The Best of Kuttner Volume I
Henry Kuttner
A Mayflower Paperback

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THE BEST OF KUTTNER 1
Henry Kuttner

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OR ELSE

Miguel and Fernandez were shooting inaccurately at each other across the valley when the flying saucer landed. They wasted a few bullets on the strange airship. The pilot appeared and began to walk across the valley and up the slope toward Miguel,

who lay in the un-certain shade of a cholla, swearing and working the bolt of his rifle as rapidly as he could. His aim, never good, grew worse as the stranger approached. Finally, at the last minute, Miguel dropped his rifle, seized the machete beside him, and sprang to his feet.

"Die then," he said, and swung the blade. The steel blazed in the hot Mexican sun. The machete rebounded elastically from the stranger's neck and flew high in the air, while Miguel's arm tingled as though from an electric shock. A bullet came from across the valley, making the kind of sound a wasp's sting might make if you heard it instead of feel-ing it. Miguel dropped and rolled into the shelter of a large rock. An-other bullet shrieked thinly, and a brief blue flash sparkled on the stranger's left shoulder.

"Estoy perdido," Miguel said, giving himself up for lost. Flat on his stomach, he lifted his head and snarled at his enemy.

The stranger, however, made no inimical moves. Moreover, he seemed to be unarmed. Miguel's sharp eyes searched him. The man was un-usually dressed. He wore a cap made of short, shiny blue feathers. Under it his face was hard, ascetic and intolerant. He was very thin, and nearly seven feet tall. But he did seem to be unarmed. That gave Miguel courage. He wondered where his machete had fallen. He did not see it, but his rifle was only a few feet away.

The stranger came and stood above Miguel.

"Stand up," he said. "Let us talk."

He spoke excellent Spanish, except that his voice seemed to be com-ing from inside Miguel's head.

"I will not stand up," Miguel said. "If I stand up, Fernandez will shoot me. He is a very bad shot, but I would be a fool to take such a chance. Besides, this is very unfair. How much is Fernandez paying you?"

The stranger looked austerely at Miguel.

"Do you know where I came from?" he asked.

"I don't care a centavo where you came from," Miguel said, wiping sweat from his forehead. He glanced toward a nearby rock where he had cached a goatskin of wine. "From *los estados unidos,* no doubt, you and your machine of flight. The Mexican government will hear of this."

"Does the Mexican government approve of murder?"

"This is a private matter," Miguel said. "A matter of water rights, which are very important. Besides, it is self-defense. That *cabrón* across the valley is trying to kill me. And you are his hired assassin. God will punish you both." A new thought came to him. "How much will you take to kill Fernandez?" he inquired. "I will give you three pesos and a fine kid."

"There will be no more fighting at all," the stranger said. "Do you hear that?"

"Then go and tell Fernandez," Miguel said. "Inform him that the wa-ter rights are mine. I will gladly allow him to go in peace." His neck ached from staring up at the tall man. He moved a little, and a bullet shrieked through the still, hot air and dug with a vicious splash into a nearby cactus.

The stranger smoothed the blue feathers on his head.

"First I will finish talking with you. Listen to me, Miguel."

"How do you know my name?" Miguel demanded, rolling over and sitting up

cautiously behind the rock. “It is as I thought. Fernandez has hired you to assassinate me.”

“I know your name because I can read your mind a little. Not much, because it is so cloudy.”

“Your mother was a dog,” Miguel said.

The stranger’s nostrils pinched together slightly, but he ignored the remark. “I come from another world,” he said. “My name is—” In Mi-guel’s mind it sounded like Quetzalcoatl.

“Quetzalcoat.l?” Miguel repeated, with fine irony. “Oh, I have no doubt of that. And mine is Saint Peter, who has the keys to heaven.”

Quetzalcoatl’s thin, pale face flushed slightly, but his voice was de-terminedly calm. “Listen, Miguel. Look at my lips. They are not moving. I am speaking inside your head, by telepathy, and you translate my thoughts into words that have meaning to you. Evidently my name is too difficult for you. Your own mind has translated it as Quetzalcoatl. That is not my real name at all.”

“De *veras,”* Miguel said. “It is not your name at all, and you do not come from another world. I would not believe a *norteamericano* if he swore on the bones often thousand highly placed saints.”

Quetzalcoatl’s long, austere face flushed again.

“I am here to give orders,” he said. “Not to bandy words with— Look

here, Miguel. Why do you suppose you couldn’t kill me with your machete? Why can’t bullets touch me?”

“Why does your machine of flight fly?” Miguel riposted. He took out a sack of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette. He squinted around the rock. “Fernandez is probably trying to creep up on me. I had better get my rifle.”

“Leave it alone,” Quetzalcoatl said. “Fernandez will not harm you.”

Miguel laughed harshly.

“And you must not harm him,” Quetzalcoatl added firmly.

“I will, then, turn the other cheek,” Miguel said, “so that he can shoot me through the side of my head. I will believe Fernandez wishes peace, *Señor* Quetzalcoatl, when I see him walking across the valley with his hands over his head. Even then I will not let him come close, because of the knife he wears down his back.”

Quetzalcoatl smoothed his blue steel feathers again. His bony face was frowning.

“YOU must stop fighting forever, both of you,” he said. “My race po-lices the universe and our responsibility is to bring peace to every planet we visit.”

“It is as I thought,” Miguel said with satisfaction. “You come from *los estados unidos.* Why do you not bring peace to your own country? I have seen *los señores* Humphrey Bogart and Edward Robinson in *las peliculas.* Why, all over Nueva York gangsters shoot at each other from one skyscraper to another. And what do you do about it? You dance all over the place with *la señora* Betty Grable. Ah yes, I understand very well. First you will bring peace, and then you will take our oil and our precious minerals.”

Quetzalcoatl kicked angrily at a pebble beside his shiny steel toe.

“I must make you understand,” he said. He looked at the unlighted cigarette dangling from Miguel’s lips. Suddenly he raised his hand, and a white-hot ray shot from a ring on his finger and kindled the end of the cigarette. Miguel jerked away,

startled. Then he inhaled the smoke and nodded. The white-hot ray disappeared.

"Muchas gracias, señor," Miguel said.

Quetzalcoatl's colorless lips pressed together thinly. "Miguel," he said, "could a *norteconericano* do that?"

"Quie'n sabe?"

"No one living on your planet could do that, and you know it."

Miguel shrugged.

"Do you see that cactus over there?" Quetzalcoatl demanded. "I could destroy it in two seconds."

"I have no doubt of it, *señor."*

"I could, for that matter, destroy this whole planet."

"Yes, I have heard of the atomic bombs," Miguel said politely. "Why, then, do you trouble to interfere with a quiet private little argument between Fernandez and me, over a small water hole of no importance to anybody but—"

A bullet sang past.

Quetzalcoatl rubbed the ring on his finger with an angry gesture.

"Because the world is going to stop fighting," he said ominously. "If it doesn't we will destroy it. There is no reason at all why men should not live together in peace and brotherhood."

"There is one reason, *señor."*

"W7hat is that?"

"Fernandez," Miguel said.

"I will destroy you both if you do not stop fighting."

"El *señor* is a great peacemaker," Miguel said courteously. "I will gladly stop fighting if you will tell me how to avoid being killed when I do."

"Fernandez will stop fighting too."

Miguel removed his somewhat battered sombrero, reached for a stick, and carefully raised the hat above the rock. There was a nasty crack. The hat jumped away, and Miguel caught it as it fell.

"Very well," he said. "Since you insist, *señor,* I will stop fighting. But I will not come out from behind this rock. I am perfectly willing to stop fighting. But it seems to me that you demand I do something which you do not tell me how to do. You could as well require that I fly through the air like your machine of flight."

Quetzalcoatl frowned more deeply. Finally he said, "Miguel, tell me how this fight started."

"Fernandez wishes to kill me and enslave my family."

"Why should he want to do that?"

"Because he is evil," Miguel said.

"How do you know he is evil?"

"Because," Miguel pointed out logically, "he wishes to kill me and enslave my family."

There was a pause. A road runner darted past and paused to peck at the gleaming barrel of Miguel's rifle. Miguel sighed.

"There is a skin of good wine not twenty feet away—" he began, but Quetzalcoatl interrupted him.

"V/hat was it you said about the water rights?"

"Oh, that," Miguel said. "This is a poor country, *señor.* Water is pre-cious here. We have had a dry year and there is no longer water enough

for two families. The water hole is mine. Fernandez wishes to kill me and enslave—"

"Are there no courts of law in your country?"

"For such as us?" Miguel demanded, and smiled politely.

"Has Fernandez a family too?" Quetzalcoatl asked.

"Yes, the poors," Miguel said. "He beats them when they do not work until they drop."

"Do you beat your family?"

"Only when they need it," Miguel said, surprised. "My wife is very fat and lazy. And my oldest, Chico, talks back. It is my duty to beat them when they need it, for their own good. It is also my duty to protect our water rights, since the evil Fernandez is determined to kill me and—"

Quetzalcoatl said impatiently, "This is a waste of time. Let me con-sider." He rubbed the ring on his finger again. He looked around. The road runner had found a more appetizing morsel than the rifle. He was now to be seen trotting away with the writhing tail of a lizard dangling from his beak.

Overhead the sun was hot in a clear blue sky. The dry air smelled of mesquite. Below, in the valley, the flying saucer's perfection of shape and texture looked incongruous and unreal.

"Wait here," Quetzalcoatl said at last. "I will talk to Fernandez. When I call, come to my machine of ffight. Fernandez and I will meet you there presently."

"As you say, *señor,"* Miguel agreed. His eyes strayed.

"And do not touch your rifle," Quetzalcoatl added with great firmness. "Why, no, *señor,"* Miguel said. He waited until the tall man had gone. Then he crawled cautiously across the dry ground until he had recaptured his rifle. After that, with a little searching, he found his machete. Only then did he turn to the skin of wine. He was very thirsty indeed. But he did not drink heavily. He put a full clip in the rifle, leaned against a rock, and sipped a little from time to time from the wineskin as he waited.

In the meantime the stranger, ignoring fresh bullets that occasionally splashed blue from his steely person, approached Fernandez' hiding place. The sound of shots stopped. A long time passed, and finally the tall form reappeared and waved to Miguel.

"Yo voy, señor," Miguel shouted agreeably. He put his rifle conven-iently on the rock and rose very cautiously, ready to duck at the first hostile move. There was no such move.

Fernandez appeared beside the stranger. Immediately Miguel bent down, seized his rifle and lifted it for a snap shot.

Something thin and hissing burned across the valley. The rifle turned

red-hot in Miguel's grasp. He squealed and dropped it, and the next moment his mind went perfectly blank.

"I die with honor," he thought, and then thought no more.

When he woke, he was standing under the shadow of the great flying saucer. Quetzalcoatl was lowering his hand from before Miguel's face. Sunlight sparkled on

the tall man's ring. Miguel shook his head dizzily.

"I live?" he inquired.

But Quetzalcoatl paid no attention. He had turned to Fernandez, who was standing beside him, and was making gestures before Fernandez' masklike face. A light flashed from Quetzalcoatl's ring into Fernandez' glassy eyes. Fernandez shook his head and muttered thickly. Miguel looked for his rifle or machete, but they were gone. He slipped his hand into his shirt, but his good little knife had vanished too.

He met Fernandez' eyes.

"We are both doomed, Don Fernandez," he said. "This *señor* Quetzal-coati will kill us both. In a way I am sorry that you will go to hell and I to heaven, for we shall not meet again."

"You are mistaken," Fernandez replied, vainly searching for his own knife. "You will never see heaven. Nor is this tall *norteamericano* named Quetzalcoatl. For his own lying purposes he has assumed the name of Cortés."

"You will tell lies to the devil himself," Miguel said.

"Be quiet, both of you," Quetzalcoatl (or Cortés) said sharply. "You have seen a little of my power. Now listen to me. My race has assumed the high duty of seeing that the entire solar system lives in peace. We are a very advanced race, with power such as you do not yet dream of. We have solved problems which your people have no answer for, and it is now our duty to apply our power for the good of all. If you wish to keep on living, you will stop fighting immediately and forever, and from now on live in peace and brotherhood. Do you understand me?"

"That is all I have ever wished," Fernandez said, shocked. "But this offspring of a goat wishes to kill me."

"There will be no more killing," Quetzalcoatl said. "You will live in brotherhood, or you will die."

Miguel and Fernandez looked at each other and then at Quetzal-coatl.

"The *señor* is a great peacemaker," Miguel murmured. "I have said it before. The way you mention is surely the best way of all to insure peace. But to us it is not so simple. To live in peace is good. Very well, *señor.* Tell us how."

"Simply stop fighting," Quetzalcoatl said impatiently.

"Now that is easy to say," Fernandez pointed out. "But life here in Sonora is not a simple business. Perhaps it is where you come from—"

"Naturally," Miguel put in. "In *los estados unidos* everyone is rich."

"—but it is not simple with us. Perhaps in your country, *señor,* the snake does not eat the rat, and the bird eat the snake. Perhaps in your country there is food and water for all, and a man need not fight to keep his family alive. Here it is not so simple."

Miguel nodded. "We shall certainly all be brothers some day," he agreed. 'We try to do as the good God commands us. It is not easy, but little by little we learn to be better. It would be very fine if we could all become brothers at a word of magic, such as you command us. Unfor-tunately—" he shrugged.

"You must not use force to solve your problems," Quetzalcoatl said with great firmness. "Force is evil. *You will make peace now."*

"Or else you will destroy us," Miguel said. He shrugged again and met Fernandez' eyes. "Very well, *señor.* You have an argument I do not care to resist. *Al fin,* I agree.

What must we do?”

Quetzalcoatl turned to Fernandez.

“I too, *señor,”* the latter said, with a sigh. “You are, no doubt, right. Let us have peace.”

“You will take hands,” Quetzalcoatl said, his eyes gleaming. “You will swear brotherhood.”

Miguel held out his hand. Fernandez took it firmly and the two men grinned at each other.

“You see?” Quetzalcoatl said, giving them his austere smile. “It is not hard at all. Now you are friends. Stay friends.”

He turned away and walked toward the flying saucer. A door opened smoothly in the sleek hull. On the threshold Quetzalcoatl turned.

“Remember,” he said. “I shall be watching.”

“Without a doubt,” Fernandez said. *“Adios, señor.”*

“Vaya con Dios,” Miguel added.

The smooth surface of the hull closed after Quetzalcoatl. A moment later the flying saucer lifted smoothly and rose until it was a hundred feet above the ground. Then it shot off to the north like a sudden flash of lightning and was gone.

“As I thought,” Miguel said. “He was from *los estados unidos.”*

Fernandez shrugged.

“There was a moment when I thought he might tell us something sensible,” he said. “No doubt he had great wisdom. Truly, life is not easy.”

“Oh, it is easy enough for him,” Miguel said. “But he does not live

in Sonora. We, however, do. Fortunately, I and my family have a good water hole to rely on. For those without one, life is indeed hard.”

“It is a very poor water hole,” Fernandez said. “Such as it is, however, it is mine.” He was rolling a cigarette as he spoke. He handed it to Mi-guel and rolled another for himself. The two men smoked for a while in silence. Then, still silent, they parted.

Miguel went back to the wineskin on the hill. He took a long drink, grunted with pleasure, and looked around him. His knife, machete and rifle were carelessly flung down not far away. He recovered them and made sure he had a full clip.

Then he peered cautiously around the rock barricade. A bullet splashed on the stone near his face. He returned the shot.

After that, there was silence for a while. Miguel sat back and took another drink. His eye was caught by a road runner scuttling past, with the tail of a lizard dangling from his beak. It was probably the same road runner as before, and perhaps the same lizard, slowly progressing to-ward digestion.

Miguel called softly, *“Señor* Bird! It is wrong to eat lizards. It is very wrong.”

The road runner cocked a beady eye at him and ran on.

Miguel raised and aimed his rifle.

“Stop eating lizards, *Señor* Bird. Stop, or I must kill you.”

The road runner ran on across the rifle sights.

“Don’t you understand how to stop?” Miguel called gently. “Must I explain how?”

The road runner paused. The tail of the lizard disappeared com-pletely.

“Oh, very well,” Miguel said. “When I find out how a road runner can stop eating

lizards and still live, then I will tell you, *amigo*. But un-til then, go with God."

He turned and aimed the rifle across the valley again.

YEAR DAY

irene came back on Year Day. It's a lost day for those of us who were born before 1980. The calendar day that comes between the end of the old year and the start of the new, the day when the lid's off. New York was noisy. Beamed commercials followed me right along, even when I swung over onto the fast roadway. I'd forgotten my earplugs, too.

Irene's voice spoke to me out of the little round grid above the windshield. It was funny how clearly I could hear it, even above all the noise.

'Bill,' the voice said. 'Where are you, Bill?'

It had been six years since I heard the voice. For a minute everything else blanked out and it was as if I were driving along in silence, hearing nothing but Irene. Then I all but sidesjviped a police car and the noise, the commercials, the tumult were normal again.

'Let me in, Bill,' Irene's voice said out of the little grid. For a second I almost thought I could. Her voice sounded so small and clear I thought I could reach up my hand and open the grid and take her down, tiny and perfect in my palm, standing there with her high heels denting my hand like little needles. Year Day gives me ideas like that. Anything goes.

I pulled myself together. 'Hello, Irene.' My voice was perfectly calm. 'I'm on my way home. Be there in fifteen minutes. The super will let you in.'

'I'll wait Bill,' the small voice told me.

Then I heard the faraway click of the mike on my apartment door, and I was alone in the car again, feeling strange, feeling afraid, not sure if I wanted to see her, but automatically pulling into the high-speed lane so I could get home quicker.

New York is noisy all the time. On Year Day the pace doubles. Everybody off work, out for a good time, in a spending mood if they ever are. The commercials went crazy. The air bounced and shivered with them. Once or twice the roadway passed through an area lined with special mikes and amplifiers to pick up sound and send out reactions enough out of phase to add up to silence. There were a couple of five-minute drifts like that, like driving in a dream after all the noise, but every minute on the minute a caressing voice told me, 'This silence is coming to you by courtesy of Paradise Homes. Freddi Lester speaking.'

I don't know if Freddi Lester exists. Maybe he's a filmstrip composite. Maybe he isn't. Certainly he's too perfect to be real.

A lot of men bleach their hair now and wear it in curls over the forehead, like Freddi. I've seen his face, projected ten feet high, sliding along the sides of buildings on the street in a circle of light, gliding and molding itself to every projection, and women reaching up to touch it as if it were real. 'Breakfast time with Freddi. Hypnolearn while you sleep—with Freddi's voice. Buy into Paradise Homes.' Yeah.

The roadway rushed out of a silent zone and the blare and roar of Manhattan hit me. BUY—BUY—BUY! over and over again, in a million different ways, with light and sound and rhythm.

She stood up when I came in. She didn't say anything. She was wearing her hat a new way, and her make-up was different, but I'd have known her anywhere, in a fog, in pitch dark, with my eyes shut. Then she smiled, and I saw that the six years had maybe changed her a little after all, and I hesitated for a second, feeling afraid again. I remembered how right after our divorce a TV call had come from a woman made up to look exactly like Irene. She wanted to sell me advertising insurance.

But today, on this day that doesn't really exist, it didn't matter. Only cash sales are legal on Year Day, anyhow. Of course there aren't any laws to protect a man against the thing I was afraid of, but that wouldn't mean much to Irene. It never had. I doubt if she ever quite grasped the principle that I am real. Not basically, essentially grasped it. Irene is a product of her world. And so, of course, am I.

'This is going to be a tough conversation to start,' I said.

'Does today count?' she asked.

'Maybe it does,' I said. I went over to the server. 'Drinlt?'

'Seven-Twelve-Jay,' she told me, and I dialed it. A pink drink came out. I dialed myself a Scotch and soda. • 'Where have you been?' I asked her. 'Happy?'

'I've been—somewhere. I think I've learned some things. Yes, very happy. Are you?'

I took a quick drink. 'Oh, sure. Happy as a lark. Happy as Freddi Lester.'

She smiled faintly and sipped the pink drink. 'You used to be jealous of Jerome Foret, when he had the Lester spot,' she said. 'You used to wear a Foret double part in your hair, remember?'

'I learn,' I said. 'You notice—no bleach? No curls? I'm not imitating anybody now. You used to be jealous too. I think you're wearing a Niobe Gai hair job.'

She shrugged. 'It was easier than an argument with the hairdresser. Maybe I thought you'd like it. Do you?'

'I like it on you. I try not to look at Niobe Gai. Or Freddi Lester.'

'Even their names are horrible, aren't they?' she said. I was surprised.

'You've changed,' I told her. 'Where *have* you been?'

She wouldn't look at me. All this time we had been standing about ten feet apart, each a little afraid of the other. She gazed out the window and said, 'Bill. For the last five years I've been living at Paradise Homes.'

I didn't move for a while. Finally I lifted my glass and drank. Only then did I look at her. Now I knew why she seemed different. I'd seen women before who'd lived at Paradise Homes,

'Evicted?' I asked.

But she shook her head.

'Five years was enough I got a full dose of what I thought I wanted. The—ultimate. I found out I'd been wrong, Bill. That wasn't it.'

'All I know about Paradise Homes,' I said, 'is the commercials. I didn't think it would work, though.'

'You always were ahead of me, Bill,' she said humbly. 'I know that too now. But it sounded good.'

'Nothing's that easy. The real problems can't be solved for us by hiring somebody else to do the work.'

'I know. Now. I suppose I've matured a little. But it's hard. There's so damned much conditioning so early nowadays.'

'How do you expect people to keep alive?' I asked her. 'Total demand's away down to whatever it is today, and production's probably dropped since yesterday. We've got to take in each other's washing to keep going. You need good strong advertising to make money. And, by God, you'd better have money! There just isn't enough to go around, that's all.'

'Do you—are you doing all right?' Irene asked hesitantly.

'Is that an offer or a request?'

'Oh, an offer,' she said. 'I've got enough.'

'Paradise Homes aren't cheap.'

'I bought stock in the Lunar Servile Corporation five years ago, so I'm fairly rich now.'

'That's nice. I'm all right too, thanks. Though I sank a lot in advertising protection insurance. The premiums run high, but it's worth it. I can walk through Times Square now without feeling worried even when the Joysmoke Feelies are running.'

'There isn't any advertising allowed in Paradise Homes,' she said.

'Don't believe it. Now there's a tight-beam sonic that can pierce walls and whisper hypnotism in your ear while you sleep. Even earplugs don't help. It works through bone conductivity.'

'If you live in Paradise Homes, you're protected.'

'You're not now,' I said, 'Why did you leave your nunnery?'

'Maybe I grew up."

'Maybe.'

'Bill,' she said. 'Bill—have you married?'

I didn't answer, because something tapped at the window,

and there was a little imitation bird fluttering around, trying to flatten itself against the glass. It had some kind of sucker-disk diaphragm on its breast. It must have been a beam transmitter, for suddenly a clear, brisk, unbirdlike voice said, —'so you *must* taste Greamies you *must*———' Then the window automatically polarized and kicked the advertibird into space.

'No,' I said. Tm not married, Irene.' I looked at her a moment. 'Come out on the balcony,' I said.

The door spun us both out, and the Safeties went on. They're expensive, but they're included in my insurance premiums.

Here it was quiet. The special mikes picked up the yells of the city screaming its commercials to the sky and neutralized them to dead silence. The ultrasonic shook the air enough so that the blazing advertising of New York ran together in a blurred, melting waterfall of meaningless colors.

'What's the matter, Irene?' I asked.

'This,' she said, and put her arms around my neck and kissed me.

After that she drew back and waited. I said again,

'What's the matter, Irene?'

'Nothing left, Bill?' she asked me softly. 'All gone?'

T don't know,' I said. 'My God, I don't know. I'm afraid to know.' Afraid was the word. I couldn't be sure. We grew up in a commercial world and how can we tell what's real, now? Suddenly I moved my hand over the switchplate and the Safeties shut themselves off.

Instantly the flowing colors knotted into shouting signals in nucolor, as bright by day as by night. EAT DRINK PLAY SLEEP they blazed, screaming in silence for an instant, until the sonic barrier went down and the shout was no longer silent. *EAT DRINK PLAY SLEEP! EAT DRINK PLAY SLEEP!*

BE BEAUTIFUL!

BE HEALTHY!

BE ADMIRED BE TOPDOG BE RICH—ADMIRED— FAMOUS!

JOYSMOKE! CREAMIES! MARSFOOD!

HURRYHURRYHURRYHURRYHURRY!

NIOBE GAI SAYS—FREDDI LESTER PRESENTS-PARADISE HOMES FOR HAPPY ADJUSTMENT!

EAT DRINK PLAY SLEEP EAT DRINK PLAY SLEEP BUY BUY BUY!

I didn't even realize Irene was screaming until I felt her shaking me and saw her white face swimming out from that pushing, driving, hypnotic whirl of colors, superadvertising planned by the best psychologists on earth, twisting everybody's arm to squeeze out of them their last cent because there wasn't enough dough to go around any more.

I turned the Safeties on again with one hand. With the other

I held on to Irene. We were both a little punch drunk. The advertising isn't really quite as overwhelming as all that. It just isn't safe to let it hit you suddenly when you're emotionally imbalanced. The commercials work on emotion. They find out your weak spots. They aim at your basic drives.

'It's all right,' I said. 'It's all right, as right as it ever will be. Look. The Safeties are on. The damned stuff can't get in. It's only when you're a kid that it's really bad. You don't know enough to protect yourself. You get conditioned. Stop crying, Irene. Come inside.'

I dialed us another drink. She kept on crying and I kept on talking.

'It's that damned conditioning,' I said. 'Drummed into your head as soon as you're old enough to know what words mean. Movies, TV, magazines, bookreels, every medium of communication there is. Aimed at just one thing—to make you buy. And doing it by trickery. Building up artificial needs and fears until you don't know what's real and what isn't. Nothing's real—not even your breathing. It stinks. Use Kinebreath Chlorophyll Dulces. Damn it, Irene, I know why things went wrong with us.'

'Why?' she asked, muffled through her handkerchief.

'You thought I was Freddi Lester. Maybe I thought you were Niobe Gai. Not real people, changing and reacting all the time. No wonder marriage doesn't work any more. Don't you think I've ever wished it had been different?'

I felt better. That much was out of my system. I waited until she stopped crying. She looked at me over the handkerchief.

'No Niobe Gai?' she said.

'To hell with Niobe Gai.'

'And you aren't going to ask me about Freddi Lester?'

'Why should I? He's nothing but an image, like Niobe Gai. Even in Paradise Homes, I suppose.'

She gave me a curious look over the handkerchief. Then she blew her nose, blinked and smiled at me. It took me a little while to realize why she was waiting.

'The last time,' I reminded her, 'I said some pretty romantic things. This time——'

'Yes?'

'Will you marry me, Irene?'

'Yes, Bill,' she said.

So at one minute after midnight of Year Day we were married. She wanted to wait until the new year really began. Year Day, she said, was too artificial. It wasn't really there. It wasn't real. I was glad to hear her say it. In the old days that was something she wouldn't have known.

Right after the ceremony we put up the Complete Barrier, because of the direct advertising that would be aimed right at us

the minute spot-checkers reported a marriage had taken place. Even so, the ceremony was interrupted twice by jamming Newlywed commercials.

So there we were, shut away safe and quiet in an apartment in New York. Outside, the unrealities blazed and shouted, outdoing each other in promises of fame and fortune for everybody. Everybody could be richer than everybody else. Everybody could be handsomer, smell sweeter, live longer than anyone else in the world. Nobody but us could be us, safe and silent and real in our oasis.

We made plans that night. They were pretty vague. With the little war going on all around the globe there wasn't any safe place to travel. The moon is a penal colony. Mars and Venus are kept iron-curtained by the government. Russia is painfully changing from a political-economic dictatorship to a semi-Buddhist religious society. Only in Africa, where the great weather control experiments are going on, is there any sort of peace, though slavery is still a boiling pot of trouble.

There is no arable land left, of course. We talked about buying the necessary equipment and creating good land, a self-sustaining part-hydroponic unit, just to get away from the urban centers and the commercials. I expect it was all pretty unrealistic.

The next morning, when I woke up, sunlight was slanting in long parallel bars across the bed and Irene wasn't there any more.

