. But the citizen had been angry. He was being taken in by another Flying Saucer story and it was just too much.

The citizen was angry because he didn't want his little world disturbed.

He wanted no interference. He had trouble enough of his own without things being messed up by a Saucer's landing. He had problems of his own - earning a living, getting along with his neighbours, planning his work, worrying about the polio epidemic.

Although the newscaster had said the polio situation seemed a little brighter - no new cases and no deaths. And that was a fine thing, for polio was pain and death and a terror on the land.

Pain, he thought.

I've had no pain today.

For the first time in many days, there has been no pain.

He lay stiff and still beneath the covers, examining himself for pain. He knew just where it lurked, the exact spot in his anatomy where it lurked hidden out of sight. He lay and waited for it, fearful, now that he had thought of it, that he would find it there.

But it was not there.

He lay and waited for it, afraid that the very thought of it would conjure it up from its hiding-place. It did not come. He dared it to come, he invited it to show itself, he hurled mental jibes at it to lure it out. It refused to be lured.

He relaxed and knew that for the moment he was safe. But safe only temporarily, for the pain was still there. It bided its time, waited for its moment, would come when the time was right.

With careless abandon, trying to wipe out the future and its threat, he luxuriated in life without the pain. He listened to the house - the slightly settling joists that made the floorboards creak, the thrum of the light summer wind against the weathered siding, the scraping of the elm branch against the kitchen roof.

Another sound. A knocking at the door. 'Chaye! Chaye, where are you?'

'Coming,' he called.

He found slippers and went to the door. It was the sheriff and his men.

'Light the lamp,' the sheriff said.

'You got a match?' Peter asked.

'Yeah, here are some.'

Groping in the dark, Peter found the sheriffs hand and the book of matches.

He located the table, slid his hand across the top and found the lamp. He lit it and looked at the sheriff from across the table.

'Chaye,' the sheriff said, 'that thing is building something.'

'I know it is.'

'What's the gag?'

'There's no gag.'

'It gave me this,' the sheriff said. He threw the object on the table. 'A gun?' said Peter.

'You ever see one like it?'

It was a gun, all right, about the size of a .45. But it had no trigger and the muzzle flared and the whole thing was made of some white, translucent substance.

Peter picked it up and found it weighed no more than half a pound or so.

'No,' said Peter. 'No, I've never seen one like it.' He put it back on the table, gingerly. 'Does it work?'

'It does,' the sheriff said. 'I tried it on your barn.' 'There ain't no barn no more,' said one of the deputies. 'No report, no flash, no nothing,' the sheriff added. 'Just no barn,' repeated the deputy, obsessed with the idea.

A car drove into the yard.

'Go out and see who's there,' said the sheriff.

One of the deputies went out.

'I don't get it,' complained the sheriff. 'They said Flying Saucer, but I don't think it's any Saucer. A box is all it is.'

'It's a machine,' said Peter.

Feet stamped across the porch and men came through the door.

'Newspapermen,' said the deputy who had gone out to see.

'I ain't got no statement, boys,' the sheriff said.

One of them said to Peter: 'You Chaye?'

Peter nodded.

'I'm Hoskins from the Tribune. This is Johnson from the IP. 'That guy over there with the sappy look is a photographer, name of Langly. Disregard him.'

He pounded Peter on the back. 'How does it feel to be sitting in the middle of the century's biggest news break? Great stuff, hey, boy?'

Langly said: 'Hold it.' A flash bulb popped.

'I got to use the phone', said Johnson. 'Where is it?'

'Over there,' said Peter. 'It's not working.'

'How come at a time like this?'

'I cut the wire.'

'Cut the wire! You crazy, Chaye?'

'There were too many people calling.'

'Now,' said Hoskins, 'wasn't that a hell of a thing to do?'

'I'll fix her up,' Langly offered. 'Anyone got a pair of pliers?'

The sheriff said, 'You boys hold on a minute.'

'Hurry up and get into a pair of pants,' Hoskins said to Peter. 'We'll want your picture on the scene. Standing with your foot on it like the guy that's just killed an elephant.'

'You listen here,' the sheriff said.

'What is it, Sheriff?'

'This here's important. Get it straight. You guys can't go messing around with it.'

'Sure it's important,' said Hoskins. 'That is why we're here. Millions of people standing around with their tongues hanging out for news.'

'Here are some pliers,' someone remarked.

'Leave me at that phone,' said Langly.

'What are we horsing around for?' asked Hoskins. 'Let's go and see it.'

'I gotta make a call,' said Johnson.

'Look here, boys,' the sheriff insisted in confusion. 'Wait-'

'What's it like, Sheriff? Figure it's a Saucer? How big is it? Does it make a clicking noise or something? Hey, Langly, take the sheriff's picture.'

'Just a minute,' Langly shouted from outside. 'I'm fixing up this wire.'

More feet came across the porch. A head was thrust into the door.

'TV truck,' the head said. 'This the place? How do we get out to the thing?'

The phone rang.

Johnson answered it.

'It's for you, Sheriff.'

The sheriff lumbered across the room. They waited, listening.

'Sure, this is Sheriff Burns... Yeah, it's out there, all right... Sure, I know. I've seen it... No, of course, I don't know what it is... Yes, I understand... Yes, sir... Yes, sir. I'll see to it, sir.'

He hung up the receiver and turned around to face them.

'That was military intelligence,' he said. 'No one is going out there. No one's moving from this house. This place is restricted as of this minute.'

He looked from one to another of them ferociously.

'Them's orders,' he told them.

'Oh, hell,' said Hoskins.

'I came all the way out here,' bawled the TV man. 'I'm not going to come out here and not...'

'It isn't me that's doing the ordering,' said the sheriff. 'It's Uncle Sam. You boys take things easy.'

Peter went into the kitchen and poked up the fire and set on the kettle.

'The coffee's there,' he said to Langly. 'I'll put on some clothes.'

Slowly, the night wore on. Hoskins and Johnson phoned in the information they had jotted down on folded copy paper, their pencils stabbing cryptic signs as they talked to Peter and the sheriff. After some argument with the sheriff about letting him go, Langly left with his pictures. The sheriff paced up and down the room.

The radio blared. The phone banged constantly. They drank coffee amid smoked cigarettes, littering the floor with ground-omit stubs. More newsmen pulled in, were duly warned by the sheriff, and settled down to wait.

Someone brought out a bottle and passed it around. Someone else tried to start a poker game, but nobody was interested.

Peter went out to get an armload of wood. The night was quiet, with stars.

He glanced towards the pasture, but there was nothing there to see. He tried to make out the empty place where the barn had disappeared. It was too dark to tell whether the barn was there or not.

Death watch or the last dark hour before the dawn - the brightest, most wonderful dawn that Man had ever seen in all his years of striving?