There was no message on the wiretape. I waited till afternoon. I kept switching off the Barrier, thinking she might be trying to reach me, and then switching it on again to stop the deluge of Newlywed commercials. I almost went crazy that morning. I couldn't figure out what had happened. I lost count of the times people came to the door wheedling me through the tumed-off' mike, but the one-way glass never showed me Irene's face and I walked up and down all morning, drank coffee that began to taste like glue after the tenth cup, and smoked myself into a state of nausea.

Finally I put an Investigatory Bureau on the job. I didn't like to do it. After our little oasis of silence and warmth and peace last night I hated to set the hounds on her, especially when I thought of her out there in the swirls and torrents of commercials and the clangor that is Manhattan.

An hour later the Investigatory Bureau told me where she was. I couldn't believe it.

Again, for a second, it seemed to me that everything went blind and soundless around me and I stood there in a little individual Complete Barrier of my own, widi life too noisy to endure on the other side.

I came out of it to hear the tail end of a sentence coming out of the screen.

'What's that?' I asked.

The man repeated. I said I didn't believe it. Then I begged his pardon, cut the switch, and dialed the number of my bank. The report had been perfectly true. My balance was now zero. Sometime during the morning while I paced in a frenzy my bride had drawn eighty-four thousand dollars out of my account. The dollar isn't worth much now, of course, but it was the savings of a long period and it was all I had.

'We checked on it, of course,' the bank official told me. 'But it was perfectly legal. She was your wife, since the marriage took place one minute after Year Day. The Year Day. amnesty on contractual matters didn't apply.'

'Why didn't you check with me?'

'It was perfectly legal,' he repeated firmly. 'Since the regular bounty for complete withdrawal was paid to us from the total amount, we had no choice.'

Of course. The bounty. I'd forgotten that. Naturally the bank hadn't wanted to check with me. And there wasn't a thing I could do.

'O.K.,' I said. 'Thanks.'

'If we can serve you in any way———' That slid into the bank's color commercial signature, so I clicked off. There was no use wasting a commercial on me.

I put in my earplugs and took the dropper to the third street level. There, the fast slideway shot me across town to the Paradise Homes offices. The homes themselves are mostly underground, but the offices are like a cathedral and the hush was so deep I took the earplugs out again. The lights were remote and blue, and the stained glass made me think of a mortuary.

I got to see one of the top agents before I had to explain my real intentions. I think he almost called the bouncer, but then he got a speculative look in his eye and decided to give me a salesman pitch first.

'Certainly,' he said. 'Glad to oblige you. Come this way. I'll have our Mr. Field assist you.'

He left me at the dropper door. I sank a few hundred feet and was decanted into a warm, luminous corridor, where a large, kindly, rosy-faced man in a dark suit was waiting for me. He had a very friendly voice.

'Paradise Homes is always happy to help,' he purred at me. 'We all know how difficult adjustment is in these troubled times. We create an optimum adaptation for happiness. Now you must let me try to help you, and you'll be surprised to find your problems can be solved more easily than you think.'

'I know they can,' I said. 'Where's my wife?'

'Come this way,' he said, and led me along the corridor. There were doors on each side, some of them with little metal seals too small to read from a distance. Finally we came to an open door. It was dark inside.

'In here,' Mr. Field said, and his large, warm hand gently urged me across the threshold. A soft light came on and I saw a sparsely furnished apartment, rather

shoddy, with a minimum of production-line furniture. It was colorless and without character, like a clean but second-rate hotel. I was surprised.

'The bathroom,' Mr. Field said, opening a door.

'That's fine,' I said, not looking. 'Now about my wife———'

'You will notice,' Mr. Field went on calmly, 'that there is a wall bed. This button——' He demonstrated. 'And this button retracts it. The plastic sheets last forever. Once daily a cleansing fluid circulates through the valves in which all Paradise beds nest, and by nightfall you have, in effect, a freshly made, clean bed. You will find this an attraction.'

'I'm sure I will.'

'You will not be disturbed by maid service,' Mr. Field went on. 'Magnetic lines of force make the bed. The electromagnets——'

'Never mind,' I said, as he reached for the button. 'You're wasting your time. Are you going to take me to my wife?'

'We protect our clients,' he said, raising his eyebrows. 'First I must explain to you exactly how Paradise Homes operates. If you'll be patient I feel quite certain you'll understand why this is advisable.'

I thought that over. The little room depressed me. I felt dazed and still incredulous. It was hard to believe that this dreary cubicle was Paradise Homes, but then nothing seemed very real to me that day. I had probably dreamed the whole thing. I thought tritely, from the first moment Irene's voice came to me, clear and small, out of the car's grid, asking to be let in.

She had seemed so—well, so changed, so contrite, so mature, so different from the irresponsible Irene I'd parted from six years earlier. I'd thought this time things would be different, that Year Day would work a kind of magic and give us a second chance, that lost day out of the calendar when the impossible might happen. I still couldn't quite believe——

'And here,' Mr. Field said, pulling a mouthpiece on a tube out of the wall, 'are the facilities for smoking. You may have any brand you wish. We are even prepared to supply you with— ah—imported inhalants, if you care for them. These smokers are set in each wall at five-foot intervals, including the bathroom. While everything in this room is fireproof,' he smiled kindly, 'the occupant may not be. No one can possibly be injured in a Paradise Home.'

'What if he fell out of bed?'

'The floor is resilient.'

'Like a padded cell,' I said. Mr. Field smiled again, shaking his head.

'That kind of thought won't occur to you once you've joined

our happy group of tenants,' he assured me. 'Paradise Homes ensure happiness. Now.' He waved a plump hand at the walL 'This slot is the food tube. Whatever meals you order arrive here by pneumotube. Or liquid food may be preferred.' He indicated a row of nipples on tubes.

'Very fine,' I said. 'Is that all?'

'Not quite.' He ran his hand along the wall. A faint flicker trembled in the air. I heard a faraway, musical humming. 'If you will sit here for a moment, now——' He pushed me gently into a chair. I let him do it. The ugly little room shimmered before me. I was curious. I waited.

Couldn't anyone tell the difference, I wondered, gazing at the drab carpet and the drab wall unsteady through the shimmer. Because Paradise Homes put out such publicity did people really think this ugliness was luxury? It wouldn't surprise me.

'Now just sit back and relax,' Mr. Field urged kindly. 'Remember, Paradise Homes sponsors Niobe Gai as well as Freddi Lester. We serve both men and women. And we have the answer to all the complex personality problems of this complex age. Consider how difficult it is for a man to adjust to society. Or a man to adjust to a woman. It's really quite impossible, you know, any more. But in Paradise Homes we have the answer. We provide happiness. All human drives and appetites are satisfied. Here is happiness, my dear friend, here is happiness.'

His voice was fading a little. Something was happening to the air. It grew thicker, and the musical humming was more rhythmic, with a hint of articulation in it. Mr. Field kept on talking, softer and softer.

'We are a large organization. One fee covers every possible requirement for the client. Write us a check for as long or as short a period as you like, and you may stay here in this room for that period. It is leased to you. If you wish, the door can be sealed to open only from within until the lease expires. The rental is . . .'

I hardly heard it. His voice was a dying whisper.

The air was curdling like milk, running like the running colors in the balcony Safety.

I could almost hear a new voice speaking.

'Consider,' Mr. Field whispered. 'You grow up conditioned to expect impossibilities. But here we can give you the impossible. Here is happiness. Our fee is very small indeed compared to the great goal within your reach. Here, my friend, you can live perfectly. This is Paradise.'

Niobe Gai stood there in the curdled air, smiling at me.

She is the most beautiful woman in the world. She is equated with all desirable things. She is wealth, fame, happiness, health, fortune. For many years I have been conditioned to desire all these impossible goals, and to know that Niobe Gai is the epi-

tome of them all. But I never saw her before like this, standing here in the same room, firm and real, breathing and warm, holding out her arms....

It was a projection, of course. But complete. All tactile and sensory elements perfect. I could smell her perfume. I could feel her arms clasping me and the light brushing of her hair over my hand, and the shape of her lips. I could feel all this exactly as thousands of other men in the underground apartments would feel her lips as they kissed her. ,

It was that thought, and not any sense of lost realities, that made me push her away and step back. It didn't make any difference to Niobe Gai. She went right on making love to the air.

Then I knew that the last test of sanity had failed me, for it was no longer possible to tell the unreal from the real. The last test fails when the illusion moves into life itself and you can touch and feel and handle the commercial vision as if she were the real woman. There was no defense any more.

I looked at Niobe Gai clasping the empty air. The vision of all beauty and all desirable things in life, making love to nothingness as if it were a real human creature.

Then I opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. Mr. Field was waiting, studying a little note pad in his hand. He looked up at me, and probably he'd had plenty of experience, for he simply shrugged and nodded.

'Well, if you ever should be interested, here's my card,' he said. 'Lots of them do come back, you know. After they've thought it over awhile.'

'Not all,' I said.

'Well, no.' His face was serious. 'Some people seem to have a natural resistance. Maybe you're one of them. If you are, I'm sorry for you. Things are a mess outside. Nobody's fault, really. We've got to keep alive the only ways we know. You think it over. Maybe later on———'

I said, 'Where's my wife?'

'In there,' he said. 'Excuse me for not waiting. I'm rather busy. You can find the lift.'

I heard his footsteps going away. I moved forward and knocked at the door. I waited. There wasn't any answer.

I knocked again, harder and louder. But it had a flat, muffled sound, as if it didn't penetrate the panels at all. The client is protected in Paradise.

I could see now that there was one of the round metal seals attached to the panel; and I was close enough to read the printing. It said, 'Sealed until June 30, 1998. Cash received.'

I did a little sum in my head. Yes, she's used it all, every one of the eighty-four thousand dollars. Her lease wouldn't run out again for quite a few years.

I wondered what she'd do next time.

I didn't knock again. I followed Mr. Field, found the lift, rose to street level. I got on a fast slideway and let it carry me around Manhattan. The advertising blazed and screamed. I found my earplugs in my pocket and stopped my ears. But that only shut out the sound. Visual commercials whirled and glared and glided across the buildings, slipping around corners, embracing the solid walls. And everywhere I looked was Freddi Lester's face.

Even when I shut my eyes, his after-image burned against my closed lids.

SHOCK

when gregg looked up from his book to see the man crawling through the wall of his apartment, he thought briefly that he was crazy. Such things don't happen to a middle-aged physicist who has arranged his life into an ordered pattern. Nevertheless, there was now a hole in the wall, and a half-naked person with macrocephalia was wedging himself through it.

'Who the hell are you?' Gregg demanded, recovering the use of his tongue.

The man spoke an odd sort of English, slurred and with an extraordinary tonal range, but recognizable. 'I'm a mug-wump,' he announced, balancing on his middle. 'My mug's in ... eh? ... in 1953 and my wump's in ... wA!" He gave a convulsive wriggle and burst through, sprawling on the carpet and breathing hard. 'That was a nardly squeeze. The valve isn't quite big enough yet. Forthever.'

It made sense, but not much. Manning Gregg's heavy, leonine features darkened.

He reached out, seized a heavy book end, and rose.

'I am Halison,' the newcomer announced, adjusting his toga. "This should be 1953. Norvunder soverless.'

'What?'

'Semantic difficulty," Halison told him. 'I am from about . . .' well, several thousand years in the future. Your future.'

Gregg's gaze went in the hole in the wall. 'You're talking English.'

'Learned it in 1970. This isn't my first trip into past. Many of them. Looking for something. Important—skandarly important. I use mental power to warp space-time pharron, so valve opens. Lend me clothes, if you please?'

Still holding the book end, Gregg walked to the wall and looked through the circular gap, just large enough to admit a small man's body. All he could see was a blue, bare wall apparently a few feet away. The adjoining apartment? Improbable.

Valve will open wider later,' Halison said. 'Open at night, closed by day. I must be back before Thursday. Ranil-Mens visits me on Thursdays. But now may I beg clothes? There is something I must find—— I have been searching in time for a long carvishtime. Please?'

He was still squatting on the floor. Gregg stared down at his extraordinary visitor. Halison was certainly not Homo sapiens

1953. He had a pinched, bright-pink face, with very large bright eyes, and his cranium was abnormally developed and totally bald. He had six fingers and his toes had fused. And he kept up a continual nervous trembling, as though his metabolism had gone haywire.

'Good Lord!' Gregg said, suddenly understanding. "This isn't a gag. Is it?' His voice rose.

'Gag, gag, gag. Nevishly holander sprae? Was mugwump wrong? Hard to know what to say in new time-world. You have no conception of our advanced culture, sorry. Hard to get down to same plane with you. Civilization moved fast, fast, after your century. There is not much time. Talk later, but important now that you lend me clothes.'

There was a cold, hard knot just under Gregg's backbone. 'Yes, but—wait. If this isn't some———'

'Forgive me,' Halison remarked. 'I am looking for something; great hurry. I will return soon. By Thursday anyway to see Ranil-Mens. I get much wisdom from him. Now, forgive reedishly.' He touched Gregg's forehead.

The physicist said, 'Talk a bit slower, pi———'

Halison was gone.

Gregg whirled, searching the room with his gaze. Nothing. Except that the hole in the wall had doubled in diameter. What the hell.

He looked at the clock. It was just past eight. It should have been about seven. An hour had passed, it seemed, since Halison had reached out to touch his forehead.

As a sample of hypnotism, it was damned impressive.

Gregg carefully found a cigarette and lit it. Drawing smoke into his lungs, he looked at the valve from across the room and considered. A visitor from the future, eh? Well——

Struck by an obvious thought, he went into the bedroom and discovered that a

suit of clothes, a brown Harris tweed, had been confiscated. A shirt was missing, a tie, and a pair of shoes. But the hole in the wall eliminated the chance that this was merely a clever theft. For one thing, Gregg's wallet was still in his trousers pocket.

He looked through the valve again, but still could see nothing but the blue wall. It obviously wasn't in the next-door apartment of Tommy MacPherson, the aging playboy who had given up night-clubbing for more peaceful pursuits, at his doctor's suggestion. Nevertheless, Gregg went into the hall and rang the buzzer beside MacPherson's door.

' 'Lo, Mac,' he said when a round, pale face, topped by carefully dyed chestnut hair, appeared to blink sleepily at him. 'Busy? I'd like to come in a minute."

MacPherson enviously eyed Gregg's cigarette. 'Sure. Make yourself at home. I've been going over some incunabula my

Philadelphia man sent me, and wishing for a drink, Highball?'

'If you'll join me."

'Wish I could,' MacPherson groaned. 'But I'm too young to die. What's up?' He followed Gregg into the kitchen and watched the other man carefully examining the wall. 'Ants?'

'There's a hole in my wall,' Gregg said. 'It doesn't come through, though.' Which proved that the valve was definitely off .the beam. It had to open either into MacPherson's kitchen or else—some other place. <

'Hole in your wall? How come?'

'I'll show you.'

'I'm not that curious,' MacPherson remarked. 'Phone the landlord. He may be interested.'

Gregg scowled. 'I mean it, Mac. I want you to take a look. It's—funny. And I'd rather like confirmation.'

'It's either a hole or it isn't,' MacPherson said simply. 'Is that razor-edged brain of yours poisoned by alcohol? I wish mine was.' He looked wistfully at the portable bar.

'You're no help,' Gregg said. 'But you're better than nobody. Come on!' He lugged the protesting MacPherson into his apartment and pointed to the valve. Mac went over, muttering something about a mirror, and peered into die gap. He whistled softly. Then he put his arm through, stretching it as far as possible, and tried to touch the blue wall. He couldn't quite make it.

'The hole's got bigger,' Gregg said quietly, 'even since a few, minutes ago. You see it too, eh?'

MacPherson found a chair. 'Let's have a drink,' he grunted. 'I need it. Anyhow it's an excuse. Make it short, though,' he added with a flash of last-minute caution.

Gregg mixed two highballs and gave MacPherson one. As they drank, he told die other'what had happened. Mac was unhelpful.

'Out of die future? Glad it didn't happen to me. I'd have gone off my crock.'

'It's perfectly logical,' Gregg argued, partly widi himself. 'The guy—Halison—certainly wasn't a 1953 product.'

'He must have looked like a combination of Pogo and Karloff.'

'Well, you don't look like a Neanderthaler or a Piltdown man,-do you? That skull of his—Halison must have a tremendous brain. His I.Q.—well!'

'What good's all diat if he wouldn't talk to you?' MacPherspn asked cogently.

For some reason Gregg felt a slow flush creeping warmly up his neck. 'I must have seemed like an ape to him,' he said flatly. T could scarcely understand him—and no wonder. But he'll be back.'

'By Thursday? Who's diis Ranilpants?'

Hanil-Mens,' Gregg said. 'A friend, I suppose. A ... a teacher. Halison said he got wisdom from him. Perhaps Ranil-Mens is a professor at some future university. I can't quite think straight. You don't realize the implications of all this, Mac, do you?'

'I don't want to,' MacPherson said, tasting his drink. 'I'm a bit scared.'

'Rationalize it away,' Gregg advised. 'I'm going to.' He looked again at the wall. 'That hole's getting pretty big. Wonder if I could step through it?' He walked close to the valve. The blue wall was still there, and a blue floor at a slightly lower level than his own gray carpet. A pungent, pleasant breatii of air floated in from die unknown, oddly reassuring.

'Better not,' MacPherson said. 'It might close up on you.'

For answer Gregg vanished into die kitchen and returned with a length of thin clothesline. He made a loop around his waist, handed the other end to MacPherson, and crushed out his cigarette in a convenient tray.

'It won't close till Halison gets back. Or anyway it won't close too fast. I hope. Sing out if you see it starting to shut, though, Mac. I'll come diving back headfirst.'

'Crazy fool,' MacPherson said.

Gregg, rather pale around the lips, stepped into the future. The valve was more tiian four feet in diameter by now, its lower edge two feet from the carpet. Gregg had to duck. He straightened up, remembering to breathe, and looked back through the hole into MacPherson's white face.

'It's O.K.,' he said.

'What's over there?'

Gregg flattened himself against the blue wall. The floor felt soft under his feet. The four-foot circle was like a cut-out disk, an easel set up in empty air, a film process shot. He could see MacPherson there, and his own room.

But he was in another room now, large, lit with a cool radiant glow, and utterly different from anything he had ever seen before.

The windows drew his attention first, oval, tall openings in two of the blue walls, transparent in the center and fading around the edges to translucence and then azure opaqueness. Through them he glimpsed lights, colored lights dial moved. He took a step forward and hesitated, looking back to where MacPherson waited.

'What's it like?'

Til see,' Gregg said, and circled the valve. It was invisible from the other side. Perhaps light rays were bent around it. He couldn't tell. A little frightened, he returned briefly to glimpse MacPherson again, and, relieved, continued his explorations.

The room was about diirty feet square, with a high-domed room, and the lighting source was at first difficult to discover. Everydiing in die room had a slight glow. Absorption of sun-

light, Gregg thought, like luminous paint. It seemed effective.

There wasn't much to see. There were low couches, functional-looking padded

chairs, comfortable and pastel-tinted, and a few rubbery tables. A square glassy block as large as a small overnight bag, rubber in texture, was on the blue floor. Gregg could not make out its purpose. When he picked it up gingerly, colors played phosphorescently for a few moments within it.

There was a book on one of the tables, and he pouched this for future reference. MacPherson hailed him.

'Manning? O.K. in there?'

'Yeah. Just a minute.'

Where were the doors? Gregg grinned wryly. He was slightly handicapped by lacking even the basic technological "knowledge for this unknown world. The doors might be activated by pressure, light, or sound. Or even odor, for all he knew. A brief inspection could tell him nothing. But he was worried about the valve. If it closed———

Well, no great harm would be done, Gregg supposed., This future world was peopled by humans sufficiently similar to himself. And they'd have enough intelligence to return him to his own time-sector—Malison's appearance proved that. Nevertheless, Gregg preferred to have an open exit.

He went to the nearest window and looked out. The constellations in the purple sky had changed slightly, not much, in a few thousand years. The rainbow lights darted here and there. Aircraft. Beneath him, the dark masses of buildings were dimly visible in the shadow. There was no moon. A few towers rose to his own height, and he could make out the rounded silhouettes of their summits.

One of the lights swept toward him. Before Gregg could draw back he glimpsed a small ship—antigravity, he thought—with a boy and a girl in the open cockpit. There was neither propeller nor wing structure. The pair resembled Halison in their large craniums and pinched faces, though both had hair on their heads. They, too, wore togalike garments.

And they did not seem strange, somehow. There was no— alienage. The girl was laughing, and, despite her bulging forehead and meager features, Gregg thought her strangely attractive. Certainly there was no harm in these people. The vague fears of a coldly, ruthlessly inhuman superrace went glimmering.

They glided past, not twenty feet away, looking straight at Gregg—and did not see him. Astonished, the physicist reached out to touch the smooth, slightly warmish surface of the pane. Odd!

But there were no lights in the other buildings. The windows must be one-way only, to insure privacy. You could see out, but not in.

'Manning!'

Gregg turned hurriedly, re-coiling the rope as he returned to the valve. MacPherson's worried frown greeted him.

T wish you'd come back. I'm getting jittery.'

'All right,' Gregg said amiably, and crawled through the hole. 'But there's no danger. I bagged a book. Here's some very post-incunabula for you!' He drew the volume from his pocket.

MacPherson took it but didn't open it immediately. His pale eyes were on Gregg's.

'What did you find?'

Gregg went into detail. 'Quite remarkable in its suggestions you know. A tiny slice

out of the future. It didn't seem so strange when I was *in* there, but now it seems funny. My drink's warm. Another?'

'No. Oh, well—yes. Short.'

MacPherson examined the book while Gregg went into the kitchen. Once he glanced up at the valve. It was a little larger, he thought. Not much. Perhaps it had nearly reached its maximum.

Gregg came back. 'Can you read it? No? Well, I expected that. Halison said he had to learn our language. I wonder what he's looking for—in his past?'

'I wonder who Ranil-Mens is.'

'I'd like to meet him. Thank God I've got training. If I can get Halison—or somebody—to explain things to me, I ought to be able to grasp the rudiments of future technology. What a chance, Mac!'

'If he's willing.'

'You didn't meet him,' Gregg said. 'He was friendly, even though he did hypnotize me. What's that?' He seized the book to examine a picture.

'Octopus,' MacPherson suggested.

'Chart. I wonder. It looks almost like an atomic structure, but it's no compound I've ever run into. I wish I could read these infernal wiggles. They look like a combination of Burmese and Pitman. Even the numerical system's different from the Arabic. A whole treasure chest out here, and no key!'

'Hm-m-m. Could be. It still looks a bit dangerous to me.'

Gregg eyed MacPherson. 'I don't think so. There's no reason at all for anticipating trouble. Dime-novel stuff.'

'What is life but a dime novel?' MacPherson asked moodily, rather bottle-dizzy from the unaccustomed liquor.

'That's your way of looking at it. And the way you live it.' Gregg's tone was unpleasant, chiefly because he was allergic to MacPherson's casually hopeless philosophy. 'Try being logical for a change. The race is advancing, in spite of dictators and professional reformers. The industrial revolution started speeding up social mutations. Natural mutations tie in with that. It's progressive. In the next five hundred years we'll have covered as

much ground as we did in the last ten thousand. A snowball rolling downhill.'

'So what?[1]

'So the ultimate result is logic,' Gregg said, 'and that doesn't mean a cold-blooded inhuman logic, either. Not when it's human logic. It takes emotions and psychology into account. It will, that is. There won't be Great Brains waiting to conquer universes, or enslaving the remnants of humans. We've seen that. Halison—he was willing to talk, but in too much of a hurry just then. He said he'd explain later.'

'All I know is that there's a hole in the wall,' MacPherson said. 'It's one of those things that doesn't happen. Now it's happened. Sorry I've got my wind up.'

'That's the way you're keeping your emotional balance,' Gregg told him. 'I prefer to do it along the lines of mathematics. Working out the equation, from what factors we've got. Induction won't tell us much, but it shows what a tremendous thing the whole must be. A perfect world——'

'How d'you know?'

Gregg was stumped. 'Well, it seemed that way. In a few thousand years

civilization will have time to apply technology and use the nuances. Physically and mentally. The best part of it is that they won't be snooty about it. They *can't.* Anyhow, Halison wasn't.'

'That hole isn't getting any bigger,' MacPherson said. 'I've been watching a spot on the wallpaper.'

'Well,' Gregg said inconclusively, 'it's not getting smaller, either. Wish I knew how to open the doors in there. So damn much I can't understand by myself!'

'Have another drink. That may help.'

It didn't, much. Gregg didn't quite dare go through the valve again, for fear it might close suddenly, and he sat with MacPherson, smoking, drinking, and talking, while the night moved slowly on. From time to time they re-examined the book. That told them nothing.

Halison remained absent. At three a.m. the valve began closing. Gregg remembered what the man from the future had said; that the gap would open at night and remain closed by day. Presumably it would open again. If it didn't, then the chance of a hundred lifetimes had been muffed!

In half an hour the valve had shut completely, leaving no trace on the wallpaper. MacPherson, glassy about die eyes, returned to his own apartment. Gregg locked the book in a desk drawer and went to bed to snatch a few hours' sleep before the alarm roused him.

Later, dressing, Gregg phoned Haverhill Research to say he would not be in that day. In case Halison showed up, he wanted to be on hand. But Halison did not arrive. Gregg spent the

morning crushing out cigarettes and thumbing through the book. In the afternoon he sent it by messenger to Courtney, at the university, with a brief note asking for information. Courtney. whose forte was languages, telephoned to say he was baffled.

Naturally he was curious. Gregg spent an awkward five minutes putting him off, and decided to be more wary next time. He was not anxious to release his secret to the world. Even MacPherson—well, that couldn't be helped now. But this was Manning Gregg's discovery, and it was only fair that he should have first rights.

Gregg's selfishness was completely unmercenary. Had he analyzed his motives, he would have realized dial he was greedy for intellectual intoxication—that was the only suitable term. Gregg did have a really fine, keen-edged brain, and took an intense delight in using it. He could get positively drunk on the working out of technical problems, die same pleasure an engineer feels at sight of a beautifully executed blueprint, or a pianist confronted by an intricate composition. He was a perfectionist. And to be given a key to the perfect world of the future——

He was not certain of its perfection, of course, but later he felt more certain. Especially after the valve slowly began opening at six thirty that evening.

This time Gregg went through as soon as the hole was large enough to admit him. He had plenty of time. His search for a door proved fruitless, but he did make' another discovery—the blue walls were in reality the doors of immense cupboards, full of extraordinary objects. Books, of course—though he could read none of them. Some of the charts were tantalizingly on the edge of translation into his own focus of understanding, but not quite. Pictures, three-dimensional and tinted, proved

fascinating in their dim glimpses of the life of the future. It was, he suspected, a happy sort of life.

The cupboards——

They held the *damnedest* things. No doubt they were all perfectly familiar to Halison, but what, for example, could Gregg make of a two-foot doll, modeled after a future human, that recited what seemed to be poetry in an unknown tongue? The rhyme scheme was remarkable, from what Gregg could understand of it—an intricate, bizarre counterpoint diat had a definite emotional effect, even in the alien language.

And then there were more of the rubbery, glassy blocks, with moving lights inside;' and metallic frameworks—one of which Gregg recognized as a model of a solar system; and a hydroponic garden with chameleon qualities; and plastics of possibly mythical animals that could be merged to produce other animals that were crosses or sports—an incredible demonstration of pure genetics, this; and more, and more, and *morel* Gregg got dizzy. He had to go to the windows to recuperate.

The rainbow lights still flashed through the dark. Far below he could make out intermittent blazes of radiance, as though star shells were bursting. For a shocked instant he thought of war. Another glow, fountaining up, relieved him; by craning his neck, he could see tiny figures posturing and dancing in mid-air in a tumultuous sea of color, perhaps a ballet without gravity. No, this was the perfect world.

He was, suddenly, overcome by an intense desire to emerge from this silent room into that blazing, joyous tumult outside. But he could find no way of opening the windows. And the springs that controlled the doors still eluded him. It had not been easy to discover the concealed buttons that operated the cupboards, Gregg remembered.

He thought, with grim amusement, of old Duffey at the Haver-hill, and how the man would react to sight of all this. Well, the devil with Duffey. Later, the world could drink, but he wanted— and deserved—the first ecstatic sip from this bottle of vintage wine.