The machine was building something out there, building something in the night.

And what was it building?

Shrine?

Trading Post?

Mission House?

Embassy?

Fort?

There was no way of knowing, no way that one could tell.

Whatever it was building, it was the first known outpost ever built by an alien race on the planet Earth.

He went back into the house with the load of wood.

'They're sending troops,' the sheriff told him.

'Tramp, tramp, tramp,' said Hoskins, dead-pan, cigarette hanging negligently to his underlip.

'The radio just said so,' the sheriff said. 'They called out the guard.'

Hoskins and Johnson did some more tramp-tramping.

'You guys better not horse around with them soldier boys,' the sheriff warned. 'They'll shove a bayonet ...'

Hoskins made a noise like a bugle blowing the charge. Johnson grabbed two spoons and beat out galloping hoofs.

'The cavalry!' shouted Hoskins. 'By God, boys, we're saved!'

Someone said wearily: 'Can't you guys be your age?' They sat around, as the night wore on, drinking coffee and smoking. They didn't do much talking.

The radio station finally signed off. Someone fooled around, trying to get another station, but the batteries were too weak to pull in anything. He shut the radio off. It had been some time now since the phone had rung.

Dawn was still an hour away when the guardsmen arrived, not marching, nor riding horses, but in five canvas-covered trucks.

The captain came in for just a moment to find out where this goddam obscenity Saucer was. He was the fidgety type. He wouldn't even stay for a cup of coffee. He went out yelling orders at the drivers.

Inside the house, the others waited and heard the five trucks growl away.

Dawn came and a building stood in the pasture, and it was a bit confusing, for you could see that it was being built in a way that was highly unorthodox. Whoever or whatever was building it had started on the inside and was building outward, so that you saw the core of the building, as if it were a building that was being torn down and someone already had ripped off the entire exterior.

It covered half an acre and was five stories high. It gleamed pink in the first light of the morning, a beautiful misty pink that made you choke up a little, remembering the colour of the dress the little girl next door had worn for her seventh birthday party.

The guardsmen were ringed around it, the morning light spattering off their bayonets as they stood the guard.

Peter made breakfast - huge stacks of flapjacks, all the bacon lie had left, every egg he could find, a gallon or two of oatmeal, more coffee.

'We'll send out and get some grub,' said Hoskins. 'We'll make this right with you.'

After breakfast, the sheriff and the deputies drove back to the county seat. Hoskins took up a collection and went to town to buy groceries. The other newsmen stayed on. The TV truck got squared off for some wide-angle distance shots.

The telephone started jangling again. The newsmen took turns answering it.

Peter walked down the road to the Mallet farm to get eggs and milk.

Mary ran out to the gate to meet him. 'The neighbours are getting scared,' she said.

'They weren't scared yesterday,' said Peter. 'They walked right up and got their gifts.'

'But this is different, Peter. This is getting out of hand. The building...'

And that was it, of course. The building.

No one had been frightened of an innocent-appearing machine because it was small and friendly. It shone so prettily and it clicked so nicely and it handed out gifts. It was something that could be superficially recognized and it had a purpose that was understandable if one didn't look too far.

But the building was big and might get bigger still and it was being erected inside out. And who in all the world had ever seen a structure built as fast as that one - five stories in one single night?

'How do they do it, Peter?' Mary asked in a hushed little voice.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Some principle that is entirely alien to us, some process that men have never even thought of, a way of doing things, perhaps, that starts on an entirely different premise than the human way.'

'But it's just the kind of building that men themselves would build,' she objected. 'Not that kind of stone, perhaps - maybe there isn't any stone like that in the entire world - but in every other way there's nothing strange about it. It looks like a big high school or a department store.'

'My jade was jade,' said Peter, 'and your perfume was perfume and the rod and reel that Johnny got was a regular rod and reel.'

'That means they know about us. They know all there is to know. Peter, they've been watching us!'

'I have no doubt of it.'

He saw the terror in her eyes and reached out a hand to draw her close and she came into his arms and he held her tightly and thought, even as he did so, how strange that he should be the one to extend comfort and assurance.

'I'm foolish, Peter.'

'You're wonderful,' he assured her.

'I'm not really scared.'

'Of course you're not.' He wanted to say, 'I love you,' but he knew that those words he could never say. Although the pain, he thought - the pain had not come this morning.

'I'll get the milk and eggs,' said Mary.

'Give me all you can spare. I have quite a crowd to feed.'

Walking back, he thought about the neighbours being frightened now and wondered how long it would be before the world got frightened too - how long before artillery would be wheeling into line, how long before an atom bomb would fall.

He stopped on the rise of the hill above the house and for the first time noticed that the barn was gone. It had been sheared off as cleanly as if cut with a knife, with the stump of the foundation sliced away at an angle.

He wondered if the sheriff still had the gun and supposed he had. And he wondered what the sheriff would do with it and why it had been given him. For, of all the gifts that he had seen, it was the only one that was not familiar to Earth.

In the pasture that had been empty yesterday, that had been only trees and grass and old, grassed-over ditches, bordered by the wild plum thickets and the hazel brush and blackberry vine, rose the building. It seemed to him that it was bigger than when he had seen it less than an hour before.

Back at the house, the newspapermen were sitting in the yard, looking at the building.

One of them said to him, 'The brass arrived. They're waiting in there for you.'

'Intelligence?' asked Peter.

The newsman nodded. 'A chicken colonel and a major.'

'They were waiting in the living-room. The colonel was a young man with grey hair. The major wore a moustache, very military.'

The colonel introduced himself 'I'm Colonel Whitman. This is Major Rockwell.'

Peter put down his eggs and milk and nodded acknowledgment.

'You found this machine,' said the colonel.

'That is right.'

'Tell us about it,' said the colonel, so Peter told them about it.

'This jade, the colonel said. 'Could we have a look at it?'

Peter went to the kitchen and got the jade. They passed it from one to the other, examining it closely, turning it over and over in their hands, a bit suspicious of it, but admiring it, although Peter could see they knew nothing about jade.

Almost as if he might have known what was in Peter's mind, the colonel lifted his eyes from the jade and looked at him.

'You know jade,' the colonel said.

'Very well,' said Peter.

'You've worked with it before?'

'In a museum.'

'Tell me about yourself.'

Peter hesitated - then told about himself.

'But why are you here?' the colonel asked.

'Have you ever been in a hospital, Colonel? Have you ever thought what it would be like to die there?'

The colonel nodded. 'I can see your point. But here you'll have no -'

'I won't wait that long.'

'Yes, yes,' the colonel said. 'I see.'

'Colonel,' said the major. 'Look at this, sir, if you will. This symbolism is the same...'

The colonel snatched it from his hands and looked.

'The same as on the letterhead!' lie shouted.