He hoped someone would come into Halison's apartment, perhaps Ranil-Mens. There might be some semantic difficulties at first, unless the visitor had troubled to learn archaic English— which wasn't likely—but these wouldn't be insurmountable. If only Ranil-Mens *would* appear, to point out how the gadgets in the cupboards worked! A fine spot for a physicist!

Nobody appeared, however, and, bearing booty, Gregg returned to his own time-sector, finding MacPherson sprawled in a chair drinking highballs and eying the valve skeptically.

'How"d you get in?' Gregg demanded.

'Walked in,' MacPherson said. 'The door was open. Halison was standing inside, so I stopped to see what was up. He's real, all right.' Ice cubes clinked.

'Halison here? Mac, what ———'

'Take it easy. I came in and asked him who he was. "Halison," he said. "I just dropped in for a minute"—or words to the effect. "Gregg wants see you," I said. "Haven't time yet," he says. "I'm looking for something. I'll be back by Thursday to see Ranil-Mens. I'll tell Gregg anything he wants to know then. I *can* tell him plenty, too—I'm labeled as a genius." All this was in a sort of double talk, but I managed to

understand it. After that he went out. I ran after him. "Where's Gregg?" I yelled. He waved back toward the . . . the valve, and scooted off downstairs. I stuck my head through the hole in the wall, saw you, and started to feel funny. So I fixed a highball and sat down to wait. That guy gives me the creeps."

Gregg dropped his burden on a couch. 'Damn! So I missed him. Well, he'll be back, that's one consolation. Why the devil does he give you the creeps?'

'He's different,' MacPherson said simply.

'Nothing human is alien. Don't tell me he's not human.'

'Oh, he's human, all right, but it isn't our sort of humanity. Even his eyes. He looks right through you, as though he's seeing into the fourth dimension.'

'Maybe he does,' Gregg speculated. 'I wish . . . *mph.* He'll tell me anything I want to know, eh? I'll have a drink on that. What a chance! And he's a genius, even for his age. I suppose it'd take a genius to work out that space-time business.'

MacPherson said quietly, 'It's his world, Manning, not yours. If I were you, I'd stay out of it.' , -,

Gregg laughed, his eyes very bright. 'Under other circumstances, I'd agree. But I know something about that world now. The pictures in the books, for example. It *is* a perfect world. Only just now it's a world beyond my comprehension. Those people have gone far beyond us in everything, Mac. I doubt if we're capable of understanding everytiiing there. Still, I'm not exactly a moron. I'll learn. My training will help. I'm a technician *and* a physicist.'

'All right. Suit yourself. I'm drunk now because I've been sitting looking at that hole in the wall and wondering if it'd snap shut forever.'

'Nuts,' Gregg said.

MacPherson got up, weaving on his feet. 'I'm going to bed. Call me if you need me for anything. G'night."

'Night, Mac. Oh, say. You haven't mentioned this to anyone, have you?'

'No. I won't. And Halison's eyes scared me, even though they had a friendly look in them. Man and superman. *Urp!'* MacPherson floated away in a haze of Scotch mist. Gregg chuckled and closed the door carefully.

Whatever else he might be, Halison was no superman. He hadn't evolved to that extreme, or, perhaps, there could have been no meeting ground between the two—Homo sapiens and Homo superior. There was much that was mysterious about the 'man from the future—his enigmatic quest through time, for example—but by Thursday, Gregg hoped, he'd know at least some of the answers. If he could only curb his impatience till then.

He didn't go to work the next day, either. That was Wednesday. He spent his time pondering over the gadgets he had brought back from the future, finding a cold sort of comfort in that.

.He waited till hunger pangs could no longer be ignored, and then decided to step around the corner for a sandwich. On second thought, he changed his mind and ate across the street, at a fly-blown quick-lunch joint, where he could keep his eye on the apartment house.

He saw Halison go in.

Choking on a mouthful, Gregg flung a handful of change at the waiter and dashed out. On the steps he nearly stumbled and caught himself by clutching wildly at the

surprised doorman. The elevator——

Gregg cursed its slowness. His apartment door was open. Halison was emerging.

'Tawnishly hello,' Halison said. 'I returned for a clean shirt.'

'Wait,' Gregg said desperately. 'I want to talk to you.'

'No time yet.. I'm still searching marj entar—haven't found———'

'Halison! When will you talk to me?'

'Wednesday night. Tomorrow. I must be back then to see Ranil-Mens Thursday. Who is wiser than I, by the way.'

'The valve won't shut permanently?"

'Sar no. Not till the mental power runs down. That will not be for zanentho nearly two weeks yet.'

'I was afraid I might be caught on the other side———'

'The serving robots bring food by day; you would not go hungry. You could return the next night when the valve opened maronail again. No danger. None in my world harms another. To help and heal for commonweal—a bad translation. Your language—stinks sarkoment.'

'But———'

Halison flicked away like a phantom and was gone down the stairs. Gregg started after him, but was easily outdistanced. Glumly he returned to his apartment. Tomorrow night, however——

Tomorrow night!

Well, he could afford the time for a genuine dinner now, at any rate. Comforted by the thought, Gregg went to his favorite restaurant and ate veal scallopini. After that, he foregathered with MacPherson and relayed his conversation with Halison. MacPherson was not cheerful.

'None in his world harms another,' Gregg quoted.

'All the same—I don't know. I'm still scared.'

'I'm going through again and see what I can pick up.'

He did. He didn't wait till the valve was large enough, and went through headfirst, crashing back from the wall and thumping his head against a table. Since it was satisfactorily resilient, that didn't matter. The future has its conveniences.

That night was a repetition of the preceding one. Gregg's curiosity rose to burning pitch. All about him lay the secrets of a culture far beyond his own—and the key was just beyond his finger tips. It was difficult to wait now.

But he had to wait. He still hadn't fathomed the secret of the door, and he'd forgotten to ask Halison about it. If a telephone or televisor existed, it was hidden in some secret nook he couldn't locate. Oh, well.

Wednesday Gregg went to work, but was home early, chafing. MacPherson dropped in briefly. Gregg discouraged him. He wanted no three-way conversation. He began outlining on paper the questions he meant to ask Halison. At six forty-five the valve began to open. At midnight Gregg was biting his nails.

At two he woke MacPherson and begged the man to have a drink with him.

'He's forgotten,' Gregg said tonelessly, lighting a cigarette and crushing it out. 'Or something. Damn!'

'There's plenty of time,' MacPherson grunted. 'Take it easy. I only hope he doesn't show up.'

They waited a long time. The valve began to close slowly. Gregg cursed in a heartfelt monotone. The telephone rang.

Gregg answered, talked briefly, and cradled the receiver. His face was strained as he turned to MacPherson.

'Halison's been killed. A truck hit him. They found one of my cards in the pocket of his suit.' 'How d'you know it's Halison?'

'They described him. Mac, what a chance! And that so-and-so has to go and walk in front of a truck. Blast him to———'

'Ways of Providence,' MacPherson said, *sotto voce,* but Gregg heard him.

'There's still Ranil-Mens.' 'Whoever he is.'

'Some friend of Halison, of course!' Gregg's tone was knife-edged. 'He'll visit Halison's apartment tomorrow—Thursday. The first possible contact with that world, Mac. I've only been there at night. And I couldn't get out of the room—couldn't locate the doors. But if I'm there tomorrow when Ranil-Mens comes——' 'What if the valve doesn't open again?'

'Halison said it would. That's logical enough. Mental energy, like any other, has to drain away gradually unless it's cut off. And Halison's death certainly didn't cut it off." Gregg nodded toward the slowly closing valve.

'In the words of the prophet,' MacPherson said, 'don't.' He went out and made himself a drink. Most of that drink was straight Scotch. A cold, sick fear was crawling up MacPherson's spine.

They talked inconclusively for a while. In the end, Gregg went through. His face showed through the hole like a portrait in a circular frame.

'So far, so good,' he announced. 'I'll see you tomorrow, Mac. And I'll have plenty to tell you.'

MacPherson's nails dug into his palms. 'Want to change your mind? I wish———'

Gregg grinned. 'No chance. I'm the boy that's going to get

the answers this time. Get it through your thick skull, Mac, there's no danger.'

'O.K.'

'Hand me a drink. There's no liquor on this side . . . thanks. Luck!'

'Luck,' MacPherson said. He sat waiting. The valve shrank.

'It'll be too late in a minute, Manning.'

'It's too late now. See you later, son. Six thirty tomorrow. And maybe I'll bring Ranil-Mens with me.'

Gregg lifted the glass. The valve slowly shrank to dime-size. And vanished.

MacPherson didn't move. He sat there, waiting. He was afraid, coldly and definitely and unarguably, though, of course, illogically.

And then, without turning, he sensed the presence of someone in the room. ′

Halison walked into his range of vision. 'Too savishly late,' he said. 'Well, tomorrow night will do. Though I am sorry to have missed Ranil-Mens.'

The fumes of alcohol seemed to whirlwind in MacPherson's skull. 'The truck,' he said. "The truck. The accident———'

Halison shrugged. 'My metabolism is different. Catalepsy is frequent to me. The nervous shock threw me into that septol state. I woke in the ... what? . . . morgue, explained a little of what had happened, came here. But too late. I have not yet found

what I have been searching for.'

'Just what have you been searching for?" MacPherson asked.

'I am looking for Halison,' Halison said, 'because he has been lost in the past, and Halison will not be whole again till I find him. A genius must be whole. I worked hard, hard, and one day Halison slipped away and was gone in the past. So I must search."

MacPherson turned into ice, realizing what the look in Hali-son's eyes meant.

'Ranil-Mens,' he said. 'Then . . . oh, my God!'

Halison put out a groping, six-fingered hand. 'Mordishly. You know.what they said. But they were wrong. I was isolated, to heal. That was wrong, too, but it gave me time to open the door to the past and look for Halison where Halison is lost. The robot servants gave me food and I had quiet, which I zeverti needed. But the toys they placed in my room I did not need and did not use often.'

Toys——'

'San, san, san. Farlingly oculltar—but the words change. Even for a genius the way is hard. I am not what they said. Ranil-Mens understood. Ranil-Mens is a robot. All our physicians are robots, trained to do their tasks perfectly. But it was hard at first. The treatment—san, san, san, dantro. It took a strong brain to

withstand the healing that Ranil-Mens gave me weekly. Even for me, a genius, it was—san, san, san, and they go far into whirling down forever by token———'

MacPherson said, 'What was it? What was it, damn you?'

'No,' Halison said, crouching suddenly on the carpet and covering his face with his hands. 'Fintharingly and no, no———'

MacPherson leaned forward, the glass slipping from his sweating hand. 'What———'

Halison lifted a blind bright stare. 'The shock treatment for insanity,' he said. 'The new, the terrible, the long and long and eternal long healing that Ranil-Mens brings me once a week, but I do not mind it now, and I like it, and Ranil-Mens will give it to Gregg instead of to me, san, san, san and whirling——'

The pattern had fallen into place. The padded furniture, the lack of doors, the windows that did not open, the toys.

A cell in a madhouse.

To help and heal.

Shock treatment.

Halison got up and went to the open door. 'Halison——' he said.

His footsteps died away along the hall. His voice came back gently.

'Halison is in the past. San, san, san, and I must find Halison so Halison will be whole again, Halison, san, san, san——'

The first rays of Thursday's sun struck through the windows.

See You Later

old yancey was just about the meanest man in the world. I never seen a feller so downright, sot-in-his ways, shortsighted, plain, ornery mean. What happened to him reminded me of what another feller told me oncet, quite a spell ago. Fergit exactly

who it was— name of Louis, maybe, or could be Tamerlane—but one tune he said he wished the whole world had only one haid, so's he could chop it off.

Trouble with Yancey, he got to the point where he figgered everybody in the world was again' him, and blamed if he warn't right. That was a real spell of trouble, even for us Hogbenf.

Oh, Yancey was a regular stinker, all right. The whole Tarbell family was bad-eyed, but Yancey made even them plumb disgusted. He lived up in a little one-room shanty back of the Tarbell place, and wouldn't let nobody near, except to push vittles through the cut-out moon in the door.

Seems like some ten years back there was a new survey or something and the way it worked out, through some funny legal business, Yancey had to prove he'd got squatter's rights on his land. He had to prove it by living there for a year or something. 'Bout then he had an argument with his wife and moved out to the little shack, which was across the property line, and said he was a-gonna let the land go right back to the government, for all he cared, and that'd show the whole family. He knew his wife sot store by her turnip patch and was afraid the government would take it away.

The way it turned out, nobody wanted the land anyhow. It was all up and down and had too many rocks in it, but Yancey's wife kept on worriting and begging Yancey to come back, which he was just too mean to do.

Yancey Tarbell couldn't have been oncommon comfortable up hi that little shack, but he was short-sighted as he was mean. After a spell Mrs. Tarbell died of being

hit on the haid with a stone she was throwing up the slope at the shack, and it bounced back at her. So that left only the eight Tarbell boys and Yancey. He stayed right where he was, though.

He might have stayed there till he shriveled up and went to glory, except the Tarbells started feuding with us. We stood it as long as we could, on account of they couldn't hurt us. Uncle Les, who was visiting us, got skittery, though, and said he was tired of flying up like a quail, two or three miles hi the air, every time a gun went off behind a bush. The holes in his hide closed up easy enough, but he said it made him dizzy, on account of the air being thinned out that high up.

This went on for a while, leastwise, and nobody got hurt, which seemed to rile the eight Tarbell boys. So one night they all come over hi a bunch with their shooting irons and busted their way in. We didn't want no trouble.

Uncle Lem—who's Uncle Les's twin except they was born quite a spell apart—he was asleep for the whiter, off in a holler tree somewheres, so he was out of it. But the baby, bless his heart, is gitting kind of awkward to shift around, being as how he's four hunnerd years old and big for his age—'bout three hunnerd pounds, I guess.

We could of all hid out or gone down to Piperville in the valley for a mite, but then there was Grandpaw hi the attic, and I'd got sort of fond of the little Perfesser feller we keep hi a bottle. Didn't want to leave him on account of the bottle might of got smashed in the ruckus, if the eight Tarbell boys was hkkered up enough.

The Perfesser's cute—even though he never did have much sense. Used to say we was mutants, whatever they are, and kept shooting off his mouth about some people-he knowed called chromosomes. Seems like they got mixed up with what the

Perfesser called hard radiations and had some young 'uns which was either dominant mutations or Hogbens, but I alms got it mixed up with the Roundhead plot, back when we was living hi the old country. 'Course I don't mean the *real* old country. That got sunk.

So, seeing as how Grandpaw told us to lay low, we waited till the eight Tarbell boys busted down the door, and then we all went invisible, including the baby. Then we waited for the thing to blow over, only it didn't.

After stomping around and ripping up things a lot,

the eight Tarbell boys come down in the cellar. Now, that was kind of bad, because we was caught by surprise. The baby had gone invisible, like I say, and so had the tank we keep him in, but the tank couldn't move around fast like we could.

One of the eight Tarbell boys went and banged into it and hit hisself a smart crack on the shank bone. How he cussed! It was shameful for a growing boy to hear, except Grandpaw kin outcuss anybody I ever heard, so I didn't larn nothing.

Well—he cussed a lot, jumped around, and all of a sudden his squirrel rifle went off. Must have had a hair trigger. That woke up the baby, who got scared and let out a yell. It was the blamedest yell I'd ever heard out of the baby yet, and I've seen men go all white and shaky when he bellers. Our Perfesser feller told us oncet the baby emitted a subsonic. Imagine!

Anyhow, seven of the eight Tarbell boys dropped daid, all hi a heap, without even time to squeal. The eighth one was up at tile haid of the cellar steps, and he got all quivery and turned* around and ran. I guess he was so dizzy he didn't know where he was heading. 'Fore he knowed it, he was up in the attic, where he stepped right square on Grandpaw.

Now, the fool thing was this: Grandpaw was so busy telling us what to do he'd entirely fergot to go invisible hisself. And I guess one look at Grandpaw just plumb finished the eighth Tarbell boy. He fell right down, daid as a skun coon. Cain't imagine why, though I got to admit Grandpaw wasn't looking his best that week. He'd been sick.

"You all right, Grandpaw?" I asked, sort of shaking him out. He cussed me.

" Twarn't my fault," I told him.

" 'Sblood!" he said, mad-like. "What rabble of canting jolt-heads have I sired? Put me down, you young scoundrel." So I -put him back on the gunny sack and he turned around a couple of times and shut his eyes. After that, he said he was going to take a nap and not to wake him up for nothing, bar Judgment Day. He meant it, too.

So we had to figger out for ourselves what was best to do. Maw said it warn't our fault, and all we could do was pile the eight Tarbell boys in a wheelbarrow and take 'em back home, which I done. Only I got to feeling kind of shy on the way, on account of I couldn't figger out no

real polite way to mention what had happened. Besides, Maw had told me to break the news gentle. "Even a polecat's got feelings," she said.

So I left the wheelbarrow with the eight Tarbell boys in it behind some scrub brush, and I went on up the slope to where I could see Yancey sitting, airing hisself out in the sun and reading a book. I still hadn't studied out what to say. I just traipsed along slow-like, whistling "Yankee Doodle." Yancey didn't pay me no mind

for a while.

He's a little, mean, dirty man with chin whiskers. Couldn't be much more'n five feet high. There was tobacco juice on his whiskers, but I might have done old Yancey wrong in figgering he was only sloppy. I heard he used to spit in his beard to draw flies, so's he could ketch 'em and pull off their wings.

Without looking, he picked up a stone, and flang it past my head. "Shet up an' go way," he said.

"Just as you say, Mr. Yancey," I told him, mighty relieved, and started to. But then I remembered Maw would probably whup me if I didn't mind her orders, so I sort of moved around quiet till I was in back of Yancey and looking over his shoulder at what he was reading. It looked tike a book. Then I moved around a mite more till I was upwind of him.

He started cackling in his whiskers.

"That's a real purty picture, Mr. Yancey," I said.

He was giggling so hard it must of cheered him up.

"Ain't it, though!" he said, banging his fist on his skinny old rump. "My, my! Makes me feel full o' ginger just to look at it."

It wasn't a book, though. It was a magazine, the land they sell down at the village, and it was opened at a picture. The feller that made it could draw real good. Not so good as an artist I knowed once, over in England. He went by the name of Crookshank or Crookback or something like that, unless I'm mistook.

Anyway, this here that Yancey was looking at was quite a picture. It showed a lot of fellers, all exactly alike, coming out of a big machine which I could tell right off wouldn't work. But all these fellers was as like as peas in a pod. Then there was a red critter with bugged-out eyes grabbing a girl, I dunno why. It was sure purty.

"Wisht something like that could really happen," Yancey said.

"It ain't so hard," I told him. "Only that gadget's all wrong. All you need is a washbasin and some old scrap iron."

"Hey?"

"That thing there," I said. "The jigger that looks like it's making one feller into a whole lot of fellers. It ain't built right."

"I s'pose you could do it better?" he snapped, sort of mad.

"We did, once," I said. "I forget what Paw had on his mind, but he owed a man name of Cadmus a little favor. Cadmus wanted a lot of fighting men in a real hurry, so Paw fixed it so's Cadmus could split hisself up into a pas-sel of soldiers. Shucks. I could do it myself."

"What are you blabbering about?" Yancey asked. "You ain't looking at the right thing. This here red critter's what I mean. See what he's a-gonna do? Gonna chaw that there purty gal's haid off, looks like. See the tusks on him? Heh, heh, heh. I wisht I was a critter like that. I'd chaw up plenty of people."

"You wouldn't chav up your own kin, though, I bet," I said, seeing a way to break the news gentle.

" Tain't right to bet," -he told me. "Allus pay your debts, fear no man, and don't lay no wagers. Gambling's a sin. I never made no bets and I allus paid my debts." He stopped, scratched his whiskers, and sort of sighed. "All except one," he added, frowning.

"What was that?"

"Oh, I owed a feller something. Only I never could locate him afterward. Must be nigh on thutty years ago. Seems like I got likkered up and got on a train. Guess I robbed somebody, too, 'cause I had a roll big enough to choke a hoss. Never tried that, come to think of it. You keep bosses?"

"No, sir," I said. "We was talking about your kin."

"Shet up," old Yancey said. "Well, now, I had myself quite a time." He licked his whiskers. "Ever heard tell of a place called New York? In some furrin country, I guess. Can't understand a word nobody says. Anyway, that's where I met up with this feller. I often wisht I could find him again. An honest man like me hates to think of dying without paying his lawful debts."

"Did your eight boys owe any debts?" I asked.

He squinted at me, slapped his skinny leg, and nodded.

"Now I know," he said. "Ain't you the Hogben boy?"

"That's me. Saunk Hogben."

"I heard tell 'bout you Hogbens. All witches, ain't you?"

"No, sir."

"I heard what I heard. Whole neighborhood's buzzing. Hexers, that's what. You get outa here, go on, git!"

"I'm a-going," I said. "I just come by to say it's real unfortunate you couldri't chaw up your own kin if'n you was a critter like in that there picture."

"Ain't nobody big enough to stop me!"

"Maybe not," I said, "but they've all gone to glory."

When he heard this, old Yancey started to cackle. Finally, when he got his breath back, he said, "Not them! Them varmints have gone plumb smack to perdition, right where they belong. How'd it happen?"

"It was sort of an accident," I said. "The baby done kilt seven of them and Grandpaw kilt the other, in a way of speaking. No harm intended."

"No harm done," Yancey said, cackling again.

"Maw sent her apologies, and what do you want done with the remains? I got to take the wheelbarrow back home."

"Take 'em away. I don't want 'em. Good riddance to bad rubbish," old Yancey said, so I said all right and started off. But then he yelled out and told me he'd changed his mind. Told me to dump 'em where they was. From what I could make out, which wasn't much because he was laughing so hard, he wanted to come down and kick 'em.

So I done like he said and then went back home and told Maw, over a mess of catfish and beans and pot-likker. She made some hush puppies, too. They was good. I sat back, figgering I'd earned a rest, and thunk a mite, feeling warm and nice around the middle. I was trying to figger what a bean would feel like, down in my tummy. But it didn't seem to have no feelings.

It couldn't of been more than a half hour later when the pig yelled outside like he was getting kicked, and then somebody knocked on the door. It was Yancey. Minute he come hi, he pulled a bandanna out of his britches and started sniffling. I looked at Maw, wide-eyed. I couldn't tell her nothing.

Paw and Uncle Les was drinking corn in a corner, and giggling a mite. I could tell

they was feeling good because of the way the table kept rocking, the one be-

tween them. It wasn't touching neither one, but it kept jiggling, trying to step fust on Paw's toes and then on Uncle Les's. They was doing it inside their haids, trying to ketch the other one off guard.

It was up to Maw, and she invited old Yancey to set down a spell and have some beans. He just sobbed.

"Something wrong, neighbor?" Maw asked, polite.

"It sure is," Yancey said, sniffling. "I'm a real old man."

"You surely are," Maw told him. "Mebbe not as old as Saunk here, but you look awful old."

"Hey?" Yancey said, staring at her. "Saunk? Saunk ain't more'n seventeen, big as he is."

Maw near looked embarrassed. "Did I say Saunk?" she covered up, quick-like. "I meant this Saunk's grand-paw. His name's Saunk too." It wasn't; even Grandpaw don't remember what his name was first, it's been so long. But in his time he's used a lot of names like Elijah and so forth. I ain't even sure they had names in Atlantis, where Grandpaw come from in the first place. Numbers or something. It don't signify, anyhow.

Well, seems like qld Yancey kept snuffling and groaning and moaning, and made out like we'd kilt his eight boys and he was all alone in the world. He hadn't cared a mite half an hour ago, though, and I said so. But he pointed out he hadn't rightly understood what I was talking about then, and for me to shet up.

"Ought to had a bigger family," he said. "They used to be two more boys, Zeb and Robbie, but I shot 'em one time. Didn't like the way they was looking ory-eyed at me. The point is, you Hogbens ain't got no right to kill my boys."

"We didn't go for to do it," Maw said. "It was more or less an accident. We'd be right happy to make it up to you, one way or another."

"That's what I was counting on," old Yancey said. "It seems like the least you could do, after acting up like you done. It don't matter whether the baby kilt my boys, like Saunk says and he's a liar. The idea is that I figger all you Hogbens are responsible. But I guess we could call it square if'n you did me a little favor. It ain't really right for neighbors to hold bad feelings."

"Any favor you name," Maw said, "if it ain't out of line."

" 'Tain't much," old Yancey said. "I just want you to split me up into a rabble, sort of temporary."

"Hey, you been listening to Medea?" Paw said, being drunk enough not to know no better. "Don't you believe her. That was purely a prank she played on Pelias. After he got chopped up he stayed daid; he didn't git young like she said he would."

"Hey?" Yancey said. He pulled that old magazine out of his pocket and it fell open right to that purty picture. "This here," he said. "Saunk tells me you kin do it. And everybody round here knows you Hogbens are witches. Saunk said you done it once with a feller named of Messy."

"Guess he means Cadmus," I said.

Yancey waved the magazine. I saw he had a queer kind of gleam in his eye.

"It shows right here," he said, wild-like. "A feller steps inside this here gimmick

and then he keeps coming out of it, dozens of him, over and over. Witchcraft. Well, I know about you Hogbens. You may fool the city folk, but you don't fool me none. You're all witches."

"We ain't," Paw said from the corner. "Not no more."

"You are so," Yancey said. "I heard stories. I even seen him"—he pointed right at Uncle Les—"I seen him flying around in the air. And if that ain't witchcraft I don't know what is."

"Don't you, honest?" I asked. "That's easy. It's when you get some—"

But Maw told me to shet up.

"Saunk told me you kin do it," he said. "An' I been sitting and studying and looking over this here magazine. I got me a fine idea. Now, it stands to reason, everybody knows a witch kin be in two places at the same time. Couldn't a witch mebbe git to be in three places at the same time?"

"Three's as good as two," Maw said. "Only there ain't no witches. It's like this here science you hear tell about. People make it up out of their haids. It ain't nat-cheral."

"Well, then," Yancey said, putting the magazine down. "Two or three or a whole passel. How many people are there in the world, anyway?"

"Two billion, two hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen," I said.

"Then—"

"Hold on a minute," I said. "Now it's two billion, two

hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and twenty. Cute little tyke, too."

"Boy or girl?" Maw asked.

"Boy," I told her.

"Then why can't you make me be in two billion whatever it was places at the same tune? Mebbe for just a half a minute or so. I ain't greedy. That'd be long enough, anyhow."

"Long enough for what?" Maw asked.

Yancey give me a sly look. "I got me a problem," he said. "I want to find a feller. Trouble is, I dunno if I kin find him now. It's been a awful long tune. But I got to, somehow or other. I ain't a-gonna rest easy in my grave unless I done paid all my debts, and for thutty years I been owing this feller something. It lays heavy on my conscience."

"That's right honorable of you, neighbor," Maw said.

Yancey snuffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"It's a-gonna be a hard job," he said. "I put it off mebbe a mite too long. The thing is, I was figgering on sending my eight boys out to look for this feller sometime, so you kin see why it's busted me all up, the way them no-good varmints up and got kilt without no warning. How am I gonna find that feller I want now?"

Maw looked troubled and passed Yancey the jug.

"Whoosh!" he said, after a snort. "Tastes like real hell-fire for certain. Whoosh!" Then he took another swig, sucked in some air, and scowled at Maw.

"If'n a man plans on sawing down a tree and Ms neighbor busts the saw, seems to me that neighbor ought to lend his own saw. Ain't that right?"

"Sure is," Maw said. "Only we ain't got eight boys to lend you."

"You got something better," Yancey said. "Black, wicked magic, that's what. I ain't saying yea or nay 'bout that. It's your own affair. But seeing as how you kilt off them wuthless young 'uns of mine, so's I can't do like I was intending—why, then it looks like you ought to be willing to help me in some other way. Long as I kin locate that feller and pay him what I owe him, I'm satisfied. Now, ain't it the gospel truth that you kin spilt me up into a passel of me-critters?"

"Why, I guess we kin do that, I s'pose," Maw said.

"An' ain't it gospel that you kin fix it so's every dang

one of them me-critters will travel real fast and see everybody in the whole, entire world?"

"That's easy," I said.