The colonel lifted his head and stared at Peter, as if it had been the first time he had seen him, as if he were surprised at seeing him.

There was, suddenly, a gun in the major's hand, pointing at Peter, its muzzle a cold and steady eye.

Peter tried to throw himself aside.

He was too late.

The major shot him down.

Peter fell for a million years through a wool-grey nothingness that screamed and he knew it must be a dream, an endless atavistic dream of falling, brought down through all the years from incredibly remote forebears who had dwelt in trees and had lived in fear of falling. He tried to pinch himself to awaken from the dream, but he couldn't do it, since he had no hands to pinch with, and, after a time, it became apparent that he had no body to pinch. He was a disembodied consciousness hurtling through a gulf which seemed to have no boundaries.

He fell for a million years through the void that seemed to scream at him. At first the screaming soaked into him and filled his soul, since he had no body, with a terrible agony that went on and on, never quite reaching the breaking point that would send him into the release of insanity. But he got used to it after a time and as soon as he did, the screaming stopped and he plunged down through space in a silence that was more dreadful than the screaming.

He fell for ever and for ever and then it seemed that for ever ended, for he was at rest and no longer falling.

He saw a face. It was a face from incredibly long ago, a face that he once had seen and had long forgotten, and lie searched back along his memory to try to identify it.

He couldn't see it too clearly, for it seemed to keep bobbing around so he couldn't pin it down. He tried and tried and couldn't and he closed his eyes to shut the face away.

'Chaye,' a voice said. 'Peter Chaye.'

'Go away,' said Peter.

The voice went away.

He opened his eyes again and the face was there, clearer now and no longer bobbing.

It was the colonel's face.

He shut his eyes again, remembering the steady eye of the gun the major had held. He'd jumped aside, or tried to, and he had been too slow. Something had happened and he'd fallen for a million years and here he was, with the colonel looking at him.

He'd been shot. That was the answer, of course. The major had shot him and he was in a hospital. But where had he been hit? Arm? Both arms seemed to be all right. Leg? Both legs were all right, too. No pain. No bandages. No casts.

The colonel said: 'He came to for just a minute, Doc, and now he's off again.'

'He'll be all right,' said Doc. 'Just give him time. You gave him too big a charge, that's all. It'll take a little time.'

'We must talk to him.'

'You'll have to wait.'

There was silence for a moment.

Then: 'You're absolutely sure he's human?'

'We've gone over every inch of him,' said Doc. 'If he isn't human, he's too good an imitation for us ever to find out.'

'He told me he had cancer,' the colonel said. 'Claimed he was dying of cancer. Don't you see, if he wasn't human, if there was something wrong, he could always try to make it look...'

'He hasn't any cancer. Not a sign of it! No sign he ever had it. No sign he ever will.'

Even with his eyes shut, Peter felt that he was agape with disbelief and amazement. He forced his eyes to stay closed, afraid that this was a trick.

'That other doctor,' the colonel said, 'told Peter Chaye four months ago he had six more months to live. He told him...'

Doc said, 'Colonel, I won't even try to explain it. All I can tell you is that the man lying on that bed hasn't got cancer. He's as healthy a man as you would wish to find.'

'It isn't Peter Chaye, then,' the colonel stated in a dogged voice. 'It's

something that took over Peter Chaye or duplicated Peter Chaye or...'

Doc said, 'Now, now, Colonel. Let's stick to what we know.'

'You're sure he's a man, Doc?'

'I'm sure he's a human being, if that is what you mean.'

'No little differences? Just one seemingly unimportant deviation from the human norm?'

'None,' Doe said, 'and even if there were, it wouldn't prove what you are after. There could be minor mutational difference in anyone. The human body doesn't always run according to a blue-print.'

'There were differences in all that stuff the machine gave away. Little differences that came to light only on close examination - but differences that spelled out a margin between human and alien manufacture.'

'All right, then, so there were differences. So those things were made by aliens. I still tell you this man is a human being.'

'It all ties in so neatly,' the colonel declared. 'Chaye goes out and buys this place - this old, abandoned farm. He's eccentric as hell by the standards of that neighbourhood. By the very fact of his eccentricity, he invites attention, which might be undesirable, but at the same time his eccentricity might be used to cover up and smooth over anything he did out of the ordinary. It would be just somebody like him who'd supposedly find a strange machine. It would be...'

'You're building up a case,' said Doe, 'without anything to go on. You asked for one little difference in him to base your cockeyed theory on - no offence, but that's how I, as a doctor, see it. Well, now let's have one little fact - fact, mind you, not guess - to support this idea of yours.'

'What was in that barn?' demanded the colonel. 'That's what I want to know. Did Chaye build that machine in there? Was that why it was destroyed?'

'The sheriff destroyed the barn,' the doctor said. 'Chaye had nothing to do with it.'

'But who gave the gun to the sheriff? Chaye's machine, that's who. And it would be an easy matter of suggestion, mind control, hypnotism, whatever you want to call it...'

'Let's get back to facts. You used an anaesthetic gun on this man. You've held him prisoner. By your orders, he has been subjected to intensive examination, a clear invasion of his privacy. I hope to God he never brings you into court. He could throw the book at you.'

'I know,' the colonel admitted reluctantly. 'But we have to bust this thing. We must find out what it is. We have got to get that bomb back!'

'The bomb's what worries you.'

'Hanging up there,' the colonel said, sounding as if he'd shuddered. 'Just hanging up there!'

'I have to get along,' replied the doctor. 'Take it easy, Colonel.'

The doctor's footsteps went out through the door and down the corridor, fading away. The colonel paced up and down a while then sat down heavily in a chair.

Peter lay in bed, and one thought crashed through his brain, one thought again and again:

I'm going to live!

But he hadn't been.

He had been ready for the day when the pain finally became too great to bear.

He had picked his ground to spend his final days, to make his final stand.

And now he had been reprieved. Now, somehow, he had been given back his life.

He lay in the bed, fighting against excitement, against a growing tenseness, trying to maintain the pretence that he still was under the influence of whatever he'd been shot with.

An anaesthetic gun, the doctor had said. Something new, something he had never heard of. And yet somewhere there was a hint of it. Something, he remembered, about dentistry - a new technique that dentists used to desensitize the gums, a fine stream of anaesthetic sprayed against the gums. Something like that, only hundreds or thousands of times stronger?

Shot and brought here and examined because of some wild fantasy lurking in the mind of a G-2 colonel.

Fantasy? He wondered. Unwitting, unsuspecting, could he have played a part? It was ridiculous, of course. For he remembered nothing he had done or said or even thought which gave him a clue to any part he might have played in the machine's coming to the Earth.

Could cancer be something other than disease? Some uninvited guest, perhaps, that came and lived within a human body? A clever alien guest who came from far away, across the unguessed light-years?