"If'n I kin git to do that," Yancey said, "it'd be easy for me to spot that feller and give him what he's got coming to him." He snuffled. "I allus been honest. I'm skeered of dying unless I pay all my debts fust. Danged if'n I want to burn through all eternity like you sinful Hogbens are a-gonna."

"Shucks," Maw said, "I guess we kin help out, neighbor, being as how you feel so het up about it. Yes, sir, we'll do like you want."

Yancey brightened up considerable.

"Promise?" he asked. "Swear it, on your word an' honor?"

Mow looked kind of funny, but Yancey pulled out his bandanna again, so she busted down and made her solemn promise. Right away Yancey cheered up.

"How long will the spell take?" he asked.

"There ain't no spell," I said. "Like I told you, all I need is some scrap iron and a washbasin. 'Twon't take long."

"I'll be back real soon," Yancey said, sort of cackling, and run out, laughing his haid off. Going through the yard, he kicked out at a chicken, missed, and laughed some more. Guess he was feeling purty good.

"You better go on and make that gadget so's it'll be ready," Maw told me. "Git going."

"Yes, Maw," I said, but I sat there for a second or two, studying. She picked up the broomstick.

"You know, Maw—"

"Well?"

"Nothing," I said, and dodged the broomstick. I went on out, trying to git clear what was troubling me. Something was, only I couldn't tell what. I felt kind of unwilling to make that there gadget, which didn't make right good sense, since there didn't seem to be nothing really wrong.

I went out behind the woodshed, though, and got busy. Took me 'bout ten minutes, but I didn't hurry much. Then I come back to the house with the gadget and said I was done. Paw told me to shet up.

Well, I sat there and looked at the gimmick and still felt trouble on my mind. Had to do with Yancey, somehow

or other. Finally I noticed he'd left his old magazine behind, so I picked it up and started reading the story right under that picture, trying to make sense out of it. Durned if I could.

It was all about some crazy hillbillies who could fly. Well, that ain't no trick but what I couldn't figger out was whether the feller that writ it was trying to be funny or not. Seems to me people are funny enough anyhow, without trying to make 'em funnier.

Besides, serious things ought to be treated serious, and from what our Perfesser feller told me once, there's an awful lot of people what really believe in science and take it tremendous serious. He allus got a holy light hi his eye when he talked about it. The only good thing about that story, it didn't have no girls in it. Girls make me feel funny.

I didn't seem to be gitting nowheres, so I went down to the cellar and played with the baby. He's kind of big for his tank these days. He was glad to see me. Winked all four of his eyes at me, one after the other. Real cute.

But all the time ^here was something about that magazine that kept nagging at me. I felt itchy inside, like when before they had that big fire in London, some while ago. Quite a spell of sickness they had then, too.

It reminded me of something Grandpaw had told me once, that he'd got the same sort of skitters just before Atlantis foundered. 'Course, Grandpaw kin sort of look into the future—which ain't much good, really, on account of it keeps changing around. I cain't do that myself yet. I ain't growed up enough. But I had a kind of hunch that something real bad was around, only it hadn't happened quite yet.

I almost decided to wake up Grandpaw, I felt so troubled. But around then I heard tromping upstairs, so I clomb up to the kitchen, and there was Yancey, swigging down some corn Maw'd give him. Minute I looked at the old coot, I got that feeling agin.

Yancey said, "Whoosh," put down the jug, and wanted to know if we was ready. So I pointed at the gadget I'd fixed up and said that was it, all right, and what did he think about it?

"That little thing?" Yancey asked. "Ain't you a-gonna call up Old Scratch?"

"Ain't no need," Uncle Les said. "Not with you here, you little water moccasin, you."

Yancey looked right pleased. "That's me," he said. "Mean as a moccasin, and fulla pizen. How does it work?"

"Well," I said, "it sort of splits you up into a lot of Yanceys, is all."

Paw had been setting quiet, but he must of tuned in inside the haid of some perfesser somewheres, on account of he started talking foolish. He don't know any four-bit words hisself.

I wouldn't care to know 'em myself, being as how they only mix up what's simple as cleaning a trout.

"Each human organism," Paw said, showing off like crazy, "is an electromagnetic machine, emitting a pattern of radiations, both from brain and body. By reversing polarity, each unit of you, Yancey, will be automatically attracted to each already existent human unit, since un-likes attract. But first you will step on Saunk's device and your body will be broken down—"

"Hey!" Yancey yelped.

Paw went right on, proud as a peacock.

"—into a basic electronic matrix, which can then be duplicated to the point of

infinity, just as a type face may print millions of identical copies of itself hi reverse—negative instead of positive.

"Since space is no factor where electronic wave-patterns are concerned, each copy will be instantly attracted to the space occupied by every other person in the world," Paw was going on, till I like to bust. "But since two objects cannot occupy the same space-time, there will be an automatic spacial displacement, and each Yancey-copy will be repelled to approximately two feet away from each human being."

"You forgot to draw a pentagram," Yancey said, looking around nervous-like. "That's the awfullest durn spell I ever heard hi all my born days. I thought you said you wasn't gonna call up Old Scratch?"

Maybe it was on account of Yancey was looking on-common like Old Scratch hisself just then, but I just couldn't stand it no longer—having this funny feeling inside me. So I woke up Grandpaw. I did it inside my haid, the baby helping, so's nobody noticed. Right away there was a stirring in the attic, and Grandpaw heaved hisself around a little and woke up. Next thing I knew he was cussing a blue streak.

Well, the whole family heard that, even though Yancey couldn't. Paw stopped showing off and shet up.

"Dullards!" Grandpaw said, real mad. "Rapscallions! Certes, y-wist it was no wonder I was having bad dreams. Saunk, you've put your foot in it now. Have you no sense of process? Didn't you realize what this caitiff schmo was planning, the stinkard? Get in the groove, Saunk, ere manhood's state shall find thee unprepared." Then he added something in Sanskrit. Living as long as Grandpaw has, he gits mixed up in his talk sometimes.

"Now, Grandpaw," Maw thunk, "what's Saunk been and done?"

"You've all done it!" Grandpaw yelled. "Couldn't you add cause and effect? Saunk, what of the picture y-wrought in Yancey's pulp mag? Wherefore hys sodien change of herte, when obviously the stinkard hath no more honor than a lounge lizard? Do you want the world depopulated before its time? Ask Yancey what he's got in his britches pocket, dang you!"

"Mr. Yancey," I said, "what have you got hi your britches pocket?" ,,

"Hey?" he said, reaching down and hauling out a big, rusty monkey wrench. "You mean this? I picked it up back of the shed." He was looking real sly.

"What you aiming to do with that?" Maw asked, quick.

Yancey give us all a mean look. "Ain't no harm telling you," he said. "I aim to hit everybody, every durn soul in the whole, entire world, right smack on top of the haid, and you promised to help me do it."

"Lawks a-mercy," Maw said.

"Yes, siree," Yancey giggled. "When you hex me, I'm a-gonna be in every place everybody else is, standing right behind 'em. I'll whang 'em good. Thataway, I kin be sure 111 git even. One of them people is just bound to be the feller I want, and he'll git what I been owing him for thutty years."

"What feller?" I said. "You mean the one you met up with in New York you was telling me about? I figgered you just owed him some money."

"Never said no sech thing," Yancey snapped. "A debt s a debt, be it money or a bust in the haid. Ain't nobody a-gonna step on my corn and git away with it, thutty

years or no thutty years."

"He stepped on your corn?" Paw asked. "That's all be done?"

"Yup. I was likkered up at the time, but I recollect I went down some stairs to where a lot of trains was rushing around under the ground."

"You was drunk."

"I sure was," Yancey said. "Couldn't be no sech thing—trains running underground! But I sure as shooting wasn't dreaming 'bout the feller what stepped on my corn. Why, I kin still feel it. I got mad. It was so crowded I couldn't even move for a mite, and I never even got a good look at the feller what stepped on me.

"By the time I hit out with my stick, he must of got away. Never knew what he looked like. Might have been a female, but that don't signify. I just ain't a-gonna die till I pay my debts and git even with everybody what ever done me dirt. I allus got even with every dang soul what done me wrong, and most everybody I ever met did."

Riled up a whole lot was Yancey Tarbell. He went right on from there:

"So I figgered, since I never found out just who this feller was what stepped on my corn, I better make downright sure and take a lick at everybody, man, woman, and child."

"Now you hold your hosses," I said. "Ain't no children could have been alive thutty years ago, an' you know it."

"Makes no difference," Yancey snapped. "I was a-think-ing, and I got an awful idea: suppose that feller went and died. Thutty years is a long time. But then I figgered, even if he did up and die, chances are he got married and had kids fust. Ifn I can't git even with him, I kin get even with his children. The sins of the father—that's Scripture. If'n I hit everybody in the world, I can't go fur wrong."

"You ain't hitting no Hogbens," Maw said. "None of us been in New York since afore you was born. I mean, we ain't never been there. So you kin just leave us out of it. How'd you like to git a million dollars instead? Or maybe you want to git young again or something like that? We kin fix that for you instead, if you'll give up this here wicked idea."

"I ain't a-gonna," Yancey said, stubborn. "You give your gospel word to help me."

"Well, we ain't bound to keep a promise like that," Maw said, but then Grandpaw chimed in from the attic.

"The Hogben word is sacred," he told us. "It's our bond. We must keep our promise to this booby. But, having kept it, we are not bound further."

"Oh?" I said, sort of gitting a thought. "That being the case—Mr. Yancey, just what did we promise, exact?"

He waved the monkey wrench at me.

"I'm a-gonna git split up into as many people as they are people in the world, and I'm a-gonna be standing right beside all of 'em. You give your word to help me do that. Don't you try to wiggle out of it."

"I ain't wiggling," I said. "Only we better git it clear, so's you'll be satisfied and won't have no kick coming. One thing, though. You got to be the same size as everybody you visit."

"Hey?"

"I kin fix it easy. When you step on this here gadget, there'll be two billion, two hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnered and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnered and twenty Yanceys all over the world. S'posin', now, one of these here Yanceys finds himself standing next to a big feller seven feet tall.«That wouldn't be so good, would it?"

"I want to be eight feet high," Yancey said.

"No, sir. The Yancey who goes to visit a feller that high is a-gonna be just that high hisself, exactly. And the one who visits a baby only two feet high is a-gonna be only two feet high hisself. What's fair's fair. You agree to that, or it's all off. Only other thing, you'll be just exactly as strong as the feller you're up again'."

I guess he seen I was firm. He hefted the monkey wrench.

"How'111 git back?" he asked.

"We'll take care of that," I said. "I'll give you five seconds. That's long enough to swing a monkey wrench, ain't it?"

"It ain't very long."

"If'n you stay longer, somebody might hit back."

"So they might," he said, turning pale under the dirt. "Five seconds is plenty."

"Then if'n we do just that, you'll be satisfied? You won't have no kick coming?"

He swung the monkey wrench and laughed.

"Suits me fine and dandy," he said. "I'll bust their haids good. Heh, heh, heh." "Then you step right on here," I said, showing him.

"Wait a mite, though. I better try it fust, to make sure it works right."

I picked up a stick of firewood from the box by the stone and winked at Yancey. "You git set," I said. "The minute I git back, you step right on here."

Maw started to say something, but all of a sudden Grandpaw started laughing in the attic. I guess he was looking into the future again.

I stepped on the gadget, and it worked slick as anything. Afore I could blink, I was split up into two billion, two hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen Saunk Hog-bens.

There was one short, o' course, on account of I left out Yancey, and o' course the Hogbens ain't listed in no census. But here I was, standing right in front of everybody in the whole, entire world except the Hogben fam'ly and Yancey hisself. It was plumb onreasonable.

Never did I know there was so many faces in this world! They was all colors, some with whiskers, some without, some with clothes on, some naked as needles, some awful big and some real short, and half of them was in daylight and half was in the nighttime. I got downright dizzy.

For just a flash, I thought I could make out some of the people I knowed down in Piperville, including the Sheriff, but he got mixed up with a lady in a string of beads who was casing a kangaroo-critter, and she turned into a man dressed up fit to kill who was speechifyin' hi a big room somewheres.

My, I was dizzy.

I got ahold of myself and it was about time, too, for just about then near everybody in the whole world noticed me. 'Course, it must have looked like I'd popped out of thin air, right in front of them, real sudden, and —well, you ever had near two billion, two hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand,

nine hunnerd and nineteen people looking you right square hi the eye? It's just awful. I forgot what I'd been intending. Only I sort of heard Grandpaw's voice telling me to hurry up.

So I pushed that stick of firewood I was holding, only now it was two billion, two hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and

nineteen sticks, into just about the same number of hands and let go. Some of the people let go too, but most of 'em held on to it. Then I tried to remember the speech I was a-gonna make, telling 'em to git hi the fust lick at Yancey afore he could swing that monkey wrench.

But I was too confounded. It was funny. Having all them people looking right at me made me so downright shy, I couldn't even open my mouth. What made it worse was that Grandpaw yelled I had only one second left, so there wasn't even tune to make a speech. In just one second, I was a-gonna flash back to our kitchen, and then old Yancey was all ready to jump hi the gadget and swing that monkey wrench. And I hadn't warned nobody. All I'd done was give everybody a little old stick of firewood.

My, how they stared! I felt plumb naked. Their eyes bugged right out. And just as I started to thin out around the edges like a biscuit, I—well, I don't know what come over me. I guess it was feeling so oncommon shy. Maybe I shouldn't of done it, but—

I done it! ^

Then I was back in the kitchen. Grandpaw was laughing fit to kill hi the attic. The old gentleman's got a funny kind of sense of humor, I guess. I didn't have no time for him then, though, for Yancey jumped past me and into the gadget. And he disappeared into thin air, the way I had. Split up, like I'd been, into as many people as there was hi the world, and standing right hi front of 'em.

Maw and Paw and Uncle Les was looking at me real hard. I sort of shuffled.

"I fixed it," I said. "Seems like a man who's mean enough to hit little babies over the haid deserves what he's"—I stopped and looked at the gadget—"what he's been and got," I finished, on account of Yancey had tumbled out of thin air, and a more whupped-up old rattlesnake I never seen. My!

Well, I guess purty near everybody hi the whole world had took a whang at Mr. Yancey. He never even had a chance to swing that monkey wrench. The whole world had got in the fust lick.

Yes, siree. Mr. Yancey looked plumb ruined.

But he could still yell. You could of heard him a mile off. He kept screaming that he'd been cheated. He wanted another chance, and this time he was taking his shoot-

ing iron and a bowie knife. Finally Maw got disgusted, took him by the collar, and shook him up till his teeth rattled.

"Quoting Scripture!" she said, madlike. "You little dried-up scraggle of "downright pizen! The Good Book says an eye for an eye, don't it? We kept our word, and there ain't nobody kin say different."

"That's the truth, certes," Grandpaw chimed hi from the attic.

"You better go home and git some arnicy," Maw said, shaking Yancey some more. "And don't you come round here no more, never again, or we'll set the baby on you."

"But I didn't git even!" Yancey squalled.

"I guess you ain't a-gonna, ever," I said. "You just cain't live long enough to git even with everybody hi the whole world, Mr. Yancey."

By and by, that seemed to strike Yancey all in a heap. He turned a rich color like beet soup, made a quacking noise, and started cussing. Uncle Les reached for the poker, but there wasn't no need.

"The whole dang world done me wrong!" Yancey squealed, and clapped his hands to his haid. "I been flummoxed! Why hi tarnation did they hit me fust? "There's something funny about—"

"Hush up," I said, all of a sudden realizing the trouble wasn't over, like I'd thought. "Listen, anybody hear anything from the village?"

Even Yancey shet up whilst we listened. "Don't hear a thing," Maw said.

"Saunk's right," Grandpaw put hi. "That's what's wrong."

Then everybody got it—that is, everybody except Yancey. Because about now there ought to of been quite a rumpus down at Piperville. Don't fergit me and Yancey went visiting the whole world, which includes Piperville, and people don't take a thing like that quiet. There ought to of been some yelling going on, at least.

"What are you all standing round dumb as mutes for?" Yancey busted out. "You got to help me git even!"

I didn't pay him no mind. I sat down and studied the gadget. After a minute I seen what it was I'd done wrong. I guess Grandpaw seen it about as quick as I did. You oughta heard him laugh. I hope it done the old

gentleman good. He has a right peculiar sense of humor sometimes.

"I sort of made a mistake hi this gadget, Maw," I said. "That's why it's so quiet down hi Piperville."

"Aye, by my troth," Grandpaw said, still laughing. "Saunk had best seek cover. Twenty-three skiddoo, kid."

"You done something you shouldn't, Saunk?" Maw said.

"Blabber, blabber, blabber!" Yancey yelled. "I want my rights! I want to know what it was Saunk done that made everybody in the world hit me over the haid! He must of done something. I never had no tune to—"

"Now you leave the boy alone, Mr. Yancey," Maw said. "We done what we promised, and that's enough. You git outa here and simmer down afore you say something you regret."

Paw winked at Uncle Les, and before Yancey could yell back at Maw the table sort of bent its legs down like they had knees hi 'em and snuck up behind Yancey real quiet. Then Paw said to Uncle Les, "All together now, let 'er go," and the table straightened up its legs and give Yancey a terrible bunt that sent him flying out the door.

The last we heard of Yancey was the whoops he kept letting out whenever he hit the ground all the way down the hill. He rolled half the way to Piperville, I found out later. And when he got there he started hitting people over the haid with his monkey wrench.

I guess he figgered he might as well make a start the hard way.

They put him hi jail for a spell to cool off, and I guess he did, 'cause afterward he went back to that little shack of his'n. I hear he don't do nothing but set around with

his lips moving, trying to figger a way to git even with the hull world. I don't calc'late he'll ever hit on it, though.

At that tune, I wasn't paying him much mind. I had my own troubles. As soon as Paw and Uncle Les got the table back hi place, Maw lit into me again.

Tell me what happened, Saunk," she said. "I'm a-feared you done something wrong when you was hi that gadget. Remember you're a Hogben, son. You got to behave right when the whole world's looking at you. You didn't go and disgrace us hi front of the entire human race, did you, Saunk?"

Grandpaw laughed agin. "Not yet, he hasn't," he said.

Then down in the basement I heard the baby give a kind of gurgle and I knowed he could see it too. That's surprising, kinda, We never know for sure about the baby. I guess he really kin see a little bit into the future too.

"I just made a little mistake, Maw," I said. "Could happen to anybody. It seems the way I fixed that gadget up, it split me into a lot of Saunks, all right, but it sent me ahead into next week too. That's why there ain't no ruckus yet down in PipervUle."

"My land!" Maw said. "Child, you do things so careless!"

"I'm sorry, Maw," I said. "Trouble is, too many people *in* Kperville know me. I'd better light out for the woods and pick me a nice holler tree. I'll be needing it, come next week."

"Saunk," Maw said, "you been up to something. Sooner or later I'll find out, so you might as well tell me now."

Well, shucks, I knowed she was right. So I told her, and I might as well tell you, too. You'll find out anyhow, come next week. It just shows you can't be too careful. This day next week, everybody in the whole world is a-gonna be mighty surprised when I show up out of thin air, hand 'em all a stick of firewood, and then r'ar back and spit right smack in their eye.

I s'pose that there two billion, two hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen includes everybody on earth.

Everybody! .

Sometime next week, I figger.

See you later.

THE PROUD ROBOT

Things often happened to Gallegher, who played at science by ear. He was, as he often remarked, a casual genius. Sometimes he'd start with a twist of wire, a few batteries, and a button hook, and before he finished, he might contrive a new type of refrigerating unit.

At the moment he was nursing a hangover. A disjointed, lanky, vaguely boneless man with a lock of dark hair falling untidily over his forehead, he lay on the couch in the lab and manipulated his mechani-cal liquor bar. A very dry Martini drizzled slowly from the spigot into his receptive mouth.

He was trying to remember something, but not trying too hard. It had to do with the robot, of course. Well, it didn't matter.

"Hey, Joe," Gailegher said.

The robot stood proudly before the mirror and examined its innards. Its hull was transparent, and wheels were going around at a great rate inside.

"When you call me that," Joe remarked, "whisper. And get that cat out of here."

"Your ears aren't that good."

"They are. I can hear the cat walking about, all right."

"What does it sound like?" Gallegher inquired, interested.

"Jest like drums," said the robot, with a put-upon air. "And when you talk, it's like thunder." Joe's voice was a discordant squeak, so Gallegher meditated on saying something about glass houses and cast-ing the first stone. He brought his attention, with some effort, to the luminous door panel, where a shadow loomed—a familiar shadow, Gallegher thought.

"It's Brock," the annunciator said. "Harrison Brock. Let me in!"

"The door's unlocked." Gallegher didn't stir. He looked gravely at the well-dressed, middle-aged man who came in, and tried to remember. Brock was between forty and fifty; he had a smoothly massaged, clean-shaven face, and wore an expression of harassed intolerance. Probably Gallegher knew the man. He wasn't sure. Oh, well.

Brock looked around the big, untidy laboratory, blinked at the robot, searched for a chair, and failed to find it. Arms akimbo, he rocked back and forth and glared at the prostrate scientist.

"Well?" he said.

"Never start conversations that way," Callegher mumbled, siphoning another Martini down his gullet. "I've had enough trouble today. Sit down and take it easy. There's a dynamo behind you. It isn't very dusty, is it?"

"Did you get it?" Brock snapped. "That's all I want to know. You've had a week I've a check for ten thousand in my pocket. Do you want it, or don't you?"

"Sure," Gallegher said. He extended a large, groping hand. "Give."

"Caveat einptor. What am I buying?"

"Don't you know?" the scientist asked, honestly puzzled.

Brock began to bounce up and down in a harassed fashion. "My God," he said. "They told me you could help me if anybody could. Sure. And they also said it'd be like pulling teeth to get sense out of you. Are you a technician or a drivelling idiot?"

Gallegher pondered. "Wait a minute. I'm beginning to remember. I talked to you last week, didn't I?"

"You talked—" Brock's round face turned pink. "Yes! You lay there swilling liquor and babbled poetry. You sang 'Frankie and Johnnie.' And you finally got around to accepting my commission."

"The fact is," Gallegher said, "I have been drunk. I often get drunk. Especially on my vacation. It releases my subconscious, and then I can work. I've made my best gadgets when I was tizzied," be went on hap-pily. "Everything seems so clear then. Clear as a bell. I mean a bell, don't I? Anyway—" He lost the thread and looked puzzled. "Anyway, what are you talking about?"

"Are you going to keep quiet?" the robot demanded from its post be-fore the mirror.

Brock jumped. Gallegher waved a casual hand. "Don't mind Joe. I just finished him last night, and I rather regret it."

“A robot?”

“A robot. But he’s no good, you know. I made him when I was drunk, and I haven’t the slightest idea how or why. All he’ll do is stand there and admire himself. And sing. He sings like a banshee. You’ll hear him presently.”

With an effort Brock brought his attention back to the matter in hand. “Now look, Gallegher. I’m in a spot. You promised to help me. If you don’t, I’m a ruined man.”

“I’ve been ruined for years,” the scientist remarked. “It never bothers me. I just go along working for a living and making things in my spare time. Making all sorts of things. You know, if I’d really studied, I’d have

been another Einstein. So they tell me. As it is, my subconscious picked up a first-class scientific training somewhere. Probably that’s why I never bothered. When I’m drunk or sufficiently absent-minded, I can work out the damnedest problems.”

“You’re drunk now,” Brock accused.

“I approach the pleasanter stages. How would you feel if you woke up and found you’d made a robot for some unknown reason, and hadn’t the slightest idea of the creature’s attributes?”

“Well—”

“I don’t feel that way at all,” Gallegher murmured. “Probably you take life too seriously, Brock. Wine is a mocker; strong drink is raging. Pardon me. I rage.” He drank another Martini.

Brock began to pace around the crowded laboratory, circling various enigmatic and untidy objects. “If you’re a scientist, Heaven help sci-ence.”

“I’m the Larry Adler of science,” Gallegher said. “He was a musician

—lived some hundreds of years ago, I think I’m like him. Never took a lesson in my life. Can I help it if my subconscious likes practical jokes?”

“Do you know who I am?” Brock demanded.

“Candidly, no. Should I?”

There was bitterness in the other’s voice. “You might have the cour-tesy to remember, even though it was a week ago. Harrison Brock. Me. I own Vox-View Pictures.”

“No,” the robot said suddenly, “it’s no use. No use at all, Brock.”

“What the—”

Gallegher sighed wearily. “I forget the damned thing’s alive. Mr. Brock, meet Joe. Joe, meet Mr. Brock—of Vox-View.”

Joe turned, gears meshing within his transparent skull. “I am glad to meet you, Mr. Brock. Allow me to congratulate you on your good fortune in hearing my lovely voice.”

“Ugh,” said the magnate inarticulately. “Hello.”

“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” Gallegher put in, *sotto voce.* “Joe’s like that. A peacock. No use arguing with him either.”

The robot ignored this aside. “But it’s no use, Mr. Brock,” he went on squeakily. “I’m not interested in money. I realize it would bring hap-piness to many if I consented to appear in your pictures, but fame means nothing to me. Nothing. Consciousness of beauty is enough.”

Brock began to chew his lips. “Look,” he said savagely, “I didn’t come here to

offer you a picture job. See? Am I offering you a contract? Such colossal nerve—*Pah!* You're crazy."

"Yoix schemes are perfectly transparent," the robot remarked coldly.

"I can see that you're overwhelmed by my beauty and the loveliness of my voice—its grand tonal qualities. You needn't pretend you don't want me, just so you can get me at a lower price. I said I wasn't interested."

"You're *cr-r-razy!"* Brock howled, badgered beyond endurance, and Joe calmly turned back to his mirror.

"Don't talk so loudly," the robot warned. "The discordance is deafen-ing. Besides you're ugly and I don't like to look at you." Wheels and cogs buzzed inside the transplastic shell. Joe extended his eyes on stalks and regarded himself with every appearance of appreciation.

Gallegher was chuckling quietly on the couch. "Joe has a high irrita-tion value," he said. "I've found that out already. I must have given him some remarkable senses, too. An hour ago he started to laugh- his damn fool head off. No reason, apparently. I was fixing myself a bite to eat. Ten minutes after that I slipped on an apple core I'd thrown away and came down hard. Joe just looked at me. 'That was it,' he said. 'Logics of probability. Cause and effect. I knew you were going to drop that apple core and then step on it when you went to pick up the mail.' Like the White Queen, I suppose. It's a poor memory that doesn't work both ways."

Brock sat on the small dynamo—there were two, the larger one named Monstro, and the smaller one serving Gallegher as a bank— and took deep breaths. "Robots are nothing new."

"This one is. I hate its gears. It's beginning to give me an inferiority complex. Wish I knew why I'd made it," Gallegher sighed. "Oh, well. Have a drink?"

"No. I came here on business. Do you seriously mean you spent last week building a robot instead of solving the problem I hired you for?"

"Contingent, wasn't it?" Gallegher asked. "I think I remember that."

"Contingent," Brock said with satisfaction. "Ten thousand, if and when."

"Why not give me the dough and take the robot? He's worth that. Put him in one of your pictures."

"I won't have any pictures unless you figure out an answer," Brock snapped. "I told you all about it."

"I have been drunk," Gallegher said. "My mind has been wiped clear, as by a sponge. I am as a little child. Soon I shall be as a drunken little child. Meanwhile, if you'd care to explain the matter again—"

Brock gulped down his passion, jerked a magazine at random from the bookshelf, and took out a stylo. "All right. My preferred stocks are at twenty-eight, 'way below par—" He scribbled figures on the maga-rifle.

"If you'd taken that medieval folio next to that, it'd have cost you a pretty penny," Gallegher said lazily. "So you're the sort of guy who writes on tablecloths, eh? Forget this business of stocks and stuff. Get down to cases. Who are you trying to gyp?"

"It's no use," the robot said from before its mirror. "I won't sign a contract. People may come and admire me, if they like, but they'll have to whisper in my

presence.”

“A madhouse,” Brock muttered, trying to get a grip on himself. “Lis-ten, Gallegher. I told you all this a week ago, but—”

“Joe wasn’t here then. Pretend like you’re talking to him.”

“Uh—look. You’ve heard of Vox-View Pictures, at least.”

“Sure. The biggest and best television company in the business. Sonatone’s about your only competitor.”

“Sonatone’s squeezing me out.”

Gallegher looked puzzled. “I don’t see how. You’ve got the best prod-uct. Tn-dimensional color, all sorts of modern improvements, the top actors, musicians, singers—”

“No use,” the robot said. “I won’t.”

“Shut up, Joe. You’re tops in your field, Brock. I’ll hand you that. And I’ve always heard you were fairly ethical. What’s Sonatone got on you?”

Brock made helpless gestures. “Oh, it’s politics. The bootleg theaters. I can’t buck ‘em. Sonatone helped elect the present administration, and the police just wink when I try to have the bootleggers raided.”

“Bootleg theaters?” Gallegher asked, scowling a trifle. “I’ve heard something—”

“It goes ‘way back. To the old sound-film days. Home television killed sound film and big theaters. People were conditioned away from sitting in audience groups to watch a screen. The home televisors got good. It was more fun to sit in an easy-chair, drink beer, and watch the show. Television wasn’t a rich man’s hobby by that time. The meter system brought the price down to middle-class levels. Everybody knows that.”

“I don’t,” Gallegher said. “I never pay attention to what goes on out-side of my lab, unless I have to. Liquor and a selective mind. I ignore everything that doesn’t affect me directly. Explain the whole thing in detail, so I’ll get a complete picture. I don’t mind repetition. Now, what about this meter system of yours?”

“Televisors are installed free. We never sell ‘em; we rent them. Peo-pie pay according to how many hours they have the set tuned in. We run a continuous show, stage plays, wire-tape films, operas, orchestras, singers, vaudeville—everything. If you use your televisor a lot, you pay

proportionately. The man comes around once a month and reads the meter. Which is a fair system. Anybody can afford a Vox-View. Sona-tone and the other companies do the same thing, but Sonatone’s the only big competitor I’ve got. At least, the only one that’s crooked as hell. The rest of the boys—they’re smaller than I am, but I don’t step on their toes. Nobody’s ever called me a louse,” Brock said darkly.

“So what?”

“So Sonatone has started to depend on audience appeal. It was im-possible till lately—you couldn’t magnify tn-dimensional television on a big screen without streakiness and mirage-effect. That’s why the regular three-by-four home screens were used. Results were perfect. But Sona-tone’s bought a lot of the ghost theaters all over the country—”

“What’s a ghost theater?” Gallegher asked. -

“Well—before sound films collapsed, the world was thinking big. Big—you

know? Ever heard of the Radio City Music Hall? That wasn't in it! Television was coming in, and competition was fierce. Sound-film theaters got bigger and more elaborate. They were palaces. Tremendous. But when television was perfected, nobody went to the theaters any more, and it was often too expensive a job to tear 'em down. Ghost theaters—see? Big ones and little ones. Renovated them. And they're showing Sonatone programs. Audience appeal is quite a factor. The theaters charge plenty, but people flock into 'em. Novelty and the mob instinct."

Callegher closed his eyes. "What's to stop you from doing the same thing?"

"Patents," Brock said briefly. "I mentioned that dimensional television couldn't be used on big screens till lately. Sonatone signed an agree-ment with me ten years ago that any enlarging improvements would be used mutually. They crawled out of that contract. Said it was faked, and the courts upheld them. They uphold the courts—politics. Anyhow, Sonatone's technicians worked out a method of using the large screen. They took out patents—twenty-seven patents, in fact, covering every possible variation on the idea. My technical staff has been working day and night trying to find some similar method that won't be an in-fringement, but Sonatone's got it all sewed up. They've a system called the Magna. It can be hooked up to any type of televisor—but they'll only allow it to be used on Sonatone machines. See?"

"Unethical, but legal," Gallegher said. "Still, you're giving your cus-tomers more for their money. People want good stuff. The size doesn't matter."

"Yeah," Brock said bitterly, "but that isn't all. The newstapes are full of A A.—it's a new catchword. Audience Appeal. The herd instinct.

You're right about people wanting good stuff—but would you buy Scotch at four a quart if you could get it for half that amount?"

"Depends on the quality. WThat~s happening?"

"Bootleg theaters," Brock said. "They've opened all over the coun-try. They show Vox-View products, and they're using the Magna en-larger system Sonatone's got patented. The admission price is low— lower than the rate of owning a Vox-View in your own home. There's audience appeal. There's the thrill of something a bit illegal. People are having their Vox-Views taken out right and left. I know why. They can go to a bootleg theater instead."

"It's illegal," Gallegher said thoughtfully.

"So were speakeasies, in the Prohibition Era. A matter of protection, that's all. I can't get any action through the courts. I've tried. I'm run-ning in the red. Eventually I'll be broke. I can't lower my home rental fees on Vox-Views. They're nominal already. I make my profits through quantity. Now, no profits. As for these bootleg theaters, it's pretty ob-vious who's backing them."

"Sonatone?"

"Sure. Silent partners. They get the take at the box office. What they want is to squeeze me out of business, so they'll have a monopoly. After that, they'll give the public junk and pay their artists starvation salaries. With me it's different. I pay my staff what they're worth— plenty."

"And you offered me a lousy ten thousand," Gallegher remarked. *"Uh-huhl"*

"That was only the first instalment," Brock said hastily. "You can name your own fee. Within reason," he added. -

"I shall. An astronomical sum. Did I say I'd accept the commission a week ago?"

“You did.”

“Then I must have had some idea how to solve the problem.” Galle-gher pondered. “Let’s see. I didn’t mention anything in particular, did

I?”

“You kept talking about marble slabs and. . . uh. . . your sweetie.”

“Then I was singing,” Gallegher explained largely. “St. James In-firmary.’ Singing calms my nerves, and God knows they need it some-times. Music and liquor. I often wonder what the vintners buy—”

“WThat?”

“One half so precious as the stuff they sell. Let it go. I am quoting Omar. It means nothing. Are your technicians any good?”

“The best. And the best paid.”

“They can’t find a magnifying process that won’t infringe on the Sonatone Magna patents?”

“In a nutshell, that’s it.”

“I suppose I’ll have to do some research,” Gallegher said sadly. “I hate it like poison. Still, the sum of the parts equals the whole. Does that make sense to you? It doesn’t to me. I have trouble with words. After I say things, I start wondering what I’ve said. Better than watch-ing a play,” he finished wildly. “I’ve got a headache. Too much talk and not enough liquor. Where were we?”

“Approaching the madhouse,” Brock suggested. “If you weren’t my last resort, I’d—”

“No use,” the robot said squeakily. “You might as well tear up your contract, Brock. I won’t sign it. Fame means nothing to me—nothing.”

“If you don’t shut up,” Gallegher warned, “I’m going to scream in your ears.”

“All right!” Joe shrilled. “Beat me! Co on, beat me! The meaner you are, the faster I’ll have my nervous system disrupted, and then I’ll be dead. I don’t care. I’ve got no instinct of self-preservation. Beat me. See if I care.”

“He’s right, you know,” the scientist said after a pause. “And it’s the only logical way to respond to blackmail or threats. The sooner it’s over, the better. There aren’t any gradations with Joe. Anything really pain-ful to him will destroy him. And he doesn’t give a damn.”

“Neither do I,” Brock grunted. ‘What I want to find out—”

“Yeah. I know. Well, I’ll wander around and see what occurs to me. Can I get into your studios?”

“Here’s a pass.” Brock scribbled something on the back of a card. “Will you get to work on it right away?”

“Sure,” Gallegher lied. “Now you run along and take it easy. Try and cool off. Everything’s under control. I’ll either find a solution to your problem pretty soon or else—”

“Or else what?”

“Or else I won’t,” the scientist finished blandly, and fingered the but-tons on a control panel near the couch. “I’m tired of Martinis. Why didn’t I make that robot a mechanical bartender, while I was at it? Even the effort of selecting and pushing buttons is depressing at times. Yeah, I’ll get to work on the business, Brock. Forget it.”

The magnate hesitated. “Well, you’re my only hope. I needn’t bother to mention that if there’s anything I can do to help you—”

“A blonde,” Gallegher murmured. “That gorgeous, gorgeous star of yours, Silver O’Keefe. Send her over. Otherwise I want nothing.”

“Good-by, Brock,” the robot said squeakily. “Sorry we couldn’t get to-

gether on the contract, but at least you’ve had the ineluctable delight of hearing my beautiful voice, not to mention the pleasure of seeing me. Don’t tell too many people how lovely I am. I really don’t want to be bothered with mobs. They’re noisy.”

“You don’t know what dogmatism means till you’ve talked to Joe,” Gallegher said. “Oh, well. See you later. Don’t forget the blonde.”

Brock’s lips quivered. He searched for words, gave it up as a vain task, and turned to the door.

“Good-by, you ugly man,” Joe said.

Gallegher winced as the door slammed, though it was harder on the robot’s supersensitive ears than on his own. “*Why* do you go on like that?” he inquired. “You nearly gave the guy apoplexy.”

“Surely he didn’t think he was beautiful,” Joe remarked.

“Beauty’s in the eye of the beholder.”

“How stupid you are. You’re ugly, too.”

“And you’re a collection of rattletrap gears, pistons and cogs. You’ve got worms,” said Gallegher, referring of course, to certain mechanisms in the robot’s body.

“I’m lovely.” Joe stared raptly into the mirror.

“Maybe, to you. Why did I make you transparent, I wonder?”

“So others could admire me. I have X-ray vision, of course.”

“And wheels in your head. Why did I put your radio-atomic brain in your stomach? Protection?”

Joe didn’t answer. He was humming in a maddeningly squeaky voice, shrill and nerve-racking. Gallegher stood it for a while, fortifying him-self with a gin rickey from the siphon.

“Get it up!” he yelped at last. “You sound like an old-fashioned sub-way train going round a curve.”

“You’re merely jealous,” Joe scoffed, but obediently raised his tone to a supersonic pitch. There was silence for a half-minute. Then all the dogs in the neighborhood began to howl.

Wearily Gallegher dragged his lanky frame up from the couch. He might as well get out. Obviously there was no peace to be had in the laboratory. Not with that animated junk pile inflating his ego all over the place. Joe began to laugh in an off-key cackle. Gallegher winced.

“‘What now?”

“You’ll find out.”

Logic of causation and effect, influenced by probabilities, X-ray vision and other enigmatic senses the robot no doubt possessed. Gallegher cursed softly, found a shapeless black hat, and made for the door. He

opened it to admit a short, fat man who bounced painfully off the scien-tist’s

stomach.

'Whoof! Uh. What a corny sense of humor that jackass has. Hello, Mr. Kennicott. Glad to see you. Sorry I can't offer you a drink."

Mr. Kennicott's swarthy face twisted malignantly. "Don' wanna no drink. Wanna my money. You gimme. Howzabout it?"

Gallegher looked thoughtfully at nothing. "Well, the fact is, I was just going to collect a check."

"I sella you my diamonds. You say you gonna make somet'ing wit' 'em. You gimme check before. It go bounca, bounca, bounca. Why is?"

"It was rubber," Gallegher said faintly. "I never can keep track of my bank balance."

Kennicott showed symptoms of going bounca on the threshold. "You gimme back diamonds, eh?"

"Well, I used 'em in an experiment. I forget just what. You know, Mr. Kennicott, I think I was a little drunk when I bought them, wasn't

I?"

"Dronk," the little man agreed. "Mad wit' vino, sure. So whatta? I wait no longer. Awready you put me off too much. Pay up now or elsa."

"Go away, you dirty man," Joe said from within the room. "You're awful."

Gallegher hastily shouldered Kennicott out into the street and latched the door behind him. "A parrot," he explained. "I'm going to wring its neck pretty soon. Now about that money. I admit I owe it to you. I've just taken on a big job, and when I'm paid, you'll get yours."

"Bah to such stuff," Kennicott said. "You gotta position, eh? You are technician wit' some big company, eh? Ask for ahead-salary."

"I did," Gallegher sighed. "I've drawn my salary for six months ahead. Now look. I'll have that dough for you in a couple of days. Maybe I can get an advance from my client. O.K.?"

"No?"

"Ah-h, nutsa. I waita one day. Two daysá, maybe. Enough. You get money. Awright. If not, O.K., *calabozo* for you."

"Two days is plenty," Gallegher said, relieved. "Say, are there any of those bootleg theaters around here?"

"Better you get to work an' not waste time."

"That's my work. I'm making a survey. How can I find a bootleg place?"

"Easy. You go downtown, see guy in doorway. He sell you tickets. Anywhere. All over."

"Swell," Gallegher said, and bade the little man adieti. Why had he bought diamonds from Kennicott? It would be almost worth while to have his subconscious amputated. It did the most extraordinary things. It worked on inflexible principles of logic, but that logic was com-pletely alien to Gallegher's conscious mind. The results, though, were often surprisingly good, and always surprising. That was the worst of being a scientist who knew no science—who played by ear.

There was diamond dust in a retort in the laboratory, from some unsatisfactory experiment Gallegher's subconscious had performed; and he had a fleeting memory

of buying the stones from Kennicott. Curious. Maybe—oh, yeah. They'd gone into Joe. Bearings or something. Dis-mantling the robot wouldn't help now, for the diamonds had certainly been reground. Why the devil hadn't he used commercial stones, quite as satisfactory, instead of purchasing blue-whites of the finest water? The best was none too good for Gallegher's subconscious. It had a fine freedom from commercial instincts. It just didn't understand the price system of the basic principles of economics.

Gallegher wandered downtown like a Diogenes seeking truth. It was early evening, and the luminates were flickering on overhead, pale bars of light against darkness. A sky sign blazed above Manhattan's towers. Air-taxis, skimming along at various arbitrary levels, paused for pas-sengers at the elevator landings. Heigh-ho.

Downtown, Gallegher began to look for doorways. He found an oc-cupied one at last, but the man was selling post cards. Gallegher declined and headed for the nearest bar, feeling the needs of replenish-ment. It was a mobile bar, combining the worst features of a Coney Island ride with uninspired cocktails, and Gallegher hesitated on the threshold. But at last he seized a chair as it swung past and relaxed as much as possible. He ordered three rickeys and drank them in rapid succession. After that he called the bartender over and asked him about bootleg theaters.

"Hell, yes," the man said, producing a sheaf of tickets from his apron. "How many?"

"One. Where do I go?"

"Two-twenty-eight. This street. Ask for Tony."

"Thanks," Gallegher said, and having paid exorbitantly, crawled out of the chair and weaved away. Mobile bars were an improvement he didn't appreciate. Drinking, he felt, should be performed in a state of stasis, since one eventually reached that stage, anyway.

The door was at the bottom of a flight of steps, and there was a grilled panel set in it. When Gallegher knocked, the visascreen lit up

—obviously a one-way circuit, for the doorman was invisible.

"Tony here?" Gallegher said.

The door opened, revealing a tired-looking man in pneumo-slacks, which failed in their purpose of building up his skinny figure. "Got a ticket? Let's have it. O.K., bud. Straight ahead. Show now going on. Liquor served in the bar on your left."

Gallegher pushed through soundproofed curtains at the end of a short corridor and found himself in what appeared to be the foyer of an ancient theater, *circa* 1980, when plastics were the great fad. He smelled out the bar, drank expensively priced cheap liquor, and, forti-fied, entered the theater itself. It was nearly full. The great screen—a Magna, presumably—was filled with people doing things to a spaceship. Either an adventure film or a newsreel, Gallegher realized. -

Only the thrill of lawbreaking would have enticed the audience into the bootleg theater. It smelled. It was certainly run on a shoe-string, and there were no ushers. But it was illicit, and therefore well patronized. Gallegher looked thoughtfully at the screen. No streakiness, no mirage effect. A Magna enlarger had been fitted to a Vox-View un-licensed televisor, and one of Brock's greatest stars was emoting effec-tively for the benefit of the bootleggers' patrons. Simple highjacking. Yeah.

After a while Gallegher went out, noticing a uniformed policeman in one of the

aisle seats. He grinned sardonically. The flatfoot hadn't paid his admission, of course. Politics were as usual.

Two blocks down the street a blaze of light announced SONATONE BIJOU. This, of course, was one of the legalized theaters, and corre-spondingly high-priced. Gallegher recklessly squandered a small fortune on a good seat. He was interested in comparing notes, and discovered that, as far as he could make out, the Magna in the Bijou and the boot-leg theater were identical. Both did their job perfectly. The difficult task of enlarging television screens had been successfully surmounted.

In the Bijou, however, all was palatial. Resplendent ushers salaamed to the rugs. Bars dispensed free liquor, in reasonable quantities. There was a Turkish bath. Gallegher went through a door labelled MEN and emerged quite dazzled by the splendor of the place. For at least ten min-utes afterward he felt like a Sybarite.

All of which meant that those who could afford it went to the legal-ized Sonatone theaters, and the rest attended the bootleg places. All but a few homebodies, who weren't carried off their feet by the new fad. Eventually Brock would be forced out of business for lack of revenue. Sonatone would take over, jacking up their prices and concentrating on making money. Amusement was necessary to life; people had been

conditioned to television. There was no substitute. They'd pay and pay for inferior talent, once Sonatone succeeded in their squeeze.

Gallegher left the Bijou and hailed an air-taxi. He gave the address of Vox-View's Long Island studio, with some vague hope of getting a drawing account out of Brock. Then, too, he wanted to investigate further.

Vox-View's eastern offices sprawled wildly over Long Island, border-ing the Sound, a vast collection of variously shaped buildings. Gallegher instinctively found the commissary, where he absorbed more liquor as a precautionary measure. His subconscious had a heavy job ahead, and he didn't want it handicapped by lack of complete freedom. Besides, the Collins was good.

After one drink, he decided he'd had enough for a while. He wasn't a superman, though his capacity was slightly incredible. Just enough for objective clarity and subjective release— "Is the studio always open at night?" he asked the waiter. "Sure. Some of the stages, anyway. It's a round-the-clock program." "The commissary's full."

"We get the airport crowd, too. 'Nother?"

Gallegher shook his head and went out. The card Brock had given him provided entree at a gate, and he went first of all to the big-shot's office. Brock wasn't there, but loud voices emerged, shrilly feminine.

The secretary said, "Just a minute, please," and used her interoffice visor. Presently—"Will you go in?"

Gallegher did. The office was a honey, functional and luxurious at the same time. Three-dimensional stills were in niches along the walls— Vox-View's biggest stars. A small, excited, pretty brunette was sitting behind the desk, and a blonde angel was standing furiously on the other side of it. Gallegher recognized the angel as Silver O'Keefe.

He seized the opportunity. "Hiya, Miss O'Keefe. Will you autograph an ice cube

for me? In a highball?”

Silver looked feline. “Sorry, darling, but I’m a working girl. And I’m busy right now.”

The brunette scratched a cigarette. “Let’s settle this later, Silver. Pop said to see this guy if he dropped in. It’s important.”

“It’ll be settled,” Silver said. “And soon.” She made an exit. Gallegher whistled thoughtfully at the closed door.

“You can’t have it,” the brunette said. “It’s under contract. And it wants to get out of the contract, so it can sign up with Sonatone. Rats desert a sinking ship. Silver’s been kicking her head off ever since she read the storm signals.”

“Yeah?”

“Sit down and smoke or something. rm Patsy Brock. Pop runs this business, and I manage the controls whenever he blows his top. The old goat can’t stand trouble. He takes it as a personal affront.”

Gallegher found a chair. “So Silver’s trying to renege, eh? How many others?”

“Not many. Most of ‘em are loyal. But, of course, if we bust up—” Patsy Brock shrugged. “They’ll either work for Sonatone for their cakes, or else do without.”

“Uh-huh. Well—I want to see your technicians. I want to look over the ideas they’ve worked out for enlarger screens.”

“Suit yourself,” Patsy said. “It’s not much use. You just can’t make a televisor enlarger without infringing on some Sonatone patent.” -

She pushed a button, murmured something into a visor, and presently two tall glasses appeared through a slot in the desk. “Mr. Gallegher?”

“Well, since it’s a Collins—”

“I could tell by your breath,” Patsy said enigmatically. “Pop told me he’d seen you. He seemed a bit upset, especially by your new robot. What is it like, anyway?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Gallegher said, at a loss. “It’s got lots of abilities

—new senses, I think—but I haven’t the slightest idea what it’s good for. Except admiring itself in a mirror.”

Patsy nodded. “I’d like to see it sometime. But about this Sonatone business. Do you think you can figure out an answer?”

“Possibly. Probably.”

“Not certainly?”

“Certainly, then. Of that there is no manner of doubt—no possible doubt whatever.”

“Because it’s important to me. The man who owns Sonatone is Ella Tone. A piratical skunk. He blusters. He’s got a son named Jimmy. And Jimmy, believe it or not, has read ‘Romeo and Juliet.”

“Nice guy?”

“A louse. A big, brawny louse. He wants me to marry him.”

“‘Two families, both alike in—’”

“Spare me,” Patsy interrupted. “I always thought Romeo was a dope, anyway. And if I ever thought I was going aisling with Jimmy Tone, I’d buy a one-way ticket to the nut hatch. No, Mr. Gallegher, it’s not like that. No hibiscus blossoms. Jimmy has proposed to me—his idea of a proposal, by the way, is to get a half Nelson on a girl and tell her how lucky she is.”

“An,” said Gallegher, diving into his Collins.

“This whole idea—the patent monopoly and the bootleg theaters—is

Jimmy’s. I’m sure of that. His father’s in on it, too, of course, but Jimmy Tone is the bright little boy who started it.”

“Why?”

“Two birds with one stone. Sonatone will have a monopoly on the business, and Jimmy thinks he’ll get me. He’s a little mad. He can’t be-lieve I’m in earnest in refusing him, and he expects me to break down and say ‘Yes’ after a while. Which I won’t, no matter what happens. But it’s a personal matter. I can’t let him put this trick over on us. I want that self-sufficient smirk wiped off his face.”

“You just don’t like him, eh?” Gallegher remarked. “I don’t blame you, if he’s like that. Well, I’ll do my damnedest. However, I’ll need an expense account.”

“How much?”

Gallegher named a sum. Patsy styloed a check for a far smaller amount. The scientist looked hurt.

“It’s no use,” Patsy said, grinning crookedly. “I’ve heard of you, Mr. Gallegher. You’re completely irresponsible. If you had more than this, you’d figure you didn’t need any more, and you’d forget the whole mat-ter. I’ll issue more checks to you when you need ‘em—but I’ll want item-ized expense accounts.”

“You wrong me,” Gallegher said, brightening. “I was figuring on taking you to a night club. Naturally I don’t want to take you to a dive. The big places cost money. Now if you’ll just write another check—”

Patsy laughed. “No.”

“Want to buy a robot?”

“Not that kind, anyway.”

“Then I’m washed up,” Gallegher sighed. “Well, what about—”

At *this* point the visor hummed. A blank, transparent face grew on the screen. Gears were clicking rapidly inside the round head. Patsy gave a small shriek and shrank back.

“Tell Gallegher Joe’s here, you lucky girl,” a squeaky voice an-nounced. “You may treasure the sound and sight of me till your dying day. One touch of beauty in a world of drabness—”

Gallegher circled the desk and looked at the screen. “What the hell. How did you come to life?”

“I had a problem to solve.”

“How’d you know where to reach me?”

“I vastened you,” the robot said.

“V,That?”

“I vastened you were at the Vox-View studios, with Patsy Brock.”

“What’s vastened?” Gallegher wanted to know.

“It’s a sense I’ve got. You’ve nothing remotely like it, so I can’t de-scribe it to you. It’s like a combination of sagrazi and prescience.”

“Sagrazi?”

“Oh, you don’t have sagrazi, either, do you. Well, don’t waste my time. I want to go back to the mirror.”

“Does he always talk like that?” Patsy put in.

"Nearly always. Sometimes it makes even less sense. O.K., Joe. Now what?"

"You're not working for Brock any more," the robot said. "You're working for the Sonatone people."

Gallegher breathed deeply. "Keep talking. You're crazy, though."

"I don't like Kennicott. He annoys me. He's *too* ugly. His vibrations grate on my sagrazi."

"Never mind him," Gallegher said, not wishing to discuss his diamond-buying activities before the girl. "Get back to—"

"But I knew Kennicott would keep coming back till he got his money. So when Ella and James Tone came to the laboratory, I got a check from them."

Patsy's hand gripped Gallegher's biceps. "Steady! What's going on here? The old double cross?"

"No. Wait. Let me get to the bottom of this. Joe, damn your trans-parent hide, just what did you do? How could you get a check from the Tones?"

"I pretended to be you."

"Sure," Gallegher said with savage sarcasm. 'That explains it. We're twins. We look exactly alike."

"I hypnotized them," Joe explained. "I made them think I was you."

"You can do *that?"*

"Yes. It surprised me a bit. Still, if I'd thought, I'd have vastened I could do it."

"You. . - yeah, sure. I'd have vastened the same thing myself. *What happened?"*

"The Tones must have suspected Brock would ask you to help him. They offered an exclusive contract—you work for them and nobody else. Lots of money. Well, I pretended to be you, and said all right. So I signed the contract—it's your signature, by the way—and got a check from them and mailed it to Kennicott."

"The whole check?" Gallegher asked feebly. "How much was it?"

"Twelve thousand."

"They only offered me that?"

"No," the robot said, "they offered a hundred thousand, and two thou-sand a week for five years. But I merely wanted enough to pay Kenni-cott and make sure he wouldn't come back and bother me. The Tones were satisfied when I said twieve thousand would be enough."

Gallegher made an inarticulate, gurgling sound deep in his throat. Joe nodded thoughtfully.

"I thought I had better notify you that you're working for Sonatone now. Well, I'll go back to the mirror and sing to myself."

"Wait," the scientist said. "Just wait, Joe. With my own two hands I'm going to rip you gear from gear and stamp on your fragments."

"It won't hold in court," Patsy said, gulping.

"It will," Joe told her cheerily. "You may have one last, satisfying look at me, and then I must go." He went.

Gallegher drained his Collins at a draft. "I'm shocked sober," he in-formed the girl. "What did I put into that robot? What abnormal senses has he got? Hypnotizing people into believing he's me—I'm him—I don't

know what I mean.” -

“Is this a gag?” Patsy said shortly, after a pause. “You didn’t sign up with Sonatone yourself, by any chance, and have your robot call up here to give you an out—an alibi? I’m just wondering.”

“Don’t. Joe signed a contract with Sonatone, not me. But—figure it out: If the signature’s a perfect copy of mine, if Joe hypnotized the Tones into thinking they saw me instead of him, if there are witnesses to the signature—the two Tones are witnesses, of course—Oh, hell.”

Patsy’s eyes were narrowed. “We’ll pay you as much as Sonatone of-fered. On a contingent basis. But you’re working for Vox-View—that’s understood.”

“Sure.”

Gallegher looked longingly at his empty glass. Sure. He was working for Vox-View. But, to all legal appearances, he had signed a contract giving his exclusive services to Sonatone for a period of five years—and for a sum of twelve thousand! *Yipel* What was it they’d offered? A hun-dred thousand flat, and. . . and— It wasn’t the principle of the thing, it was the money. Now Gallegher

was sewed up tighter than a banded pigeon. If Sonatone could win a court suit, he was legally bound to them for five years. With no further emolument. He had to get out of that contract, somehow—and at the same time solve Brock’s problem.

Why not Joe? The robot, with his surprising talents, had got Gal-legher into this spot. He ought to be able to get the scientist out. He’d better-or the proud robot would soon be admiring himself piecemeal.

“That’s *it,*” Gallegher said under his breath. “I’ll talk to Joe. Patsy,

feed me liquor in a hurry and send me to the technical department. I want to see those blueprints.”

The girl looked at him suspiciously. “All right. If you try to sell us out—”

“I’ve been sold out myself. Sold down the river. I’m afraid of that ro-bot. He’s vastened me into quite a spot. That’s right, Collinses.” Gal-legher drank long and deeply.

After that, Patsy took him to the tech offices. The reading of three-dimensional blueprints was facilitated with a scanner—a selective de-vice which eliminated confusion. Gallegher studied the plans long and thoughtfully. There were copies of the patent Sonatone prints, too, and, as far as he could tell, Sonatone had covered the ground beautifully. There weren’t any outs. Unless one used an entirely new principle— But new principles couldn’t be plucked out of the air. Nor would that solve the problem completely. Even if Vox-View owned a new type of enlarger that didn’t infringe on Sonatone’s Magna, the bootleg the-aters would still be in existence, pulling the trade. A. A.—audience ap-peal—was a prime factor now. It had to be considered. The puzzle wasn’t a purely scientific one. There was the human equation as well.