And that, he knew, was fantasy to match the colonel's fantasy, a malignant nightmare of distrust that dwelt within the human mind, an instinctive defence mechanism that conditioned the race to expect the worst and to arm against it.

There was nothing feared so much as the unknown factor, nothing which one must guard against so much as the unexplained.

We have to bust this thing, the colonel had said. We must find out what it is.

And, that, of course, was the terror of it - that they had no way of knowing what it was.

He stirred at last, very deliberately, and the colonel spoke.

'Peter Chaye,' he said.

'Yes, what is it, Colonel?'

'I have to talk to you.'

'All right, talk to me.'

He sat up in bed and saw that he was in a hospital room. It had the stark, antiseptic quality, the tile floor, the colourless walls, the utilitarian look - and the bed on which he lay was a hospital bed.

'How do you feel?' the colonel asked.

'Not so hot,' confessed Peter.'

'We were a little rough on you, but we couldn't take a chance. There was the letter, you see, and the slot machines and the stamp machines and all the other things and...'

'You said something about a letterhead.'

'What do you know about that, Chaye?'

'I don't know a thing.'

'It came to the President,' said the colonel. 'A month or so ago. And a similar one went to every other administrative head on the entire Earth.'

'Saying?'

'That's the hell of it. It was written in no language known anywhere on Earth. But there was one line - one line on all the letters - that you could read. It said: "By the time you have deciphered, you'll be ready to act logically." And that was all anybody could read - one line in the native language of every country that got a copy of the letter. The rest was in gibberish, for all we could make of it.'

'You haven't deciphered it?'

He could see the colonel sweating. 'Not even a single character, much less a word.'

Peter reached out a hand to the bedside table and lifted the carafe, tipped it above the glass. There was nothing in it.

The colonel heaved himself out of his chair. 'I'll get you a drink of water.'

He picked up the glass and opened the bathroom door.

'I'll let it run a while and get it cold,' he said.

But Peter scarcely heard him, for he was staring at the door. There was a bolt on it and if-

The water started running and the colonel raised his voice to be heard above it.

'That's about the time we started finding the machines,' he said. 'Can you imagine it? A cigarette-vending machine and you could buy cigarettes from it, but it was more than that. It was something watching you. Something that studied the people and the way they lived. And the stamp machines and the slot machines and all the other mechanical contrivances that we have set up. Not

machines, but watchers. Watching all the time. Watching and learning...'

Peter swung his legs out of bed and touched the floor. He approached swiftly and silently on bare feet and slammed the door, then reached up and slid the bolt. It snicked neatly into place.

'Hey!' the colonel shouted.

Clothes?

They might be in the closet.

Peter leaped at it and wrenched the door open and there they were hung upon the hangers.

He ripped off the hospital gown, snatched at his trousers and pulled them on.

Shirt, now! In a drawer.

And shoes? There on the closet floor. Don't take time to tie them.

The colonel was pushing and hammering at the door, not yelling yet. Later he would, but right now he was intent on saving all the face he could. He wouldn't want to advertise immediately the fact that he'd been tricked.

Peter felt through his pockets. His wallet was gone. So was everything else - his knife, his watch, his keys. More than likely they'd taken all of it and put it in the office safe when he'd been brought here.

No time to worry about any of them. The thing now was to get away.

He went out of the door and down the corridor, carefully not going too fast. He passed a nurse, but she scarcely glanced at him.

He found a stairway door and opened it. Now he could hurry just a little more. He went down the stairs three at a time, shoelaces clattering.

The stairs, he told himself, were fairly safe. Almost no one would use them when there were the elevators. He stopped and bent over for a moment and tied the laces.

The floor numbers were painted above each of the doors, so he knew where he was. At the ground floor, he entered the corridor again. So far, there seemed to be no alarms, although any minute now the colonel would start to raise a ruckus.

Would they try to stop him at the door? Would there be someone to question him? Would - A basket of flowers stood beside a door. He glanced up and down the corridor. There were several people, but they weren't looking at him. He scooped up the flowers.

At the door, he said to the attendant who sat behind the desk: 'Mistake. Wrong flowers.'

She smiled sourly, but made no move to stop him.

Outside, he put the flowers down on the steps and walked rapidly away.

An hour later, he knew that he was safe. He knew also that he was in a

city thirty miles away from where he wanted to go and that he had no money and that he was hungry and his feet were sore from walking on the hard and unyielding concrete of the sidewalks.

He found a park and sat down on a bench. A little distance away, a group of old men were playing checkers at a table. A mother wheeled her baby. A young man sat on a nearby bench, listening to a tiny radio.

The radio said: '...apparently the building is completed. There has been no sign of it growing for the last eighteen hours. At the moment, it measures a thousand stories high and covers more than a hundred acres. The bomb, which was dropped two days ago, still floats there above it, held in suspension by some strange force. Artillery is standing by, waiting for the word to fire, but the word has not come through. Many think that since the bomb could not get through, shells will have no better chance, if any at all.

'A military spokesman, in fact, has said that the big guns are mere precautionary measures, which may be all right, but it certainly doesn't explain why the bomb was dropped. There is a rising clamour, not only in Congress, but throughout the world, to determine why an attempt was made at bombing. There has as yet been no hostile move directed from the building. The only damage so far reported has been the engulfment by the building of the farm home of Peter Chaye, the man who found the machine.

'All trace has been lost of Chaye since three days ago, when he suffered an attack of some sort and was taken from his home. It is believed that he may be in military custody. There is wide speculation on what Chaye may or may not know. It is entirely likely that he is the only man on Earth who can shed any light on what has happened on his farm.

'Meanwhile, the military guard has been tightened around the scene and a corridor of some eighteen miles in depth around it has been evacuated. It is known that two delegations of scientists have been escorted through the lines. While no official announcement has been made, there is good reason to believe they learned little from their visits. What the building is, who or what has engineered its construction, if you can call the inside-out process by which it grew construction, or what may be expected next are all fields of groundless speculation. There is plenty of that, naturally, but no one has yet come up with what might be called an explanation.

'The world's press wires are continuing to pile up reams of copy, but even so there is little actual, concrete knowledge - few facts that can be listed one, two, three right down the line.

'There is little other news of any sort and perhaps it's just as well, since there is no room at the moment in the public interest for anything else but this mysterious building. As so often happens when big news breaks, all other events seem to wait for some other time to happen. The polio epidemic is rapidly subsiding; there is no major crime news. In the world's capitals, of course, all legislative action is at a complete standstill, with the governments watching closely the developments at the building.

'There is a rising feeling at many of these capitals that the building is not of mere national concern, that decisions regarding it must be made at an international level. The attempted bombing has resulted in some argument that we, as the nation most concerned, cannot be trusted to act in a calm, dispassionate way, and that an objective world viewpoint is necessary for an intelligent handling of the situation.'

Peter got up from his bench and walked away. He'd been taken from his home

three days ago, the radio had said. No wonder he was starved.

Three days - and in that time the building had grown a thousand stories high and now covered a hundred acres.

He went along, not hurrying too much now, his feet a heavy ache, his belly pinched with hunger.

He had to get back to the building - somehow he had to get back there. It was a sudden need, realized and admitted now, but the reason for it, the source of it, was not yet apparent. It was as if there had been something he had left behind and he had to go and find it. Something I left behind, he thought. What could he have left behind? Nothing but the pain and the knowledge that he walked with a dark companion and the little capsule that he carried in his pocket for the time when the pain grew too great.

He felt in his pocket and the capsule was no longer there. It had disappeared along with his wallet and his pocket knife and watch. No matter now, he thought. I no longer need the capsule.

He heard the hurrying footsteps behind him and there was an urgency about them that made him swing around.

'Peter!' Mary cried out. 'Peter, I thought I recognized you. I was hurrying to catch you.'

He stood and looked at her as if he did not quite believe it was she whom he saw.

'Where have you been?' she asked.

'Hospital,' Peter said. 'I ran away from them. But you...'

'We were evacuated, Peter. They came and told us that we had to leave. Some of us are at a camp down at the other end of the park. Pa is carrying on something awful and I can't blame him - having to leave right in the middle of haying and with the small grain almost ready to be cut.'

She tilted back her head and looked into his face.

'You look all worn out,' she said. 'Is it worse again?'

'It?' he asked, then realized that the neighbours must have known - that the reason for his coming to the farm must have been general knowledge, for there were no such things as secrets in a farming neighbourhood.

'I'm sorry, Peter,' Mary said. 'Terribly sorry. I shouldn't have...'

'It's all right,' said Peter. 'Because it's gone now, Mary. I haven't got it any more. I don't know how or why, but I've gotten rid of it in some way.'

'The hospital?' she suggested.

'The hospital had nothing to do with it. It had cleared up before I went there. They just found out at the hospital, that is all.'

'Maybe the diagnosis was wrong.'

He shook his head. 'It wasn't wrong, Mary.' Still, how could he be sure? How could he, or the medical world, say positively that it had been malignant

cells and not something else - some strange parasite to which he had played the unsuspecting host?

'You said you ran away,' she reminded him. 'They'll be looking for me, Mary. The colonel and the major. They think I had something to do with the machine I found. They think I might have made it. They took me to the hospital to find out if I was human.'

'Of all the silly things!'

'I've got to get back to the farm,' he said. 'I simply have to get back there.'

'You can't,' she told him. 'There are soldiers everywhere.'

'I'll crawl on my belly in the ditches, if I have to. Travel at night. Sneak through the lines. Fight if I'm discovered and they try to prevent me. There is no alternative. I have to make a try.'

'You're ill,' she said, anxiously staring at his face.

He grinned at her. 'Not ill. Just hungry.'

'Come on then.' She took his arm.

He held back. 'Not to the camp. I can't have someone seeing me. In just a little while, I'll be a hunted man - if I'm not one already.'

'A restaurant, of course.'

'They took my wallet, Mary. I haven't any money.'

'I have shopping money.'

'No,' he said. 'I'll get along. There's nothing that can beat me now.'

'You really mean that, don't you?'

'It just occurred to me,' Peter admitted, confused and yet somehow sure that what he had said was not reckless bravado, but a blunt fact.

'You're going back?'

'I have to, Mary.'

'And you think you have a chance?' He nodded.

'Peter,' she began hesitantly. 'Yes?'

'How much bother would I be?'

'You? How do you mean? A bother in what way?'

'If I went along.'

'But you can't. There's no reason for you to.'

She lifted her chin just a little. 'There is a reason, Peter. Almost as if I were being called there. Like a bell ringing in my head - a school bell calling in the children...'

'Mary,' he said, that perfume bottle - there was a certain symbol on it, wasn't there?'

'Carved in the glass,' she told him. 'The same symbol, Peter, that was carved into the jade.'

And the same symbol, he thought, that had been on the letterheads.

'Come on,' he decided suddenly. 'You won't be any bother.'

'We'll eat first,' she said. 'We can use the shopping money.'

They walked down the path, hand in hand, like two teen-age sweethearts.

'We have lots of time,' said Peter. 'We can't start for home till dark.'

They ate at a small restaurant on an obscure street and after that went grocery shopping. They bought a loaf of bread and two rings of bologna and a slab of cheese, which took all of Mary's money, and for the change the grocer sold them an empty bottle in which to carry water. It would serve as a canteen.

They walked to the edge of the city and out through the suburbs and into the open country, not travelling fast, for there was no point in trying to go too far before night set in.

They found a stream and sat beside it, for all the world like a couple on a picnic. Mary took off her shoes and dabbled her feet in the water and the two of them felt disproportionately happy.

Night came and they started out. There was no Moon, but the sky was ablaze with stars. Although they took some tumbles and at other times wondered where they were, they kept moving on, staying off the roads, walking through the fields and pastures, skirting the farmhouses to avoid barking dogs.

It was shortly after midnight that they saw the first of the campfires and swung wide around them. From the top of a ridge, they looked down upon the camp and saw the outlines of tents and the dull shapes of the canvas-covered trucks. And, later on, they almost stumbled into an artillery outfit, but got safely away without encountering the sentries who were certain to be stationed around the perimeter of the bivouac.

Now they knew that they were inside the evacuated area, that they were moving through the outer ring of soldiers and guns which hemmed in the building.

They moved more cautiously and made slower time. When the first false light of dawn came into the east, they holed up in a dense plum thicket in the corner of a pasture.

'I'm tired,' sighed Mary. 'I wasn't tired all night or, if I was, I didn't know it - but now that we've stopped, I feel exhausted.'

'We'll eat and sleep,' Peter said.

'Sleep comes first. I'm too tired to eat.'

Peter left her and crawled through a thicket to its edge.

In the growing light of morning stood the building, a great blue-misted mass that reared above the horizon like a blunted finger pointing at the sky.

'Mary!' Peter whispered. 'Mary, there it is!'

He heard her crawling through the thicket to his side.

'Peter, it's a long way off.'

'Yes, I know it is. But we are going there.'

They crouched there watching it.

'I can't see the bomb,' said Mary. 'The bomb that's hanging over it.'

'It's too far off to see.'

'Why is it us? Why are we the ones who are going back? Why are we the only ones who are not afraid?'

'I don't know,' said Peter, frowning puzzledly. 'No actual reason, that is. I'm going back because I want to, no, because I have to. You see, it was the place I chose. The dying place. Like the elephants crawling off to die where all other elephants die.'

'But you're all right now, Peter.'

'That makes no difference - or it doesn't seem to. It was where I found peace and an understanding.'