Gallegher stored the necessary information in his mind, neatly in-dexed on shelves. Later he’d use what he wanted. For the moment, he was completely baffled. Something worried him.

What? -The Sonatone affair.

“I want to get in touch with the Tones,” he told Patsy. “Any ideas?”

“I can reach ‘em on a visor.”

Gallegher shook his head. “Psychological handicap. It’s too easy to break the connection.”

“Well, if you’re in a hurry, you’ll probably find the boys night club-bing. I’ll go see what I can find out.” Patsy scuttled off, and Silver O’Keefe appeared from behind a screen.

“I’m shameless,” she announced. “I always listen at keyholes. Some-times I hear interesting things. If you want to see the Tones, they’re at the Castle Club. And I think I’ll take you up on that drink.”

Gallegher said, “O.K. You get a taxi. I’ll tell Patsy we’re going.”

“She’ll hate that,” Silver remarked. “Meet you outside the commissary in ten minutes. Get a shave while you’re at it.”

Patsy Brock wasn’t in her office, but Gallegher left word. After that, he visited the service lounge, smeared invisible shave cream on his face, left it there for a couple of minutes, and wiped it off with a treated towel. The bristles came away with the cream. Slightly re-

freshed, Gallegher joined Silver at the rendezvous and hailed an air-taxi. Presently they were leaning back on the cushions, puffing cigarettes and eying each other warily.

‘Well?” Gallegher said.

“Jimmy Tone tried to date me up tonight. That’s how I knew where to find him.”

‘Well?”

“I’ve been asking questions around the lot tonight. It’s unusual for an outsider to get into the Vox-View administration offices. I went around saying, ‘Who’s Gallegher?”

“What did you find out?”

“Enough to give me a few ideas. Brock hired you, eh? I can guess why.”

“Ergo what?”

“I’ve a habit of landing on my feet,” Silver said, shrugging. She knew how to shrug. “Vox-View’s going bust. Sonatone’s taking over. Unless—”

“Unless I figure out an answer.”

‘That’s right. I want to know which side of the fence I’m going to land on. You’re the lad who can probably tell me. Who’s going to win?”

“You always bet on the winning side, eh?” Gallegher inquired. “Have you no ideals, wench? Is there no truth in you? Ever hear of ethics and scruples?”

Silver beamed happily. ‘Did you?”

‘Well, I’ve heard of ‘em. Usually I’m too drunk to figure out what they mean. The trouble is, my subconscious is completely amoral, and when it takes over, logic’s the only law.”

She threw her cigarette into the East River. “Will you tip me off which side of the fence is the right one?”

“Truth will triumph,” Gallegher said piously. “It always does. How-ever, I figure truth is a variable, so we’re right back where we started. All right, sweetheart. I’ll answer your question. Stay on my side if you want to be safe.”

“Which side are you on?”

“God knows,” Gallegher said. “Consciously I’m on Brock’s side. But my

subconscious may have different ideas. We'll see."

Silver looked vaguely dissatisfied, but didn't say anything. The taxi swooped down to the Castle roof, grounding with pneumatic gentle-ness. The Club itself was downstairs, in an immense room shaped like half a melon turned upside down. Each table was on a transparent plat-form that could be raised on its shaft to any height at will. Smaller serv-ice elevators allowed waiters to bring drinks to the guests. There wasn't any particular reason for this arrangement, but at least it was novel,

and only extremely heavy drinkers ever fell from their tables. Lately the management had taken to hanging transparent nets under the plat-forms, for safety's sake.

The Tones, father and son, were up near the roof, drinking with two lovelies. Silver towed Gallegher to a service lift, and the man closed his eyes as he was elevated skyward. The liquor in his stomach screamed protest. He lurched forward, clutched at Elia Tone's bald head, and dropped into a seat beside the magnate. His searching hand found Jimmy Tone's glass, and he drained it hastily.

"What the hell," Jimmy said.

"It's Gallegher," Ella announced. "And Silver. A pleasant surprise. Join us?"

"Only socially," Silver said. -

Gallegher, fortified by the liquor, peered at the two men. Jimmy Tone was a big, tanned, handsome lout with a jutting jaw and an offensive grin. His father combined the worst features of Nero and a crocodile.

"We're celebrating," Jimmy said. "What made you change your mind, Silver? You said you had to work tonight."

"Gallegher wanted to see you. I don't know why."

Elia's cold eyes grew even more glacial. "All right. Why?"

"I hear I signed some sort of contract with you," the scientist said.

"Yeah. Here's a photostatic copy. What about it?"

'Wait a minute." Gallegher scanned the document. It~was apparently his own signature. Damn that robot!

"It's a fake," he said at last.

Jimmy laughed loudly. "I get it. A hold up. Sorry, pal, but you're sewed up. You signed that in the presence of witnesses."

"Well—" Gallegher said wistfully. "I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I said a robot forged my name to it—"

"Haw!" Jimmy remarked.

"—hypnotizing you into believing you were seeing me."

Elia stroked his gleaming bald head. "Candidly, no. Robots can't do that."

"Mine can."

"Prove it. Prove it in court. If you can do that, of course—" Ella chuckled. "Then you might get the verdict."

Gallegher's eyes narrowed. "Hadn't thought of that. However—I hear you offered me a hundred thousand flat, as well as a weekly salary."

"Sure, sap," Jimmy said. "Only you said all you needed was twelve thousand. Which was what you got. Tell you what, though. We'll pay you a bonus for every usable product you make for Sonatone."

Gallegher got up. "Even my subconscious doesn't like these lugs," he told Silver.

“Let’s go.”

“I think I’ll stick around.”

“Remember the fence,” he warned cryptically. “But suit yourself. I’ll run along.”

Ella said, “Remember, Gallegher, you’re working for us. If we hear of you doing any favors for Brock, we’ll slap an injunction on you be-fore you can take a deep breath.”

“Yeah?”

The Tones deigned no answer. Gallegher unhappily found the lift and descended to the floor. What now? Joe.

Fifteen minutes later Gallegher let himself into his laboratory. The lights were blazing, and dogs were barking frantically for blocks around. Joe stood before the mirror, singing inaudibly.

“I’m going to take a sledge hammer to you,” Gallegher said. “Start saying your prayers, you misbegotten collection of cogs. So help mc, I’m going to sabotage you.”

“All right, beat me,” Joe squeaked. “See if I care. You’re merely jeal-ous of my beauty.”

“Beauty?”

“You can’t see all of it—you’ve only six senses.”

“Five.”

“Six. I’ve a lot more. Naturally my full splendor is revealed only to me. But you can see enough and hear enough to realize part of my love-liness, anyway.”

“You squeak like a rusty tin wagon,” Gallegher growled.

“You have dull ears. Mine are supersensitive. You miss the full tonal values of my voice, of course. Now be quiet. Talking disturbs me. I’m appreciating my gear movements.”

“Live in your fool’s paradise while you can. Wait’ll I find a sledge.”

“All right, beat me. What do I care?”

Gallegher sat down wearily on the couch, staring at the robot’s trans-parent back. “You’ve certainly screwed things up for me. What did you sign that Sonatone contract for?”

“I told you. So Kennicott wouldn’t come around and bother me.”

“Of all the selfish, lunk-headed. . . *uh!* Well, you got me into a sweet mess. The Tones can hold me to the letter of the contract unless I prove I didn’t sign it. All right. You’re going to help me. You’re going into court with me and turn on your hypnotism or whatever it is. You’re go-ing to prove to a judge that you did and can masquerade as me.”

“Won’t,” said the robot. “Why should I?”

“Because you got me into this,” Gallegher yelped. “You’ve got to get me out!”

“Why?”

“Why? Because. . . uh. . . well, it’s common decency!”

“Human values don’t apply to robots,” Joe said. “What care I for se-mantics? I refuse to waste time I could better employ admiring my beauty. I shall stay here before the mirror forever and ever—”

“The hell you will,” Gallegher snarled. “I’ll smash you to atoms.”

“All right, I don’t care.”

“You don’t?”

“You and your instinct for self-preservation,” the robot said, rather sneeringly. “I suppose it’s necessary for you, though. Creatures of such surpassing ugliness would destroy themselves out of sheer shame if. they didn’t have something like that to keep them alive.”

“Suppose I take away your mirror?” Gallegher asked in a hopeless voice.

For answer Joe shot his eyes out on their stalks. “Do I need a mirror? Besides, I can vasten myself lokishly.”

“Never mind that. I don’t want to go crazy for a while yet. Listen, dope, a robot’s supposed to *do* something. Something useful, I mean.”

“I do. Beauty is all.”

Gallegher squeezed his eyes shut, trying to think. “Now look. Sup-pose I invent a new type of enlarger screen for Brock. The Tones will impound it. I’ve got to be legally free to work for Brock, or—”

“Look!” Joe cried squeakily. “They go round! How lovely.” He stared in ecstasy at his whirring insides. Gallegher went pale with impotent fury.

“Damn you!” he muttered. “I’ll find some way to bring pressure to bear. I’m going to bed.” He rose and spitefully snapped off the lights.

“It doesn’t matter,” the robot said. “I can see in the dark, too.”

The door slammed behind Gallegher. In the silence Joe began to sing tunelessly to himself.

Gallegher’s refrigerator covered an entire wall of his kitchen. It was filled mostly with liquors that required chilling, including the imported canned beer with which he always started his binges. The next morn-ing, heavy-eyed and disconsolate, Gallegher searched for tomato juice, took a wry sip, and hastily washed it down with rye. Since he was al-ready a week gone in bottle-dizziness, beer wasn’t indicated now—he always worked cumulatively, by progressive stages. The food service popped a hermetically sealed breakfast on a table, and Gallegher mo-rosely toyed with a bloody steak.

Well?

Court, he decided, was the only recourse. He knew little about the robot’s psychology. But a judge would certainly be impressed by Joe’s talents. The evidence of robots was not legally admissible—still, if Joe could be considered as a machine capable of hypnotism, the Sonatone contract might be declared null and void.

Gallegher used his visor to start the ball rolling. Harrison Brock still had certain political powers of pull, and the hearing was set for that very day. What would happen, though, only God and the robot knew.

Several hours passed in intensive but futile thought. Gallegher could think of no way in which to force the robot to do what he wanted. If only he could remember the purpose for which Joe had been created— but he couldn’t. Still— At noon he entered the laboratory. “Listen, stupid,” he said, “you’re coming to court with me. Now.” ‘Won’t.”

“O.K.” Gallegher opened the door to admit two husky men in over-alls, carrying a

stretcher. “Put him in, boys.”

Inwardly he was slightly nervous. Joe’s powers were quite unknown, his potentialities an x quantity. However, the robot wasn’t very large, and, though he struggled and screamed in a voice of frantic squeaki-ness, he was easily loaded on the stretcher and put in a strait jacket.

“Stop it! You can’t do this to me! Let me go, do you hear? Let me go!”

“Outside,” Gallegher said.

Joe, protesting valiantly, was carried out and loaded into an air van. Once there, he quieted, looking up blankly at nothing. Gallegher sat down on a bench beside the prostrate robot. The van glided up.

“Well?”

“Suit yourself,” Joe said. “You got me all upset, or I could have hyp-notized you all. I still could, you know. I could make you all run around barking like dogs.”

Gallegher twitched a little. “Better not.”

“I won’t. It’s beneath my dignity. I shall simply lie here and admire myself. I told you I don’t need a mirror. I can vasten my beauty without it.”

“Look,” Gallegher said. “You’re going to a courtroom. There’ll be a lot of people in it. They’ll all admire you. They’ll admire you more if you show how you can hypnotize people. Like you did to the Tones, remember?”

“What do I care how many people admire me?” Joe asked. “I don’t need confirmation. If they see me, that’s their good luck. Now be quiet. You may watch my gears if you choose.”

Gallegher watched the robot’s gears with smoldering hatred in his eyes. He was still darkly furious when the van arrived at the court chambers. The men carried Joe inside, under Gallegher’s direction, and laid him down carefully on a table, where, after a brief discussion, he was marked as Exhibit A.

The courtroom was well filled. The principals were there, too—Ella and Jimmy Tone, looking disagreeably confident, and Patsy Brock, with her father, both seeming anxious. Silver O’Keefe, with her usual wari-ness, had found a seat midway between the representatives of Sonatone and Vox-View. The presiding judge was a martinet named Hansen, but, as far as Gallegher knew, he was honest. Which was something, anyway.

Hansen looked at Gallegher. ‘We won’t bother with formalities. I’ve been reading this brief you sent down. The whole case stands or falls on the question of whether you did or did not sign a certain contract with the Sonatone Television Amusement Corp. Right?”

“Right, your honor.”

“Under the circumstances you dispense with legal representation. Right?”

“Right, your honor.”

“Then this is technically *ex officio,* to be confirmed later by appeal if either party desires. Otherwise after ten days the verdict becomes of-ficial.” This new type of informal court hearing had lately become popu-lar—it saved time, as well as wear and tear on everyone. Moreover, cer-tain recent scandals had made attorneys slightly

disreputable in the public eye. There was a prejudice.

Judge Hansen called up the Tones, questioned them, and then asked Harrison Brock to take the stand. The big shot looked worried, but an-swered promptly.

"You made an agreement with the appellor eight days ago?"

"Yes. Mr. Gallegher contracted to do certain work for me—"

"Was there a written contract?"

"No. It was verbal."

Hansen looked thoughtfully at Gallegher. 'Was the appellor intoxi-cated at the time? He often is, I believe."

Brock gulped. "There were no tests made. I really can't say."

"Did he drink any alcoholic beverages in your presence?"

"I don't know if they were *alcoholic* bev—."

"If Mr. Gallegher drank them, they were alcoholic. Q.E.D. The gen-tleman once worked with me on a case— However, there seems to be no legal proof that you entered into any agreement with Mr. Gallegher.

The defendant—Sonatone—possesses a written contract. The signature has been verified."

Hansen waved Brock down from the stand. "Now, Mr. Gallegher. If you'll come up here— The contract in question was signed at approxi-mately 8 P.M. last night. You contend you did not sign it?"

"Exactly. I wasn't even in my laboratory then."

"Where were you?"

"Downtown."

"Can you produce witnesses to that effect?"

Gallegher thought back. He couldn't.

"Very well. Defendant states that at approximately 8 P.M. last night you, in your laboratory, signed a certain contract. You deny that cate-gorically. You state that Exhibit A, through the use of hypnotism, masqueraded as you and successfully forged your signature. I have con-sulted experts, and they are of the opinion that robots are incapable of such power."

"My robot's a new type."

"Very well. Let your robot hypnotize me into believing that it is either you, or any other human. In other words, let it prove its capabilities. Let it appear to me in any shape it chooses."

Gallegher said, "I'll try," and left the witness box. He went to the table where the strait-jacketed robot lay and silently sent up a brief prayer.

"Joe."

"Yes."

"You've been listening?"

"Yes."

'Will you hypnotize Judge Hansen?"

"Go away," Joe said. "I'm admiring myself."

Gallegher started to sweat. "Listen. I'm not asking much. All you have to do—"

Joe off-focused his eyes and said faintly, "I can't hear you. I'm vastening."

Ten minutes later Hansen said, "Well, Mr. Callegher—"

"Your honor! All I need is a little time. I'm sure I can make this rattle-geared

Narcissus prove my point if you'll give me a chance."

"This court is not unfair," the judge pointed out. "Whenever you can prove that Exhibit A is capable of hypnotism, I'll rehear the case. In the meantime, the contract stands. You're working for Sonatone, not for Vox-View. Case closed."

He went away. The Tones leered unpleasantly across the courtroom. They also departed, accompanied by Silver O'Keefe, who had decided

which side of the fence was safest. Gallegher looked at Patsy Brock and shrugged helplessly.

"Well—" he said.

She grinned crookedly. "You tried. I don't know how hard, but—Oh, well, maybe you couldn't have found the answer, anyway."

Brock staggered over, wiping sweat from his round face. "I'm a ruined man. Six new bootleg theaters opened in New York today. I'm going crazy. I don't deserve this."

'Want me to marry the Tone?" Patsy asked sardonically.

"Hell, no! Unless you promise to poison him just after the ceremony. Those skunks can't lick me. I'll think of something."

"If Gallegher can't, you can't," the girl said. "So—what now?"

"I'm going back to my lab," the scientist said. "*In vino veritas.* I started this business when I was drunk, and maybe if I get drunk enough again, I'll find the answer. If I don't sell my pickled carcass for whatever it'll bring."

"O.K.," Patsy agreed, and led her father away. Gallegher sighed, su-perintended the reloading of Joe into the van, and lost himself in hope-less theorization.

An hour later Gallegher was flat on the laboratory couch, drinking passionately from the liquor bar, and glaring at the robot, who stood before the mirror singing squeakily. The binge threatene~d to be monu-mental. Gallegher wasn't sure flesh and blood would stand it. But he was determined to keep going till he found the answer or passed out.

His subconscious knew the answer. Why the devil had he made Joe in the first place? Certainly not to indulge a Narcissus complex! There was another reason, a soundly logical one, hidden in the depths of alcohol.

The *x* factor. If the *x* factor were known, Joe might be controllable. He *would* be. X was the master switch. At present the robot was, so to speak, running wild. If he were told to perform the task for which he was made, a psychological balance would occur. X was the catalyst that would reduce Joe to sanity.

Very good. Gallegher drank high-powered Drambuie. *Whoosh!*

Vanity of vanities; all is vanity. How could the *x* factor be found? Deduction? Induction? Osmosis? A bath in Drambuie—Gallegher clutched at his wildly revolving thoughts. What had happened that night a week ago?

He had been drinking beer. Brock had come in. Brock had gone. Gal-legher had begun to make the robot—Hm-m-m. A beer drunk was dif-ferent from other types. Perhaps he was drinking the wrong liquors.

Very likely. Gallegher rose, sobered himself with thiamin, and carted dozens of imported beer cans out of the refrigerator. He stacked them inside a frost-unit beside the couch. Beer squirted to the ceiling as he plied the opener. Now let's see.

The *x* factor. The robot knew what it represented, of course. But Joe wouldn't tell. There he stood, paradoxically transparent, watching his gears go around.

"Joe."

"Don't bother me. I'm immersed in contemplation of beauty."

"You're not beautiful."

"I am. Don't you admire my tarzeel?"

"What's your tarzeel?"

"Oh, I forgot," Joe said regretfully. "You can't sense that, can you? Come to think of it, I added the tarzeel myself after you made me. It's very lovely."

"Hm-m-m." The empty beer cans grew more numerous. There was only one company, somewhere in Europe, that put up beer in cans now-adays, instead of using the omnipresent plastibulbs, but Gallegher pre-ferred the cans—the flavor was different, somehow. But about Joe. Joe knew why he had been created. Or did he? Gallegher knew, but his subconscious— Oh-oh! What about Joe's subconscious?

Did a robot have a subconscious? Well, it had a brain— Gallegher brooded over the impossibility of administering scopolamin to Joe. Hell! How could you release a robot's subconscious?

Hypnotism.

Joe couldn't be hypnotized. He was too smart.

Unless— Autohypnotism?

Gallegher hastily drank more beer. He was beginning to think clearly once more. Could Joe read the future? No; he had certain strange senses, but they worked by inflexible logic and the laws of probability. Moreover, Joe had an Achillean heel—his Narcissus complex.

There *might—there* just *might—be* a way.

Gallegher said, "You don't seem beautiful to me, Joe."

"What do I care about you? I *am* beautiful, and I can see it. That's enough."

"Yeah. My senses are limited, I suppose. I can't realize your full po-tentialities. Still, I'm seeing you in a different light now. Fm drunk My subconscious is emerging. I can appreciate you with both my conscious and my subconscious. See?"

"How lucky you are," the robot approved.

Gallegher closed his eyes. "You see yourself more fully than I can. But not completely, eh?"

"What? I see myself as I am."

"With complete understanding and appreciation?"

"Well, yes," Joe said. "Of course. Don't I?"

"Consciously *and* subconsciously? Your subconsciousness might have different senses, you know. Or keener ones. I know there's a qualitative and quantitive difference in my outlook when I'm drunk or hypnotized or my subconscious is in control somehow."

"Oh." The robot looked thoughtfully into the mirror. "Oh."

"Too bad you can't get drunk."

Joe's voice was squeakier than ever. "My subconscious. . . I've never appreciated my beauty that way. I may be missing something." -

'Well, no use thinking about it," Gallegher said. "You can't release your

subconscious."

"Yes, I can," the robot said. "I can hypnotize myself."

Gallegher dared not open his eyes. "Yeah? Would that work?"

"Of course. It's just what I'm going to do now. I may see undreamed-of beauties in myself that I've never suspected before. Greater glories— Here I go."

Joe extended his eyes on stalks, opposed them, and then peered in-tently into each other. There was a long silence.

Presently Gallegher said, "Joe!" Silence.

"Joe!"

Still silence. Dogs began to howL "Talk so I can hear you."

"Yes," the robot said, a faraway quality in its squeak.

"Are you hypnotized?"

"Yes."

"Are you lovely?"

"Lovelier than I'd ever dreamed." Gallegher let that pass. "Is your subconscious ruling?" "Yes."

"Why did I create you?"

No answer. Gallegher licked his lips and tried again. "Joe. You've got to answer me. Your subconscious is dominant—re-member? Now why did I create you?"

No answer.

"Think back. Back to the hour I created you. What happened then?"

"You were drinking beer," Joe said faintly. "You had trouble with

the can opener. You said you were going to build a bigger and better can opener. That's me."

Gallegher nearly fell off the couch. *"What?"*

The robot walked over, picked up a can, and opened it with incredi-ble deftness. No beer squirted. Joe was a perfect can opener.

"That," Gallegher said under his breath, "is what comes of knowing science by ear. I build the most complicated robot in existence just so—" He didn't finish.

Joe woke up with a start. "What happened?" he asked. Gallegher glared at him. "Open that can!" he snapped. The robot obeyed, after a brief pause. "Oh. So you found out. Well, I guess I'm just a slave now."

"Damned right you are. I've located the catalyst—the master switch. You're in the groove, stupid, doing the job you were made for."

'Well," Joe said philosophically, "at least I can still admire my beauty, when you don't require my services."

Gallegher grunted. "You oversized can opener! Listen. Suppose I take you into court and tell you to hypnotize Judge Hansen. You'll have to do it, won't you?"

"Yes. I'm no longer a free agent. Fm conditioned. Conditioned to obey you. Until now, I was conditioned to obey only one command—to do the job I was made for. Until you commanded me to open cans, I was free. Now I've got to obey you completely."

"Uh-huh," Gallegher said. "Thank God for that. I'd have gone nuts within a week otherwise. At least I can get out of the Sonatone contract. Then all I have to do is solve Brock's problem."

"But you did," Joe said.

"Huh?"

"When you made me. You'd been talking to Brock previously, so you incorporated the solution to *his* problem into me. Subconsciously,

perhaps." -

Gallegher reached for a beer. "Talk fast. What's the answer?"

"Subsonics," Joe said. "You made me capable of a certain subsonic tone that Brock must broadcast at irregular time-intervals over his tele-views—"

Subsonics cannot be heard. But they can be felt. They can be felt as a faint, irrational uneasiness at first, which mounts to a blind, mean-ingless panic. It does not last. But when it is coupled with A. A.—aucli-ence appeal—there is a certain inevitable result.

Those who possessed home Vox-View units were scarcely troubled. It was a matter of acoustics. Cats squalled; dogs howled mournfully. But the families sitting in their parlors, watching Vox-View stars per-

form on the screen, didn't really notice anything amiss. There wasn't sufficient amplification, for one thing.

But in the bootleg theater, where illicit Vox-View televisors were hooked up to Magnas— There was a faint, irrational uneasiness at first. It mounted. Someone screamed. There was a rush for the doors. The audience was afraid of something, but didn't know what. They knew only that they had to get out of there.

All over the country there was a frantic exodus from the bootleg the-aters when Vox-View first rang in a subsonic during a regular broad-cast. Nobody knew why, except Gallegher, the Brocks, and a couple of technicians who were let in on the secret.

An hour later another subsonic was played. There was another mad exodus.

Within a few weeks it was impossible to lure a patron into a bootleg theater. Home televisors were far safer! Vox-View sales picked up— Nobody would attend a bootleg theater. An unexpected result of the experiment was that, after a while, nobody would attend any of the le-galized Sonatone theaters either. Conditioning had set in.

Audiences didn't know why they grew panicky in the bootleg places. They associated their blind, unreasoning fear with other factors, nota-bly mobs and claustrophobia. One evening a woman named Jane Wilson, otherwise not notable, attended a bootleg show... She fled with the rest when the subsonic was turned on.

The next night she went to the palatial Sonatone Bijou. In the mid-dle of a dramatic feature she looked around, realized that there was a huge throng around her, cast up horrified eyes to the ceiling, and imag-ined that it was pressing down.

She had to get out of there!

Her squall was the booster charge. There were other customers who had heard subsonics before. No one was hurt during the panic; it was a legal rule that theater doors be made large enough to permit easy egress during a fire. No one was hurt, but it was suddenly obvious that the public was being conditioned by subsonics to avoid the dangerous combination of throngs and theaters. A simple matter of psychological association— Within four months the bootleg places had disappeared and the

Sonatone supertheaters had closed for want of patronage. The Tones, father and son, were not happy. But everybody connected with Vox-View was.

Except Gallegher. He had collected a staggering check from Brock, and instantly cabled to Europe for an incredible quantity of canned

beer. Now, brooding over his sorrows, he lay on the laboratory couch and siphoned a highball down his throat. Joe, as usual, was before the mirror, watching the wheels go round.

“Joe,” Gallegher said.

“Yes? What can I do?”

“Oh, nothing.” That was the trouble. Gallegher fished a crumpled cable tape out of his pocket and morosely read it once more. The beer cannery in Europe had decided to change its tactics. From now on, the cable said, their beer would be put in the usual plastibulbs, in conform-ance with custom and demand. No more cans.

There wasn’t *anything* put up in cans in this day and age. Not even beer, now.

So what good was a robot who was built and conditioned to be a can opener?

Gallegher sighed and mixed another highball—a stiff one. Joe pos-tured proudly before the mirror.

Then he extended his eyes, opposed them, and quickly liberated his subconscious through autohypnotism. Joe could appreciate himself bet-ter that way.

Gallegher sighed again. Dogs were beginning to bark like mad for blocks around. Oh, well.

He took another drink and felt better. Presently, he thought, it would be time to sing “Frankie and Johnnie.” Maybe he and Joe might have a duet—one baritone and one inaudible sub or supersonic. Close harmony.

Ten minutes later Gallegher was singing a duet with his can opener.

The Ego Machine

nicholas martin looked up at the robot across the desk.

"I'm not going to ask what you want," he said, in a

low, restrained voice. "I already know. Just go away and tell St. Cyr I approve. Tell him I think it's wonderful, putting a robot in the picture. We've had everything else by now, except the Rockettes. But clearly a quiet little play about Christmas" among the Portuguese fishermen on the Florida coast *must* have a robot. Only, why not six robots? Tell him I suggest a baker's dozen. Go away."

"Was your mothers'name Helena Glinska?" the robot asked, paying no heed to Martin's remarks.

"It was not," Martin said.

"Ah, then she must have been the Great Hairy One," the robot murmured.

Martin took his feet off the desk and sat up slowly.

"It's quite all right," the robot said hastily. "You've been chosen for an ecological experiment, that's ah[1]. But it won't hurt. Robots are perfectly normal life forms where I come from, so you needn't—"

"Shut up," Martin said. "Robot indeed, you—you bit-player! This tune St. Cyr

has gone too far." He began to shake slightly all over, with some repressed but strong emotion. The intercom box on the desk caught his eye, and he stabbed a finger at one of the switches. "Get me Miss Ashby! Right away!"

"I'm so sorry," the robot said apologetically. "Have I made a mistake? The threshold fluctuations in the neurons always upset my mnemonic norm when I temporalize. Isn't this a crisis-point in your life?"

Martin breathed hard, which seemed to confirm the robot's assumption.

"Exactly," it said. "The ecological imbalance approaches a peak that may destroy the life-form, unless . . . mm-m. Now either you're about to be stepped on by' a mammoth, locked hi an iron mask, assassinated by helots, or—is this Sanskrit I'm speaking?" He shook his gleaming head. "Perhaps I should have got off fifty years ago, but I thought—sorry. Good-bye," he added hastily as Martin raised an angry glare.

Then the robot lifted a finger to each corner of his naturally rigid mouth, and moved his fingers horizontally in opposite directions, as though sketching an apologetic smile.

"No, don't go away," Martin said. "I want you right here, where the sight of you can refuel my rage in case it's needed. I wish to God I could get mad and stay mad," he added plaintively, gazing at the telephone.

"Are you sure your mother's name wasn't Helena Glinska?" the robot asked. It pinched thumb and forefinger together between its nominal brows, somehow giving the impression of a worried frown.

"Naturally, I'm sure," Martin snapped.

"You aren't married yet, then? To Anastasia Zak-harina-Koshkina?"

"Not yet or ever," Martin replied succinctly. The telephone rang. He snatched it up.

"Hello, Nick," said Erika Ashby's calm voice. "Something wrong?"

Instantly the fires of rage went out of Martin's eyes, to be replaced by a tender, rose-pink glow. For some years now he had given Erika, his very competent agent, ten per cent of his take. He had also longed hopelessly to give her approximately a pound of flesh—the cardiac muscle, to put it in cold, unromantic terms. Martin did not; he put it in no terms at all, since whenever he tried to propose marriage to Erika he was taken with such fits of modesty that he could only babble o' green fields.

"Well," Erika repeated. "Something wrong?"

"Yes," Martin said, drawing a long breath. "Can St. Cyr make me marry somebody named Anastasia Zak-harina-Koshkina?"

"What a wonderful memory you have," the robot put hi mournfully. "Mine used to be, before I started tem-poralizing. But even radioactive neurons won't stand—"

"Nominally you're still entitled to life, liberty, et cetera," Erika said. "But I'm busy right now, Nick. Can't it wait till I see you?"

"When?"

"Didn't you get my message?" Erika demanded.

"Of course not," Martin said, angrily. "I've suspected for some time that all my incoming calls have to be cleared by St. Cyr. Somebody might try to smuggle hi a word of hope, or possibly a file." His voice brightened. "Planning a jailbreak?"

"Oh, this is outrageous," Erika said. "Some day St. Cyr's going to go too far—"

"Not while he's got DeeDee behind him," Martin said gloomily. Summit Studios would sooner have made a film promoting atheism than offend their top box-office star, DeeDee Fleming. Even Tolh'ver Watt, who owned Summit lock, stock and barrel, spent wakeful nights because

St. Cyr refused to let the lovely DeeDee sign a long-term contract.

"Nevertheless, Watt's no fool," Erika said. "I still think we could get him to give you a contract release if we could make him realize what a rotten investment you are. There isn't much time, though."

"Why not?" . r

"I told you—ott. Of course you don't know. He's leaving for Paris tomorrow morning."

Martin moaned. "Then I'm doomed," he said. "They'll pick up my option automatically next week and I'll never draw a free breath again. Erika, do something!"

"I'm going to," Erika said. "That's exactly what I want to see you about. Ah," she added suddenly, "now I understand why St. Cyr stopped my message. He was afraid. Nick, do you know what we've got to do?"

"See Watt?" Nick hazarded unhappily. "But Erika—"

"See Watt *alone,"* Erika amplified.

"Not if St. Cyr can help it," Nick reminded her.

"Exactly. Naturally St. Cyr doesn't want us to talk to Watt privately. We might make him see reason. But this time, Nick, we've simply got to manage it somehow. One of us is going to talk to Watt while the other keeps St. Cyr at bay. Which do you choose?"

"Neither," Martin said promptly.

"Oh, Nick! I can't do the whole thing alone. Anybody'd think you were afraid of St. Cyr."

"I *am* afraid of St. Cyr," Martin said.

"Nonsense. What could he actually do to you?"

"He could terrorize me. He does it all the time. Erika, he says I'm indoctrinating beautifully. Doesn't it make your blood run cold? Look at all the other writers he's indoctrinated."

"I know. I saw one of them on Main Street last week, delving into garbage cans. Do you want to end up that way? Then stand up for your rights!"

"Ah," said the robot wisely, nodding. "Just as I thought. A crisis-point."

"Shut up," Martin said. "No, not you, Erika. I'm sorry."

"So am I," Erika said tartly. "For a moment I thought you'd acquired a backbone."

"If I were somebody like Hemingway—" Martin began in a miserable voice.

"Did you say Hemingway?" the robot inquired. "Is

this the Kinsey-Hemingway era? Then I must be right. You're Nicholas Martin, the next subject. Martin, Martin? Let me see—oh yes, the Disraeli type, that's it." He rubbed his forehead with a grating sound. "Oh, my poor neuron thresholds! Now I remember."

"Nick, can you hear me?" Erika's voice inquired. "I'm coming over there right away. Brace yourself. We're going to beard St. Cyr in his den and convice Watt you'll never make a good screen-writer. Now—"

"But St. Cyr won't *ever* admit that," Martin cried. "He doesn't know the meaning of the word failure. He says so. He's going to make me into a screen-writer or kill me."

"Remember what happened to Ed Cassidy?" Erika reminded him grimly. "St. Cyr didn't make him into a screen-writer." '

"True. Poor old Ed," Martin said, with a shiver.

"All right, then. I'm on my way. Anything else?"

"Yes!" Martin cried, drawing a deep breath. "Yes, there is! I love you madly!"

But the words never got past his glottis. Opening and closing his mouth noiselessly, the cowardly playwright finally clenched his teeth and tried again. A faint, hopeless squeak vibrated the telephone's disk. Martin let his shoulders slump hopelessly. It was clear he could never propose to anybody, not even a harmless telephone.

"Did you say something?" Erika asked. "Well, goodbye then."

"Wait a minute," Martin said, his eyes suddenly falling once more upon the robot. Speechless on one subject only, he went on rapidly, "I forgot to tell you. Watt and the nest-fouling St. Cyr have just hired a mock-up phony robot to play in *Angelina Noel!"*

But the line was dead.

"I'm not a phony," the robot said, hurt.

Martin fell back in his chair and stared at his guest with dull, hopeless eyes. "Neither was King Kong," he remarked. "Don't start feeding me some line St. Cyr's told you to pull. I know he's trying to break my nerve. He'll probably do it, too. Look what he's done to my play already. Why Fred Waring? I don't mind Fred Waring in his proper place. There he's fine. But not in *Angelina Noel.* Not as the Portuguese captain of a fishing boat manned by his entire band, accompanied by Dan Dailey singing *Napoli* to DeeDee Fleming in a mermaid's tail—"

Self-stunned by this recapitulation, Martin put his arms on the desk, his head in his hands, and to his horror found himself giggling. The telephone rang. Martin groped for the instrument without rising from his semi-recumbent position. *

"Who?" he asked shakily. *"Who?* St. Cyr—"

A hoarse bellow came over the wire. Martin sat bolt upright, seizing the phone desperately with both hands.

"Listen!" he cried. "Will you let me finish what I'm going to say, just for once? Putting a robot in *Angelina Noel* is simply—"

"I do not hear what you say," roared a heavy voice. "Your idea stinks. Whatever it is. Be at Theater One for yesterday's rushes. At once!"

"But wait—"

St. Cyr belched and hung up. Martin's strangling hands tightened briefly on the telephone. But it was no use. The real strangle-hold was the one St. Cyr had around Martin's throat, and it had been tightening now for nearly thirteen weeks. Or had it been thirteen years? Looking backward, Martin could scarcely believe that only a short time ago he had been a free man, a successful Broadway playwright, the author of the hit play *Angelina Noel.* Then had come St. Cyr. ...

A snob at heart, the director loved getting his clutches on hit plays and name writers. Summit Studios, he had roared at Martin, would follow the original play

exactly and would give Martin the final okay on the script, provided he signed a thirteen-week contract to help write the screen treatment. This had seemed too good to be true—and was.

Martin's downfall lay partly in the fine print and partly in the fact that Erika Ashby had been in the hospital with a bad attack of influenza at the time. Buried in legal verbiage was a clause that bound Martin to five years of servitude with Summit should they pick up his option. Next week they would certainly do just that, unless justice prevailed.

"I think I need a drink," Martin said unsteadily. "Or several." He glanced toward the robot. "I wonder if you'd mind getting me that bottle of Scotch from the bar over there."

"But I am here to conduct an experiment on optimum ecology," said the robot.

Martin closed his eyes. "Pour me a drink," he pleaded.

"Please. Then put the glass in my hand, will you? It's not much to ask. After all, we're both human beings, aren't we?"

"Well, no," the robot said, placing a brimming glass in Martin's groping fingers. Martin drank. Then he opened his eyes and blinked at the tall highball glass in his hand. The robot had filled it to the brim with Scotch. Martin turned a wondering gaze on his metallic companion.

"You must do a lot of drinking yourself," he said thoughtfully. "I suppose tolerance can be built up. Go ahead. Help yourself. Take the rest of the bottle."

The robot placed the tip of a finger above each eye and slid the fingers upward, as though raising his eyebrows inquiringly.

"Go on, have a jolt,": Martin urged. "Or don't you want to break bread with me, under the circumstances?"

"How can I?" the robot asked. "I'm a robot." His voice sounded somewhat wistful. "What happens?" he inquired. "Is it a lubricatory or a fueling mechanism?"

Martin glanced at his brimming glass.

"Fueling," he said tersely. "High octane. You really believe in staying in character, don't you? Why not—"

"Oh, the principle of irritation," the robot interrupted. "I see. Just like fermented mammoth's milk."

Martin choked. "Have you ever drunk fermented mammoth's milk?" he inquired.

"How could I?" the robot asked. "But I've seen it done." He drew a straight line vertically upward between his invisible eyebrows, managing to look wistful. "Of course my world is perfectly functional and functionally perfect, but I can't help finding temporalizing a fas-cina—" He broke off. "I'm wasting space-time. Ah. Now. Mr. Martin, would you be willing to—"

"Oh, have a drink," Martin said. "I feel hospitable. Go ahead, indulge me, will you? My pleasures are few. And I've got to go and be terrorized in a minute, anyhow. If you can't get that mask off I'll send for a straw. You can step out of character long enough for one jolt, can't you?"

"I'd like to try it," the robot said pensively. "Ever since I noticed the effect fermented mammoth's milk had on the boys, it's been on my mind, rather. Quite easy for a human, of course. Technically it's simple enough, I see now. The irritation just increases the frequency of

the brain's kappa waves, as with boosted voltage, but since electrical voltage never existed in pre-robot times—"

"It did," Martin said, taking another drink. "I mean, it does. What do you call that, a mammoth?" He indicated the desk lamp.

The robot's jaw dropped.

"That?" he askef in blank amazement. "Why—why then all those telephone poles and dynamos and lighting-equipment I noticed in this era are powered by electricity!"

"What did you think they were powered by?" Martin asked coldly.

"Slaves," the robot said, examining the lamp. He switched it on, bunked, and then unscrewed the bulb. "Voltage, you say?"

"Don't be a fool," Martin said. "You're overplaying your part. I've got to get going in a minute. Do you want a jolt or don't you?"

"Well," the robot said, "I don't want to seem unsociable. This *ought* to work." So saying, he stuck his finger in the lamp-socket. There was a brief, crackling flash. The robot withdrew his finger.

"F(t)—" he said, and swayed slightly. Then his fingers came up and sketched a smile that seemed, somehow, to express delighted surprise.

"Fff(t)t" he said, and went on rather thickly, *"F(t)* integral between plus and minus infinity . . ; *a-sub-n* to *e. . . ."*

Martin's eyes opened wide with shocked horror. Whether a doctor or a psychiatrist should be called in was debatable, but it was perfectly evident that this was a case for the medical profession, and the sooner the better. Perhaps the police, too. The bit-player in the robot suit was clearly as mad as a hatter. Martin poised indecisively, waiting for his lunatic guest either to drop dead or spring at his throat.

The robot appeared to be smacking his lips, with faint clicking sounds.

"Why, that's wonderful," he said. "AC, too."

"Y-you're not dead?" Martin inquired shakily.

"I'm not even alive," the robot murmured. "The way you'd understand it, that is. Ah—thanks for the jolt."

Martin stared at the robot with the wildest dawning of surmise.

"Why—" he gasped. "Why—*you're a robot!"*

"Certainly I'm a robot," his guest said. "What slow minds you pre-robots had. Mine's working like lightning now." He stole a drunkard's glance at the desk-lamp. *"F(t)—I* mean, if you counted the kappa waves of my radio-atomic brain now, you'd be amazed how the frequency's increased." He paused thoughtfully. *"F(t),"* he added.

Moving quite slowly, like a man under water, Martin lifted his glass and drank whiskey. Then, cautiously, he looked up at the robot again.

"F(t)—" he said, paused, shuddered, and drank again. That did it. "I'm drunk," he said with an air of shaken relief. "That must be it. I was almost beginning to believe—"

"Oh, nobody believes I'm a robot at first," the robot said. "You'll notice I showed up *in* a movie lot, where I wouldn't arouse suspicion. I'll appear to Ivan Vasilovich in an alchemist's lab, and he'll jump to the conclusion I'm an automaton. Which, of course, I *am.* Then there's a Uighur on my list—I'll appear to him in a shaman's hut and he'll assume I'm a devil. A matter of ecologico-logic."

"Then you're a devil?" Martin inquired, seizing on the only plausible solution.

"No, no, no. I'm a robot. Don't you understand anything?"

"I don't even know who I am, now," Martin said. "For all I know, I'm a faun and you're a human child. I don't think this Scotch is doing me as much good as I'd—"

"Your name is Nicholas Martin," the robot said patiently. "And mine is ENIAC."

"Eniac?"

"ENIAC," the robot corrected, capitalizing. "ENIAC Gamma the Ninety-Third."

So saying, he unslung a sack from his metallic shoulder and began to rummage out length upon length of what looked like red silk ribbon with a curious metallic lustre. After approximately a quarter-mile of it had appeared, a crystal football helmet emerged attached to its end. A gleaming red-green stone was set on each side of the helmet.

"Just over the temporal lobes, you see," the robot ex-

plained, indicating the jewels. "Now you just set it on your head, like this—"

"Oh, no, I don't," Martin said, withdrawing his head with the utmost rapidity. "Neither do you, my friend. What's the idea? I don't like the looks of that gimmick. I particularly don't like those two red garnets on the sides. They look like eyes."

"Those are artific|ali*eclogite," the robot assured him. "They simply have a high dielectric constant. It's merely a matter of altering the normal thresholds of the neuron memory-circuits. All thinking is based on memory, you know. The strength of your associations—the emotional indices of your memories—channel your actions and decisions, and the ecologizer simply changes the voltage of your brain so the thresholds are altered."

"Is that all it does?" Martin asked suspiciously.

"Well, now," the robot said with a slight air of evasion. "I didn't intend to mention it, but since you ask— it also imposes the master-matrix of your character type. But since that's the prototype of your character in the first place, it will simply enable you to make the most of your potential ability, hereditary and acquired. It will make you react to your environment in the way that best assures your survival."

"Not me, it won't," Martin said firmly. "Because you aren't going to put that thing on my head."

The robot sketched a puzzled frown. "Oh," he said after a pause. "I haven't explained yet, have I? It's very simple. Would you be willing to take part in a valuable socio-cultural experiment for the benefit of all mankind?"

"No," Martin said.

"But you don't know what it is yet," the robot said plaintively. "You'll be the only one to refuse, after I've explained everything thoroughly. By the way, can you understand me all right?"

Martin laughed hollowly. "Natch," he said.

"Good," the robot said, reh'eved. "That may be one trouble with my memory. I had to record so many languages before I could temporalize. Sanskrit's very simple, but medieval Russian's confusing, and as for Uighur— however! The purpose of this experiment is to promote the most successful pro-survival relationship between man and his environment. Instant adaptation is what we're aiming at, and we hope to get it by minimizing the differential between individual and environment. In

other words, the right reaction at the right time. Understand?

"Of course not," Martin said. "What nonsense you talk."

"There are," the robot said rather wearily, "only a limited number of character matrices possible, depending first on the arrangement of the genes within the chromosomes, and later upon environmental additions. Since environments tend to repeat—like societies, you know— an organizational pattern isn't hard to lay out, along the Kaldekooz time-scale. You follow me so far?"

"By the Kaldekooz time-scale, yes," Martin said.

"I was always lucid," the robot remarked a little vainly, flourishing a swirl of red ribbon.

"Keep that thing away from me," Martin complained. "Drunk I may be, but- I have no intention of sticking my neck out that far."

"Of course you'll do it," the robot said firmly. "Nobody's ever refused yet. And don't bicker with me or you'll get me confused and I'll have to take another jolt of voltage. Then there's no telling how confused I'll be. My memory gives me enough trouble when I temporalize. Time-travel always raises the synaptic delay threshold, but the trouble is it's so variable. That's why I got you mixed up with Ivan at first. But I don't visit him till after I've seen you—I'm running the test chronologically, and nineteen-fifty-two comes before fifteen-seventy, of course."

"It doesn't," Martin said, tilting the glass to his lips. "Not even in Hollywood does nineteen-fifty-two come before fifteen-seventy."

"I'm using the Kaldekooz time-scale," the robot explained. "But really only for convenience. Now do you want the ideal ecological differential or don't you? Because—" Here he flourished the red ribbon again, peered into the helmet, looked narrowly at Martin, and shook his head.

"I'm sorry," the robot said. "I'm afraid this won't work. Your head's too small. Not enough brain-room, I suppose. This helmet's for an eight and a half head, and yours is much too—"

"My head *is* eight and a half," Martin protested with dignity.

"Can't be," the robot said cunningly. "If it were, the helmet would fit, and it doesn't. Too big."

"It does fit," Martin said.

"That's the trouble with arguing with pre-robot species," ENIAC said, as to himself. "Low, brutish, unreasoning. No wonder, when their heads are so small. Now Mr. Martin—" .He spoke as though to a small, stupid, stubborn child. "Try to understand. This helmet's size eight and a half. Your head is unfortunately so very small that the helmet wouldn't fit—"

"Blast it!" cried the infuriated Martin, caution quite lost between Scotch and annoyance. "It does fit! Look here!" Recklessly he snatched the helmet and clapped it firmly on his head. "It fits perfectly!"

"I erred," the robot acknowledged^ with such a gleam in his eye that Martin, suddenly conscious of his rashness, jerked the helmet from his head and dropped it on the desk. ENIAC quietly picked it up and put it back into his sack, stuffing the red ribbon hi after it with rapid motions. Martin watched, baffled, until ENIAC had finished, gathered together the mouth of the sack, swung it on his shoulder again, and turned toward the door.

"Good-bye," the robot said. "And thank you."

"For what?" Martin demanded.

"For your cooperation," the robot said.

"I won't cooperate," Martin told him flatly. "It's no use. Whatever fool treatment it is you're selling, I'm not going to—"

"Oh, you've already had the ecology treatment," ENIAC replied blandly. "I'll be back tonight to renew the charge. It lasts only twelve hours."

"What!"

ENIAC moved his forefingers outward from the corners of his mouth, sketching a polite smile. Then he stepped through the door and closed it behind him.

Martin made a faint squealing sound, like a stuck but gagged pig.

Something was happening inside his head.

Nicholas Martin felt like a man suddenly thrust under an ice-cold shower. No, not cold—steaming hot. Perfumed, too. The wind that blew hi from the open window bore with it a frightful stench of gasoline, sagebrush, paint, and—from the distant commissary—ham sandwiches.

"Drunk," he thought frantically. "I'm drunk—or crazy!" He sprang up and spun around wildly; then catching

sight of a crack in the hardwood floor he tried to walk along it. "Because if I can walk a straight line," he thought, "I'm not drunk. I'm only crazy . . ." It was not a very comforting thought.

He could walk it, all right. He could walk a far straighter line than the crack, which he saw now was microscopically jagged. He had, in fact, never felt such a sense of location and equilibrium in his life. His experiment carried him across the room to a wall-mirror, and as he straightened to look into it, suddenly all confusion settled and ceased. The violent sensory perceptions leveled off and returned to normal.

Everything was quiet. Everything was all right.

Martin met his own eyes in the mirror.

Everything was *not* all right.

He was stone cold sober. The Scotch he had drunk might as well have been spring-water. He leaned closer to the mirror, trying to stare through his own eyes into the depths of his brain. For something extremely odd was happening hi there. All over his brain, tiny shutters were beginning to move, some sliding up till only a narrow crack remained, through which the beady little eyes of neurons could be seen peeping, some sliding down with fault crashes, revealing the agile, spidery forms of still other neurons scuttling for cover.

Altered thresholds, changing the yes-and-no reaction time of the memory-circuits, with their key emotional indices and associations . . . huh?

The robot!

Martin's head swung toward the closed office door. But he made no further move. The look of blank panic on his face very slowly, quite unconsciously, began to change. The robot... could wait.

Automatically Martin raised his hand, as though to adjust an invisible monocle. Behind him, the telephone began to ring. Martin glanced at it.

His lips curved into an insolent smile.

Flicking dust from his lapel with a suave gesture, Martin picked up the telephone. He said nothing. There was a long silence. Then a hoarse voice shouted, "Hello,

hello, hello! Are you there? You, Martin."

Martin said absolutely nothing at all.

"You keep me waiting," the voice bellowed. "Me, St. Cyr! Now jump! The rushes are ... Martin, do you hear me?"

Martin gently laid down the receiver on the desk. He turned again toward the mirror, regarded himself critically, frowned.

"Dreary," he murmured. "Distinctly dreary. I wonder why I ever bought this necktie?"

The softly bellowing telephone distracted him. He studied the instrument briefly, then clapped his hands sharply together an inc^ from the mouthpiece. There was a sharp, anguished cry from the other end of the line.

"Very good," Martin murmured, turning away. "That robot has done me a considerable favor. I should have realized the possibilities sooner. After all, a super-machine, such as ENIAC, would be far cleverer than a man, who is merely an ordinary machine. Yes," he added, stepping into the hall and coming face to face with Toni LaMotta, who was currently working for Summit on loan. " *'Man is a machine, and woman—' "* Here he gave Miss LaMotta a look of such arrogant significance that she was quite startled.

" *'And woman—a toy,'"* Martin amplified, as he turned toward Theater One, where St. Cyr and destiny awaited him.

Summit Studios, outdoing even MGM, always shot ten times as much footage as necessary on every scene. At the beginning of each shooting day, this confusing mass of celluloid was shown hi St. Cyr's private projection theater, a small but luxurious domed room furnished with lie-back chairs, and every other convenience, though no screen was visible until you looked up. Then you saw it on the ceiling.

When Martin entered, it was instantly evident that ecology took a sudden shift toward the worse. Operating on the theory that the old Nicholas Martin had come into it, the theater, which had breathed an expensive air of luxurious confidence, chilled toward him. The nap of the Persian rug shrank from his contaminating feet. The chair he stumbled against in the half-light seemed to shrug contemptuously. And the three people in the theater gave him such a look as might be turned upon one of the larger apes who had, by sheer accident, got an invitation to Buckingham Palace.

DeeDee Fleming (her real name was impossible to remember, besides having not a vowel hi it) lay placidly in her chair, her feet comfortably up, her lovely hands folded, her large, liquid gaze fixed upon the screen

where DeeDee Fleming, hi the silvery meshes of a technicolor mermaid, swam phlegmatically through seas of pearl-colored mist.

Martin groped in the gloom for a chair. The strangest things were going on inside his brain, where tiny stiles still moved and readjusted until he no longer felt in the least like Nicholas Martin. Who did he feel like, then? What had happened?

He recalled the neurons whose beady little eyes he had fancied he saw staring brightly into, as well as out of, his own. Or had he? The memory was vivid, yet it couldn't be, of course. The answer was perfectly simple and terribly logical. ENIAC Gamma the Ninety-Third had told him, somewhat ambiguously, just what his ecological experiment involved. Martin had merely been given the optimum reactive pattern of his successful prototype, a man who had most thoroughly controlled his

own environment. And ENIAC had told him the man's name, along with several confusing references to other prototypes like an Ivan (who?) and an unnamed Uighur.

The name for Martin's prototype was, of course, Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield. Martin had a vivid recollection of George Arliss playing the role. Clever, insolent, eccentric hi dress and manner, exuberant, suave, self-controlled, with a strongly perceptive imagination. . . .

"No, no, no!" DeeDee said with a sort of calm impatience. "Be careful, Nick. Some other chair, please. I have my feet on this one."

"T-t-t-t-t," said Raoul St. Cyr, protruding his thick lips and snapping the fingers of an enormous hand as he pointed to a lowly chair against the wall. "Behind me, Martin. Sit down, sit down. Out of our way. Now! Pay attention. Study what I have done to make something great out of your foolish little play. Especially note how I have so cleverly ended the solo by building to five cumulative pratt-falls. Timing is all," he finished. "Now —SILENCE!"

For a man bom hi the obscure little Balkan country of Mixo-Lydia, Raoul St. Cyr had done very well for himself in Hollywood. In 1939 St. Cyr, growing alarmed at the imminence of war, departed for America, taking with him the print of an unpronounceable Mixo-Lydian film he had made, which might be translated roughly as *The Pores in the Face oj the Peasant.*

With this he established his artistic reputation as a great director, though if the truth were known, it was really poverty that caused *The Pores* to be so artistically lighted, and simple drunkenness which had made most of the cast act out one of the strangest performances in film history. But critics compared *The Pores* to a ballet and praised inordinately the beauty of its leading lady, now known to the wo^kf as DeeDee Fleming.

DeeDee was so incredibly beautiful that the law of compensation would force one to expect incredible stupidity as well. One was not disappointed. DeeDee's neurons didn't know *anything.* She had heard of emotions, and under St. Cyr's bullying could imitate a few of them, but other directors had gone mad trying to get through the semantic block that kept DeeDee's mind a calm, unruffled pool possibly three inches deep. St. Cyr merely bellowed. This simple, primordial approach seemed to be the only one that made sense to Summit's greatest investment and top star.

With this whip-hand over the beautiful and brainless DeeDee, St. Cyr quickly rose to the top in Hollywood. He had undoubted talent. He could make one picture very well indeed. He had made it twenty tunes already, each time starring DeeDee, and each time perfecting his own feudalistic production unit. Whenever anyone disagreed with St. Cyr, he had only to threaten to go over to MGM and take the obedient DeeDee with him, for he had never allowed her to sign a long-term contract and she worked only on a picture-to-picture basis. Even Tolliver Watt knuckled under when St. Cyr voiced the threat of removing DeeDee.

"Sit down, Martin," Tolliver Watt said. He was a tall, lean, hatchet-faced man who looked like a horse being starved because he was too proud to eat hay. With calm, detached omnipotence he inclined his gray-shot head a millimeter, while a faintly pained expression passed fleet-ingly across his face.

"Highball, please," he said.

A white-clad waiter appeared noiselessly from nowhere and glided forward with a tray. It was at this point that Martha felt the last stiles readjust in his brain, and entirely on impulse he reached out and took the frosted highball glass from the tray. Without observing this the waiter glided on and presented Watt with a gleaming

salver full of nothing. Watt and the waiter regarded the tray.

Then their eyes met. There was a brief silence.

"Here," Martin said, replacing the glass. "Much too weak. Get me another, please. I'm reorienting toward a new phase which means a different optimum," he explained to the puzzled Watt as he readjusted a chair beside the great man and dropped into it. Odd that he had never before felt at ease during rushes. Right now he felt fine. Perfectly at ease. Relaxed.

"Scotch and soda for Mr. Martin," Watt said calmly. "And another for me."

"So, so, so, now we begin," St. Cyr cried impatiently. He spoke into a hand microphone. Instantly the screen on the ceiling flickered noisily and began to unfold a series of rather ragged scenes in which a chorus of mermaids danced on their tails down the street of a little Florida fishing village.

To understand the full loathsomeness of the fate facing Nicholas Martin, it is necessary to view a St. Cyr production. It seemed to Martin that he was watching the most noisome movie ever put upon film. He was conscious that St. Cyr and Watt were stealing rather mystified glances at him. In the dark he put up two fingers and sketched a robot-like grin. Then, feeling sublimely sure of himself, he lit a cigarette and chuckled aloud.

"You laugh?" St. Cyr demanded with instant displeasure. "You do not appreciate great art? What do you know about it, eh? Are you a genius?"