'And there were the symbols, Peter. The symbols on the bottle and the jade.'

'Let's go back,' he said. 'Someone will spot us here.'

'Our gifts were the only ones that had the symbols,' Mary persisted. 'None of the others had any of them. I asked around. There were no symbols at all on the other gifts.'

'There's no time to wonder about that. Come on.'

They crawled back to the centre of the thicket.

The Sun had risen above the horizon now and sent level shafts of light into the thicket and the early morning silence hung over them like a benediction.

'Peter,' said Mary, 'I just can't stay awake any longer. Kiss me before I go to sleep.'

He kissed her and they clung together, shut from the world by the jagged, twisted, low-growing branches of the plum trees.

'I hear the bells,' she breathed. 'Do you hear them, too?'

Peter shook his head.

'Like school bells,' she said. 'Like bells on the first day of school -'

the first day you ever went.'

'You're tired,' he told her.

'I've heard them before. This is not the first time,'

He kissed her again. 'Go to sleep,' he said and she did, almost as soon as she lay down and closed her eyes.

He sat quietly beside her and his mind retreated to his own hidden depths, searching for the pain within him. But there was no pain. It was gone for ever.

The pain was gone and the incidence of polio was down and it was a crazy thing to think, but he thought it, anyhow:

Missionary!

When human missionaries went out to heathen lands, what were the first things that they did?

They preached, of course, but there were other things as well. They fought disease and they worked for sanitation and laboured to improve the welfare of the people and tried to educate them to a better way of life. And in this way they not only carried out their religious precepts, hut gained the confidence of the heathen folk as well.

And if an alien missionary came to Earth, what would be among the first things that he was sure to do? Would it not be reasonable that he, too, would fight disease and try to improve the welfare of his chosen charges? Thus he would gain their confidence. Although he could not expect to gain too much at first. He could expect hostility and suspicion. Only a pitiful handful would not resent him or be afraid of him.

And if the missionary -

And if THIS missionary - Peter fell asleep.

The roar awakened him and he sat upright, sleep entirely wiped from his mind.

The roar was still there, somewhere outside the thicket, but it was receding.

'Peter! Peter!'

'Quiet, Mary! There is something out there!'

The roar turned around and came back again, growing until it was the sound of clanking thunder and the Earth shook with the sound. It receded again.

The midday sunlight came down through the branches and made of their hiding-place a freckled spot of Sun and shade. Peter could smell the musky odour of warm soil and wilted leaf.

They crept cautiously through the thicket and when they gained its edge, where the leaves thinned out, they saw the racing tank far down the field. Its roar came to them as it tore along, bouncing and swaying to the ground's unevenness, the great snout of its cannon pugnaciously thrust out before it, like a stiff-arming football player.

A road ran clear down the field - a road that Peter was sure had not been there the night before. It was a straight road, absolutely straight, running towards the building, and it was of some metallic stuff that shimmered in the Sun.

And far off to the left was another road and to the right another, and in the distance the three roads seemed to draw together, as the rails seem to converge when one looks down a railroad track.

Other roads running at right angles cut across the three roads, intersecting them so that one gained the impression of three far-reaching ladders set tightly side by side.

The tank raced towards one of the intersecting roads, a tank made midget by the distance, and its roar came back to them no louder than the humming of an angry bee.

It reached the road and skidded on, whipping around sideways and slewing along, as if it had hit something smooth and solid that it could not get through, as if it might have struck a soaped metallic wall. There was a moment when it tipped and almost went over, but it stayed upright and finally backed away, then swung around to come lumbering down the field, returning towards the thicket.

Halfway down the field, it pivoted around and halted, so that the gun pointed back towards the intersecting road.

The gun's muzzle moved downward and flashed and, at the intersecting road, the shell exploded with a burst of light and a puff of smoke. The concussion of the shot slapped hard against the ear.

Again and again the gun belched out its shells point-blank. A haze of smoke hung above the tank and road - and the shells still exploded at the road - this side of the road and not beyond it.

The tank clanked forward once more until it reached the road. It approached carefully this time and nudged itself along, as if it might be looking for a way to cross.

From somewhere a long distance off came the crunching sound of artillery. An entire battery of guns seemed to be firing. They fired for a while, then grudgingly quit.

The tank still nosed along the road like a dog sniffing beneath a fallen tree for a hidden rabbit.

'There's something there that's stopping them,' said Peter.

'A wall,' Mary guessed. 'An invisible wall of some sort, but one they can't get through.'

'Or shoot through, either. They tried to break through with gunfire and they didn't even dent it.'

He crouched there, watching as the tank nosed along the road. It reached the point where the road to the left came down to intersect the cross-road. The tank sheered off to follow the left-hand one, bumping along with its forward armour shoved against the unseen wall.

Boxed in, thought Peter - those roads have broken up and boxed in all the military units. A tank in one pen and a dozen tanks in another, a battery of artillery in another, the motor pool in yet another. Boxed in and trapped; penned up and useless.

And we, he wondered - are we boxed in as well?

A group of soldiers came tramping down the right-hand road. Peter spotted them from far off, black dots moving down the road, heading east, away from the building. When they came closer, he saw that they carried no guns and slogged along with the slightest semblance of formation and he could see from the way they walked that they were dog-tired.

He had not been aware that Mary had left his side until she came creeping back again, ducking her head to keep her hair from being caught in the low-hanging branches.

She sat down beside him and handed him a thick slice of bread and a chunk of bologna. She set the bottle of water down between them.

'It was the building,' she said, 'that built the roads.'

Peter nodded, his mouth full of bread and meat.

'They want to make it easy to get to the building,' Mary said. 'The building wants to make it easy for people to come and visit it.'

'The bells again?' he asked.

She smiled and said, 'The bells.'

The soldiers now had come close enough to see the tank. They stopped and stood in the road, looking at it.

Then four of them turned off the road and walked out into the field, heading for the tank. The others sat down and waited.

'The wall only works one way,' said Mary.

'More likely,' Peter told her, 'it works for tanks, but doesn't work for people.'

'The building doesn't want to keep the people out.'

The soldiers crossed the field and the tank came out to meet them. It stopped and the crew crawled out of it and climbed down. The soldiers and the crew stood talking and one of the soldiers kept swinging his arms in gestures, pointing here and there.

From far away came the sound of heavy guns again.

'Some of them,' said Peter, 'still are trying to blast down the walls.'

Finally the soldiers and the tank crew walked back to the road, leaving the tank deserted in the field.

And that must be the way it was with the entire military force which had hemmed in the building. Peter told himself. The roads and walls had cut it into bits, had screened it off - and now the tanks and the big guns and the planes were just so many ineffective toys of an infant race, lying scattered

in a thousand playpens.

Out on the road, the foot soldiers and the tank crew slogged eastward, retreating from the siege which had failed so ingloriously.

In their thicket, Mary amid Peter sat and watched the building.

'You said they came from the stars,' said Mary. 'But why did they come here? Why did they bother with us? Why did they come at all?'

'To save us,' Peter offered slowly. 'To save us from ourselves. Or to exploit and enslave us. Or to use our planet as a military base. For any one of a hundred reasons. Maybe for a reason we couldn't understand even if they told us.'

'You don't believe those other reasons, the ones about enslaving us or using Earth as a military base. If you believed that, we wouldn't be going to the building.'

'No, I don't believe them. I don't because I had cancer and I haven't any longer. I don't because the polio began clearing up on the same day that they arrived. They're doing good for us, exactly the same as the missionaries did good among the primitive, disease-ridden people to whom they were assigned. I hope -'

He sat and stared across the field, at the trapped and deserted tank, at the shining ladder of the roads.

'I hope,' he said, 'they don't do what some of the missionaries did. I hope they don't destroy our self-respect with alien Mother Hubbards. I hope they don't save us from ringworm and condemn us to a feeling of racial inferiority. I hope they don't chop down the coconuts and hand us -'

But they know about us, he told himself. They know all there is to know. They've studied us for - how long? Squatting in a drugstore corner, masquerading as a cigarette machine. Watching us from the counter in the guise of a stamp machine.

And they wrote letters - letters to every head of state in all the world. Letters that might, when finally deciphered, explain what they were about. Or that might make certain demands. Or that might, just possibly, be no more than applications for permits to build a mission or a church or a hospital or a school.

They know us, he thought. They know, for example, that we're suckers for anything that's free, so they handed out free gifts - just like the quiz shows and contests run by radio and television and chambers of commerce, except that there was no competition and everybody won.

Throughout the afternoon, Peter and Mary watched the road and during that time small groups of soldiers had come limping down it. But now, for an hour or more, there had been no one on the road.

They started out just before dark, walking across the field, passing through the wall-that-wasn't-there to reach the road. And they headed west along the road, going towards the purple cloud of the building that reared against the redness of the sunset.

They travelled through the night and they did not have to dodge and hide, as they had that first night, for there was no one on the road except the one

lone soldier they met.

By the time they saw him, they had come far enough so that the great shaft of the building loomed halfway up the sky, a smudge of misty brightness in the bright starlight.

The soldier was sitting in the middle of the road and he'd taken off his shoes and set them neatly beside him.

'My feet are killing me,' he said by way of greeting.

So they sat down with him to keep him company and Peter took out the water-bottle and the loaf of bread and the cheese and bologna and spread them on the pavement with wrapping paper as a picnic cloth.

They ate in silence for a while and finally the soldier said, 'Well, this is the end of it.'

They did not ask the question, but waited patiently, eating bread and cheese.

'This is the end of soldiering,' the soldier told them. 'This is the end of war.'

He gestured out towards the pens fashioned by the roads and in one nearby pen were three self-propelled artillery pieces and in another was an ammunition dump and another pen held military vehicles.

'How are you going to fight a war,' the soldier asked, 'if the things back there can chop up your armies into checkerboards? A tank ain't worth a damn guarding ten acres, not when it isn't able to get out of those ten acres. A big gun ain't any good to you if you can't fire but half a mile.'

'You think they would?' asked Mary. 'Anywhere, I mean?'

'They done it here. Why not somewhere else? Why not any place that they wanted to? They stopped us. They stopped us cold and they never shed a single drop of blood. Not a casualty among us.'

He swallowed the bit of bread and cheese that was in his mouth and reached for the water-bottle. He drank, his Adam's apple bobbing up amid down.

'I'm coming back,' he said. 'I'm going out and get my girl and we both are coming back. The things in that building maybe need some help and I'm going to help them if there's a way of doing it. And if they don't need no help, why, then I'm going to figure out some way to let them know I'm thankful that they came.'

'Things? You saw some things?'

The soldier stared at Peter. 'No, I never saw anything at all.'

'But this business of going out to get your girl and both of you coming back? How did you get that idea? Why not go back right now with us?'

'It wouldn't be right,' the soldier protested. 'Or it doesn't seem just right. I got to see her first and tell her how I feel. Besides, I got a present for her.'

'She'll be glad to see you,' Mary told him softly. 'She'll like the

present.'

'She sure will.' The soldier grinned proudly. 'It was something that she wanted.'

He reached in his pocket and took out a leather box. Fumbling with the catch, he snapped it open. The starlight blazed softly on the necklace that lay inside the box.

Mary reached out her hand. 'May I?' she asked.

'Sure,' the soldier said. 'I want you to take a look at it. You'd know if a girl would like it.'

Mary lifted it from the box and held it in her hand, a stream of starlit fire.

'Diamonds?' asked Peter.

'I don't know,' the soldier said. 'Might be. It looks real expensive. There's a pendant, sort of, at the bottom of it, of green stone that doesn't sparkle much, but -'

'Peter,' Mary interrupted, 'have you got a match?'

The soldier dipped his hand into a pocket. 'I got a lighter, Miss. That thing gave me a lighter. A beauty.'

He snapped it open and the blaze flamed out. Mary held the pendant close.

'It's the symbol,' she said. 'Just like on my bottle of perfume.'

'That carving?' asked the soldier, pointing. 'It's on the lighter, too.'

'Something gave you this?' Peter urgently wanted to know.

'A box. Except that it really was more than a box. I reached down to put my hand on it and it coughed up a lighter and when it did, I thought of Louise and the lighter she had given me. I'd lost it and I felt bad about it, and here was one just like it except for the carving on the side. And when I thought of Louise, the box made a funny noise and out popped the box with the necklace in it.'

The soldier leaned forward, his young face solemn in the glow from the lighter's flame.

'You know what I think?' he said. 'I think that box was one of them. There are stories, but you can't believe everything you hear...'

He looked from one to the other of them. 'You don't laugh at me,' he remarked wonderingly.

Peter shook his head. 'That's about the last thing we'd do, Soldier.'

Mary handed back the necklace and the lighter. The soldier put them in his pocket and began putting on his shoes.

'I got to get on,' he said. 'Thanks for the chow.'

'We'll be seeing you,' said Peter.

'I hope so.'

'I know we will,' Mary stated positively.

They watched him trudge away, then walked on in the other direction.

Mary said to Peter, 'The symbol is the mark of them. The ones who get the symbol are the ones who will go back. It's a passport, a seal of approval.'

'Or,' Peter amended, 'the brand of ownership.'

'They'd be looking for certain kinds of people. They wouldn't want anybody who was afraid of them. They'd want people who had some faith in them.'

'What do they want us for?' Peter fretted. 'That's what bothers me. What use can we be to them? The soldier wants to help them, but they don't need help from us. They don't need help from anyone.'

'We've never seen one of them,' said Mary. 'Unless the box was one of them.'

And the cigarette machines, thought Peter. The cigarette machines and God knows what else.

'And yet,' said Mary, 'they know about us. They've watched us and studied us. They know us inside out. They can reach deep within us and know what each of us might want and then give it to us. A rod and reel for Johnny and a piece of jade for you. And the rod and reel were a human rod and reel and the jade was Earth jade. They even know about the soldier's girl. They knew she would like a shiny necklace and they knew she was the kind of person that they wanted to come back again and...'

'The Saucers,' Peter said. 'I wonder if it was the Saucers, after all, watching us for years, learning all about us.'

How many years would it take, he wondered, from a standing start, to learn all there was to know about the human race? For it would be from a standing start; to them, all of humanity would have been a complex alien race and they would have had to feel their way along, learning one fact here and another there. And they would make mistakes; at times their deductions would be wrong, and that would set them back.

'I don't know,' said Peter. 'I can't figure it out at all.'

They walked down the shiny metal road that glimmered in the starlight, with the building growing from a misty phantom to a gigantic wall that rose against the sky to blot out the stars. A thousand stories high and covering more than a hundred acres, it was a structure that craned your head and set your neck to aching and made your brain spin with its glory and its majesty.

And even when you drew near it, you could not see the dropped and cradled bomb, resting in the emptiness above it, for the bomb was too far away for seeing.

But you could see the little cubicles sliced off by the roads and, within the cubicles, the destructive toys of a violent race, deserted now, just idle hunks of fashioned metal.

They came at last, just before dawn, to the great stairs that ran up to

the central door. As they moved across the flat stone approach to the stairs, they felt the hush and the deepness of the peace that lay in the building's shadow.

Hand in hand, they went up the stairs and came to the great bronze door and there they stopped. Turning around, they looked back in silence.

The roads spun out like wheel spokes from the building's hub as far as they could see, and the crossing roads ran in concentric circles so that it seemed they stood in the centre of a spider's web.

Deserted farmhouses, with their groups of buildings - barns, granaries, garages, silos, hog pens, machine sheds - stood in the sectors marked off by the roads, and in other sectors lay the machines of war, fit now for little more than birds' nests or a hiding-place for rabbits. Birdsongs came trilling up from the pastures and the fields and you could smell the freshness and the coolness of the countryside.

'It's good,' said Mary. 'It's our country, Peter.'

'It was our country,' Peter corrected her. 'Nothing will ever be quite the same again.'

'You aren't afraid, Peter?'

'Not a bit. Just baffled.'

'But you seemed so sure before.'

'I still am sure,' he said. 'Emotionally, I am as sure as ever that everything's all right.'

'Of course everything's all right. There was a polio epidemic and now it has died out. An army has been routed without a single death. An atomic bomb was caught and halted before it could go off. Can't you see, Peter, they're already making this a better world. Cancer and polio gone - two things that Man had fought for years and was far from conquering. War stopped, disease stopped, atomic bombs stopped - things we couldn't solve for ourselves that were solved for us.'

'I know all that,' said Peter. 'They'll undoubtedly also put an end to crime and graft and violence and everything else that has been tormenting and degrading mankind since it climbed down out of the trees.'

'What more do you want?'

'Nothing more, I guess - it's just that it's circumstantial. It's not real evidence. All that we know, or think we know, we've learned from inference. We have no proof - no actual, solid proof.'

'We have faith. We must have faith. If you can't believe in someone or something that wipes out disease and war, what can you believe in?'

'That's what bothers me.'

'The world is built on faith,' said Mary. 'Faith in God and in ourselves and in the decency of mankind.'

'You're wonderful,' exclaimed Peter.

He caught her tight and kissed her and she clung against him and when finally they let each other go, the great bronze door was opening.

Silently, they walked across the threshold with arms around each other, into a foyer that arched high overhead. There were murals on the high arched ceiling, and others panelled in the walls, and four great flights of stairs led upward.

But the stairways were roped off by heavy velvet cords. Another cord, hooked into gleaming standards, and signs with pointing arrows showed them which way to go.

Obediently, walking in the hush that came close to reverence, they went across the foyer to the single open door.

They stepped into a large room, with great, tall, slender windows that let in the morning sunlight, and it fell across the satin newness of the blackboards, the big-armed class chairs, the heavy reading tables, case after case of books, and the lectern on the lecture platform.

They stood and looked at it and Mary said to Peter: 'I was right. They were school bells, after all. We've come to school, Peter. The first day we ever went to school.'

'Kindergarten,' Peter said, and his voice choked as he pronounced the word.

It was just right, he thought, so humanly right: the sunlight and the shadow, the rich bindings of the books, the dark patina of the wood, the heavy silence over everything. It was an Earthly classroom in the most scholarly tradition. It was Cambridge and Oxford and the Sorbonne and an Eastern ivy college all rolled into one.

The aliens hadn't missed a bet - not a single bet.

'I have to go,' said Mary. 'You wait right here for me.'

'I'll wait right here,' he promised.

He watched her cross the room and open a door. Through it, he saw a corridor that went on for what seemed miles and miles. Then she shut the door and he was alone.

He stood there for a moment, then swung swiftly around. Almost running across the foyer, he reached the great bronze door. But there was no door, or none that he could see. There was not even a crack where a door should be. He went over the wall inch by inch and he found no door.

He turned away from the wall and stood in the foyer, naked of soul, and felt the vast emptiness of the building thunder in his brain.

Up there, he thought, up there for a thousand stories, the building stretched into the sky. And down here was kindergarten and up on the second floor, no doubt, first grade, and you'd go up and up and what would be the end - and the purpose of that end?

When did you graduate?

Or did you ever graduate?

And when you graduated, what would you be?

What would you be? he asked.

Would you be human still?

They would be coming to school for days, the ones who had been picked, the ones who had passed the strange entrance examination that was necessary to attend this school. They'd come down the metal roads and climb the steps and the great bronze door would open and they would enter. And others would come, too, out of curiosity, but if they did not have the symbol, the doors would not open for them.

And those who did come in, when and if they felt the urge to flee, would find there were no doors.

He went back into the classroom and stood where he had stood before.

Those books, he wondered. What was in them? In just a little while, he'd have the courage to pick one out and see. And the lectern? What would stand behind the lectern?

What, not who.

The door opened and Mary came across the room to him.

'There are apartments out there,' she said. 'The cutest apartments you have ever seen. And one of them has our names on it and there are others that have other names and some that have no names at all. There are other people coming, Peter. We were just a little early. We were the ones who started first. We got here before the school bell rang.'

Peter nodded. 'Let's sit down and wait,' he said.

Side by side, they sat down, waiting for the Teacher.