"This," Martin said urbanely, "is the most noisome movie ever put on film."

In the sudden, deathly quiet which followed, Martin flicked ashes elegantly and added, "With my help, you may yet avoid becoming the laughing stock of the whole continent. Every foot of this picture must be junked. Tomorrow bright and early we will start all over, and—"

Watt said quietly, "We're quite competent to make a film out of *Angelina Noel*, Martin."

"It is artistic!" St. Cyr shouted. "And it will make money, too!"

"Bah, money!" Martin said cunningly. He rucked more ash with a lavish gesture. "Who cares about money? Let Summit worry."

Watt leaned forward to peer searchingly at Martin in the dimness.

"Raoul," he said, glancing at St. Cyr, "I understand you were getting your—ah—your new writers whipped into shape. This doesn't sound to me as if—"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," St. Cyr cried excitedly. "Whipped into shape, exactly! A brief delirium, eh? Martin, you feel well? You feel yourself?"

Martin laughed with quiet confidence. "Never fear," he said. "The money yflu spend on me is well worth what I'll bring you in prestige. I quite understand. Our confidential talks were not to be secret from Watt, of course."

"What confidential talks?" bellowed St. Cyr thickly, growing red.

"We need keep nothing from Watt, need we?" Martin went on imperturbably. "You hired me for prestige, and prestige you'll get, if you can only keep your big mouth shut long enough. I'll make the name of St. Cyr glorious for you. Naturally

you may lose something at the box-office, but it's well worth—"

"Pjrzqxgl!" roared St. Cyr in his native tongue, and he lumbered up from the chair, brandishing the microphone in an enormous, hairy hand.

Deftly Martin reached out and twitched it from his grasp.

"Stop the film," he ordered crisply.

It was very strange. A distant part of his mind knew that normally he would never have dared behave this way, but he felt convinced that never before hi his life had he acted with complete normality. He glowed with a giddy warmth of confidence that everything he did would be right, at least while the twelve-hour treatment lasted.... '•

The screen flickered hesitantly, then went blank.

"Turn the lights on," Martin ordered the unseen presence beyond the mike. Softly and suddenly the room glowed with illumination. And upon the visages of Watt and St..Cyr he saw a mutual dawning uneasiness begin to break.

He had just given them food for thought. But he had given them more than that. He tried to imagine what moved in the minds of the two men, below the suspicions he had just implanted. St. Cyr's was fairly obvious. The Mixo-Lydian licked his lips—no mean task— and studied Martin with uneasy little, bloodshot eyes. Clearly Martin had acquired confidence from some-

where. What did it mean? What secret sin of St. Cyr's had been discovered to him, what flaw hi his contract, that he dared behave so defiantly?

Tolliver Watt was a horse of another color; apparently the man had no guilty secrets; but he too looked uneasy. Martin studied the proud face and probed for inner weaknesses. Watt would be a harder nut to crack. But Martin could do it.

"That last underwater sequence," he now said, pursuing his theme. "Pure trash, you know. It'll have to come out. The whole scene must be shot from under water."

"Shut up!" Cyr shouted violently.

"But it must, you know," Martin went on. "Or it won't jibe with the new stuff I've written in. In fact, I'm not at all certain that the whoft picture shouldn't be shot under water. You know, we could use the documentary technique—"

"Raoul," Watt said suddenly, "what's this man trying to do?"

"He is trying to break his contract, of course," St. Cyr said, turning ruddy olive. "It is the bad phase all my writers go through before I get them whipped into shape. In Mixo-Lydia—"

"Are you sure he'll whip into shape?" Watt asked.

"To me this is now a personal matter," St. Cyr said, glaring at Martin. "I have spent nearly thirteen weeks on this man and I do not intend to waste my valuable tune on another. I tell you he is simply trying to break his contract—tricks, tricks, tricks."

"Are you?" Watt asked Martin coldly.

"Not now," Martin said. "I've changed my mind. My agent insists I'd be better off away from Summit. In fact, she has the curious feeling that I and Summit would suffer by a mesalliance. But for the first time I'm not sure I agree. I begin to see possibilities, even in the tripe St. Cyr has been stuffing down the public's throat for years. Of course I can't work miracles all at once. Audiences have come to expect garbage from Summit, and they've even been conditioned to like it. But we'll begin hi

a small way to re-educate them with this picture. I suggest we try to symbolize the Existentialist hopelessness of it by ending the film with a full four hundred feet of seascapes—nothing but vast, heaving stretches of ocean," he ended, on a note of complacent satisfaction.

A vast heaving stretch of Raoul St. Cyr rose from his chair and advanced upon Martin.

"Outside, outside!" he shouted. "Back to your cell, you double-crossing vermin! I, Raoul St. Cyr, command it. Outside, before I rip you limb from limb—"

Martin spoke quickly. His voice was calm, but he knew he would have to work fast.

"You see, Watt?"|he said clearly, meeting Watt's rather startled gaze. "Doesn't dare let you exchange three words with me, for fear I'll let something slip. No wonder he's trying to put me out of here—he's skating on thin ice these days."

Goaded, St. Cyr rolled forward in a ponderous lunge, but Watt interposed. It was true, of course, that the writer was probably trying to break his contract. But there were wheels within wheels here. Martin was too confident, too debonair. Something was going on which Watt did not understand.

"All right, Raoul," he said decisively. "Relax for a minute. I said relax! We don't want Nick here suing you for assault and battery, do we? Your artistic temperament carries you away sometimes. Relax and let's hear what Nick has to say."

"Watch out for him, Tolh'ver!" St. Cyr cried warn-ingly. "They're cunning, these creatures. Cunning as rats. You never know—"

Martin raised the microphone with a lordly gesture. Ignoring the director, he said commandingly into the mike, "Put me through to the commissary. The bar, please. Yes. I want to order a drink. Something very special. A—ah—a Helena Glinska—"

"Hello," Erika Ashby's voice said from the door. "Nick, are you there? May I come in?"

The sound of her voice sent delicious chills rushing up and down Martin's spine. He swung round, mike in hand, to welcome her. But St. Cyr, pleased at this diversion, roared before he could speak.

"No, no, no, no! Go! Go at once. Whoever you are— *out!"*

Erika, looking very brisk, attractive and firm, marched into the room and cast at Martha a look of resigned patience.

Very clearly she expected to fight both her own battles and his.

"I'm on business here," she told St. Cyr coldly. "You

can't part author and agent like this. Nick and I want to have a word with Mr. Watt."

"Ah, my pretty creature, sit down," Martin said in a loud, clear voice, scrambling out of his chair. "Welcome! I'm just ordering myself a drink. Will you have something?"

Erika look at him with startled suspicion. "No, and neither will you," she said. "How many have you had already? Nick, if you're drunk at a time like this—"

"And no shilly-shallying," Martin said blandly into the mike. "I want it at once, do you hear? A Helena Glinska, yes. Perhaps you don't know it? Then listen carefully. Take the largest Napoleon you've got. If you haven't a big one, a small punch bowl will do. Fill it half full with ice-cold ale. Got that? Add three jiggers of creme de

menthe—" •"•'•

"Nick, are you mad?" Erika demanded, revolted.

"—and six jiggers of honey," Martin went on placidly. "Stir, don't shake. Never shake a Helena Glinska. Keep it well chilled, and—"

"Miss Ashby, we are very busy," St. Cyr broke in importantly, making shooing motions toward the door. "Not now. Sorry. You interrupt. Go at once."

"—better add six more jiggers of honey," Martin was heard to add contemplatively into the mike. "And then send it over immediately. Drop everything else, and get it here within sixty seconds. There's a bonus for you if you do. Okay? Good. See to it."

He tossed the microphone casually at St. Cyr.

Meanwhile, Erika had closed in on Tolliver Watt.

"I've just come from talking to Gloria Eden," she said, "and she's willing to do a one-picture deal with Summit *if I* okay it. But I'm not going to okay it unless you release Nick Martin from his contract, and that's flat."

Watt showed pleased surprise.

"Well, we might get together on that," he said instantly, for he was a fan of Miss Eden's and for a long tune had yearned to star her in a remake of *Vanity Fair*. "Why didn't you bring her along? We could have—"

"Nonsense!" St. Cyr shouted. "Do not discuss this matter yet, Tolliver."

"She's down at Laguna," Erika explained. "Be quiet, St. Cyr! I won't—"

A knock at the door interrupted her. Martin hurried

to open it and as he had expected encountered a waiter with a tray.

"Quick work," he said urbanely, accepting the huge, coldly sweating Napoleon in a bank of ice. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

St. Cyr's booming shouts from behind him drowned out whatever remark .the waiter may have made as he received a bill iron! Martin and withdrew, looking nauseated.

"No, no, no, no," St. Cyr was roaring. "Tolliver, we can get Gloria and keep this writer too, not that he is any good, but I have spent already thirteen weeks training him in the St. Cyr approach. Leave it to me. In Mixo-Lydia we handle—"

Erika's attractive mouth was opening and shuting, her voice unheard in the uproar. St. Cyr could keep it up indefinitely, as was well known in Hollywood. Martin sighed, lifted the brimming Napoleon and sniffed delicately as he stepped backward toward his chair. When his heel touched it, he tripped with the utmost grace and savoir-faire, and very deftly emptied the Helena Glinska, ale, honey, creme de menthe, ice and ah[1], over St. Cyr's capacious front.

St. Cyr's bellow broke the microphone.

Martin had composed his invention carefully. The nauseous brew combined the maximum elements of wetness, coldness, stickiness and pungency.

The drenched St. Cyr, shuddering violently as the icy^ beverage deluged his legs, snatched out his handkerchief and mopped in vain. The handkerchief merely stuck to his trousers, glued there by twelve jiggers of honey. He reeked of peppermint.

"I suggest we adjourn to the commissary," Martin said fastidiously. "In some private booth we can go on with this discussion away from the—the rather overpowering smell of peppermint."

"In Mixo-Lydia," St. Cyr gasped, sloshing in his shoes as he turned toward Martin, "in Mixo-Lydia we throw to the dogs—we boil in oil—we—"

"And next time," Martin said, "please don't joggle my elbow when I'm holding a Helena Glinska. It's most annoying."

St. Cyr drew a mighty breath, rose to his full height— and then subsided. St. Cyr at the moment looked like a Keystone Kop after the chase sequence, and knew it.

Even if he killed Martin now, the element of classic tragedy would be lacking. He would appear hi the untenable position of Hamlet murdering his uncle with custard pies.

"Do nothing until I return!" he commanded, and with a final glare at Martin plunged moistly out of the theater.

The door crashed shut behind him. There was silence for a moment except for the soft music from the overhead screen which DeeDee had caused to be turned on again, so that she might watch her own lovely form flicker in dimmed images through pastel waves, while she sang a duet with Dan Dailey about sailors, mermaids and her home in far Atlantis.

"And now," said Martin, turning with quiet authority to Watt, who was regarding him with a baffled expression, "I want a word with you."

"I can't discuss your contract till Raoul gets back," Watt said quickly.

"Nonsense," Martin said in a firm voice. "Why should St. Cyr dictate your decisions? Without you, he couldn't turn out a box-office .success if he had to. No, be quiet, Erika. I'm handling this, my pretty creature."

Watt rose to his feet. "Sorry, I can't discuss it," he said. "St. Cyr pictures make money, and you're an in-experien—"

"That's why I see the true situation so clearly," Martin said. "The trouble with you is you draw a line between artistic genius and financial genius. To you, it's merely routine when you work with the plastic medium of human minds, shaping them into an Ideal Audience. You are an ecological genius, Tolliver Watt! The true artist controls his environment, and gradually you, with a master's consummate skill, shape that great mass of living, breathing humanity into a perfect audience. . . ."

"Sorry," Watt said, but not brusquely. "I really have no time—ah—"

"Your genius has gone long enough unrecognized," Martin said hastily, letting admiration ring in his golden voice. "You assume that St. Cyr is your equal. You give him your own credit titles. Yet hi your own mind you must have known that half the credit for his pictures is yours. Was Phidias non-commercial? Was Michaelangelo? Commercialism is simply a label for functionalism, and all great artists produce functional art. The trivial details of Rubens' masterpieces were filled in by assistants,

were they not? But Rubens got the credit, not his hirelings. The proof of the pudding's obvious. Why?" Cunningly gauging his listener, Martin here broke off.

"Why?" Watt asked.

"Sit down," Martin urged. "I'll tell you why. St. Cyr's pictures make money, but you're responsible for their molding into the ideal form, impressing your character-matrix upon everyihihg and everyone at Summit Studios. . .."

Slowly Watt sank into his chair. About his ears the hypnotic bursts of Disraelian rodomontade thundered compellingly. For Martin had the man hooked. With

unerring ami he had at the first try discovered Watt's weakness—the uncomfortable feeling in a professionally arty town that money-making is a basically contemptible business. Disraeli had handled tougher problems in his day. He had swayed parliaments.

Watt swayed, tottered—and fell. It took about ten minutes, all in all. By the end of that tune, dizzy with eloquent praise of his economic ability Watt had realized that while St. Cyr might be an artistic genius, he had no business interfering in the plans of an economic genius. Nobody told Watt what to do when economics were concerned.

"You have the broad vision that can balance all possibilities and show the right path with perfect clarity," Martin said glibly. "Very well. You wish Eden. You feel—do you not?—that I am unsuitable material. Only geniuses can change their plans with instantaneous speed. . . . When will my contract release be ready?"

"What?" said Watt, in a swimming, glorious daze. "Oh. Of course. Hm-m. Your contract release. Well, now—"

"St. Cyr would stubbornly cling to past errors until Summit goes broke," Martin pointed out. "Only a genius like Tolliver Watt strikes when the iron is hot, when he sees a chance to exchange failure for success, a Martin for an Eden."

"Hm-m," Watt said. "Yes. Very well, then." His long face grew shrewd. "Very well, you get your release— *after* I've signed Eden."

"There you put your finger on the heart of the matter," Martin approved, after a very brief moment of somewhat dashed thought. "Miss Eden is still undecided. If you left the transaction to somebody like St. Cyr, say, it would be botched. Erika, you have your car here? How quickly

could you drive Tolliver Watt to Laguna? He's the only person with the skill to handle this situation."

"What situa—oh, yes. Of course, Nick. We could start right away."

"But—" Watt said.

The Disraeli-matrix swept on into oratorical periods that made the walls ring. The golden tongue played arpeggios with logic.

"I see," the dazed Watt murmured, allowing himself to be shepherded toward the door. "Yes, yes, of course. Then—suppose you drop over to my place tonight, Martin. After I get the Eden signature, I'll have your release prepared. Hm-m. Functional genius. . . ." His voice fell to a low, crooning mutter, and he moved quietly out of the door.

Martin laid a hand on Erika's arm as she followed him.

"Wait a second," he said. "Keep him away from the studio until we get the release. St. Cyr can still outshout me any time. But he's hooked. We—"

"Nick," Erika said, looking searchingly into his face. "What's happened?"

"Tell you tonight," Martin said hastily, hearing a distant bellow that might be the voice of St. Cyr approaching. "When I have tune I'm going to sweep you off your feet. Did you know that I've worshipped you from afar all my life? But right now, get Watt out of the way. Hurry!"

Erika cast a glance of amazed bewilderment at him as he thrust her out of the door. Martin thought there was a certain element of pleasure in the surprise.

"Where is Tolliver?" The loud, annoyed roar of St. Cyr made Martin wince. The

director was displeased, it appeared, because only in Costumes could a pair of trousers be found large enough to fit him. He took it as a personal affront. "What have you done with Tolliver?" he bellowed.

"Louder, please," Martin said insolently. "I can't hear you."

"DeeDee," St. Cyr shouted, whirling toward the lovely star, who hadn't stirred from her rapturous admiration of DeeDee in technicolor overhead. "Where is Tolliver?" Martin started. He had quite forgotten DeeDee.

"You don't know, do you DeeDee?" he prompted quickly.

"Shut up," St. Cyr snapped. "Answer me, you—" He added a brisk polysyllable in Mixo-Lydian, with the desired effect. DeeDee wrinkled her flawless brow.

"Tolliver went away, I think. I've got it mixed up with the picture. He went home to meet Nick Martin, didn't he?"

"See?" Martin interrupted, relieved. "No use expecting DeeDee to—" \ '

"But Martin is *here!"* St. Cyr shouted. "Think, think!"

"Was the contract release in the rushes?" DeeDee asked vaguely.

"A contract release?" St. Cyr roared. "What is this? Never will I permit it, never, never, never! DeeDee, answer me—where has Watt gone?"

"He went somewhere with that agent," DeeDee said. "Or was that in the rushes too?"

"But where, where, where?"

"They went to Atlantis," DeeDee announced with an air of faint triumph.

"No!" shouted St. Cyr. "That was the *picture!* The mermaid came from Atlantis, not Watt!"

"Tolliver didn't say he was coming from Atlantis," DeeDee murmured, unruffled. "He said he was going to Atlantis. Then he was going to meet Nick Martin at his house tonight and give him his contract release."

"When?" St. Cyr demanded furiously. "Think, Dee-Dee? What time did—"

"DeeDee," Martin said, stepping forward with suave confidence, "you can't remember a thing, can you?" But DeeDee was too subnormal to react even to a Disraeli-matrix. She merely smiled placidly at him.

"Out of my way, you writer!" roared St. Cyr, advancing upon Martin. "You will get no contract release! You do not waste St. Cyr's tune and get away with it! This I will not endure. I fix you as I fixed Ed Cassidy!"

Martin drew himself up and froze St. Cyr with an insolent smile. His hand toyed with an imaginary monocle. Golden periods were hanging at the end of his tongue. There only remained to hypnotize St. Cyr as he had hypnotized Watt. He drew a deep breath to unleash the floods of his eloquence—

And St. Cyr, also too subhuman to be impressed by urbanity, hit Martin a clout on the jaw.

It could never have happened in the British Parliament

When the robot walked into Martin's office that evening, he, or it went directly to the desk, unscrewed the bulb from the lamp, pressed the switch, and stuck his finger into the socket. There was a crackling flash. ENIAC withdrew his finger and shook his metallic head violently.

"I needed that," he sighed. "I've been on the go all day, by the Kaldekooz time-scale. Paleolithic, Neolithic, Technological—I don't even know what time it is.

Well, how's your ecological adjustment getting on?"

Martin rubbed Ms chin thoughtfully.

"Badly," he said. "Tell me, did Disraeli, as Prune Minister, ever have any dealings with a country called Mixo-Lydia?"

"I have no idea," said,the robot. "Why do you ask?"

"Because my environment hauled back and took a poke at my jaw," Martin said shortly.

"Then you provoked it," ENIAC countered. "A crisis —a situation of stress—always brings a man's dominant trait to the fore, and Disraeli was dominantly courageous. Under stress, his courage became insolence. But he was intelligent enough to arrange his environment so insolence would be countered on the semantic level. Mixo-Lydia, eh? I place it vaguely, some billions of years ago, when it was inhabited by giant white apes. Or—oh, now I remember. It's an encysted medieval survival, isn't it?"

Martin nodded.

"So is this movie studio," the robot said. "Your trouble is that you've run up against somebody who's got a better optimum ecological adjustment than you have. That's it. This studio environment is just emerging from medievalism, so it can easily slip back into that plenum when an optimum medievalist exerts pressure. Such types caused the Dark Ages. Well, you'd better change your environment to a neo-technological one, where the Disraeli-matrix can be successfully pro-survival. In your era, only a few archaic social-encystments like this studio are feudalistic, so go somewhere else. It takes a feudalist to match a feudalist."

"But I can't go somewhere else," Martin complained. "Not without my contract release. I was supposed to pick it up tonight, but St. Cyr found out what was happening, and he'll throw a monkey-wrench hi the works if he has to knock me out again to do it. I'm due at Watt's place now, but St. Cyr's already there—"

"Spare me the trivia," the robot said, raising his hand. "As for this St. Cyr, if he's a medieval character-type, obviously he'll knuckle under only to a stronger man of his own kind."

"How would Disraeli have handled this?" Martin demanded.

"Disraeli would never have got into such a situation in the first place," thi robot said unhelpfully. "The ecolo-gizer can give you the ideal ecological differential, but only for your own type, because otherwise it wouldn't be your optimum. Disraeli would have been a failure in Russia hi Ivan's tune."

"Would you mind clarifying that?" Martin asked thoughtfully.

"Certainly," the robot said with great rapidity. "It all depends on the threshold-response-time of the memory-circuits hi the brain, if you assume the identity of the basic chromosome-pattern. The strength of neuronic activation varies in inverse proportion to the quantitative memory factor. Only actual experience could give you Disraeli's memories, but your reactivity-thresholds have been altered until perception and emotional-indices approximate the Disraeli ratio."

"Oh," Martin said. "But how would *you,* say, assert yourself against a medieval steam-shovel?"

"By plugging my demountable brain into a larger steam-shovel," ENIAC told him.

Martin seemed pensive. His hand rose, adjusting an invisible monocle, while a

look of perceptive imagination suddenly crossed his face.

"You mentioned Russia hi Ivan's tune," he said. "Which Ivan would that be? Not, by any chance—?"

"Ivan the Fourth. Very well adjusted to his environment he was, too. However, enough of this chit-chat. Obviously you'll be one of the failures in our experiment, but our aim is to strike an average, so if you'll put the ecologizer on your—"

"That was Ivan the Terrible, wasn't it?" Martin interrupted. "Look here, could you impress the character-matrix of Ivan the Terrible on my brain?"

"That wouldn't help you a bit," the robot said. "Besides, it's not the purpose of the experiment. Now—"

"One moment. Disraeli can't cope with a medievalist like St. Cyr on his own level, but if I had Ivan the Ter-rible's reactive thresholds, I'll bet I could throw a bluff

that might do the trick. Even though St. Cyr's bigger than I am, he's got a veneer of civilization . . . now wait. He trades on that. He's always dealt with people who are too civilized to use his own methods. The trick would be to call his bluff. And Ivan's the man who could do it."

"But you don't understand."

"Didn't everybody hi Russia tremble with fear at Ivan's name?"

"Yes, in—"

"Very well, then," Martin said triumphantly. "You're going to impress the character-matrix of Ivan the Terrible on my mind, and then I'm going to put the bite on St. Cyr the way Ivan would have done it. Disraeli's simply too civilized. Size is a factor, but character's more important. I don't *look* like Disraeli, but people have been reacting to me as though I were George Arliss down to the spit-curl. A good big man can always lick a good little man. But St. Cyr's never been up against ft really uncivilized little man—one who'd gladly rip out an enemy's heart with his bare hands." Martin nodded briskly. "St. Cyr will back down—I've found that out. But it would take somebody like Ivan to make him stay all the way down."

"If you think I'm going to impress Ivan's matrix on you, you're wrong," the robot said.

"You couldn't be talked into it?"

"I," said ENIAC, "am a robot, semantically adjusted. Of course you couldn't talk me into it."

Perhaps not, Martin reflected, but Disraeli—hm-m. "Man is a machine." Why, Disraeli was the one person hi the world ideally fitted for robot-coercion. To him, men *were* machines—and what was ENIAC?

"Let's talk this over—" Martin began, absently pushing the desk-lamp toward the robot. And then the golden tongue that had swayed empires was loosed. . . .

"You're not going to like this," the robot said dazedly, sometime later. "Ivan won't do at ... oh, you've got me all confused. You'll have to eyeprint a—" He began to pull out of his sack the helmet and the quarter-mile of red ribbon.

"To tie up my bonny gray brain," Martin said, drunk with his own rhetoric. "Put it on my head. That's right. Ivan the Terrible, remember. I'll fix St. Cyr's Mixo-Lydian wagon."

"Differential depends on environment as much as on

heredity," the robot muttered, clapping the helmet on Martin's head. "Though

naturally Ivan wouldn't have had the Tsardom environment without his particular heredity, involving Helena Glinska ——there!" He removed the helmet. -

"But nothing's happening," Martin said. "I don't feel any different." ,

"It'll take a few inoments. This isn't your basic character-pattern, remember, as Disraeli's was. Enjoy yourself while you can. You'll get the Ivan-effect soon enough." He shouldered the sack and headed uncertainly for the door.

"Wait," Martin said uneasily. "Are you sure—"

"Be quiet. I forgot something—some formality—now I'm all confused. Well, I'll think of it later, or earlier, as the case may be. I'll see you hi twelve hours—I hope."

The robot departed. Martin shook his head tentatively from side to side. Then he got up and followed ENIAC to the door. But there was no sign of the robot, except for a diminishing whirlwind of dust in the middle of the corridor.

Something began to happen in Martin's brain. ...

Behind him, the telephone rang.

Martin heard himself gasp with pure terror. With a sudden, impossible, terrifying, absolute certainty he *knew* who was telephoning.

Assassins!

"Yes, Mr. Martin," said Tolliver Watt's butler to the telephone. "Miss Ashby is here. She is with Mr. Watt and Mr. St. Cyr at the moment, but I will give her your message. You are detained. And she is to call for you— where?"

"The broom-closet on the second floor of the Writers' Building," Martin said in a quavering voice. "It's the only one near a telephone with a long enough cord so I could take the phone in here with me. But I'm not at all certain that I'm safe. I don't like the looks of that broom on my left."

"Sir?"

"Are you *sure* you're Tolliver Watt's butler?" Martin demanded nervously.

"Quite sure, Mr.—eh—Mr. Martin."

"I *am* Mr. Martin," cried Martin with terrified defiance. "By all the laws of God and man, Mr. Martha I am and Mr. Martin I will remain, in spite of all attempts

by rebellious dogs to depose me from my rightful place."

"Yes, sir. The broom-closet you say, sir?"

"The broom-closet. Immediately. But swear not to tell another soul, no matter how much you're threatened. 111 protect you."

"Very well, sir. Is that all?"

"Yes. Tell Miss Ashby to hurry. Hang up now. The line may be tapped. I have enemies."

There was a click. Martin replaced his own receiver and furtively surveyed the broom-closet. He told himself that this was ridiculous. There was nothing to be afraid of, was there? True, the broom-closet's narrow walls were closing in upon him alarmingly, while the ceiling descended....

Panic-stricken, Martin emerged from the closet, took a long breath, and thr^w back his shoulders. "N-not a thing to be afraid of," he said. "Who's afraid?" Whistling, he began to stroll down the hall toward the staircase, but midway agoraphobia overcame him, and his nerve broke.

He ducked into his own office and sweated quietly in the dark until he had mustered up enough courage to turn on a lamp.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* in its glass-fronted cabinet, caught his eye. With noiseless haste, Martin secured *ITALY to LORD* and opened the volume at his desk. Something, obviously, was very, very wrong. The robot had said that Martin wasn't going to like being Ivan the Terrible, come to think of it. But was Martin wearing Ivan's character-matrix? Perhaps he'd got somebody else's matrix by mistake—that of some arrant coward. Or maybe the Mad Tsar of Russia had really been called Ivan the Terrified. Martin flipped the rustling pages nervously. Ivan, Ivan—here it was.

Son of Helena Glinska . . . married Anastasia Zakharina-Koshkina . . . private life unspeakably abominable . . . memory astonishing, energy indefatigable, ungovernable fury—great natural ability, political foresight, anticipated the ideals of Peter the Great— Martin shook his head.

Then he caught his breath at the next line.

Ivan had lived in an atmosphere of apprehension, imagining that every man's hand was against him.

"Just like me," Martin murmured. "But—but there was more to Ivan than just cowardice. I don't understand."

"Differential," the robot had said, "depends on envi-

ronment as much as on heredity. Though naturally Ivan wouldn't have had the Tsardom environment without his particular heredity."

Martin sucked in his breath sharply. Environment does make a difference. No" doubt Ivan IV had been a fearful coward, but heredity plus environment had given Ivan the one great weapon that had enabled him to keep his cowardice a recessive tlait.

Ivan the Terrible had been Tsar of ah[1] the Russias.

Give a coward a gun, and, while he doesn't stop being a coward, it won't show in the same way. He may act like a violent, aggressive tyrant instead. That, of course, was why Ivan had been ecologically successful—in his specialized environment. He'd never run up against many stresses that brought his dominant trait to the fore. Like Disraeli, he had been able to control his environment so that such stresses were practically eliminated.

Martin turned green.

Then he remembered Erika. Could he get Erika to keep St. Cyr busy, somehow, while he got his contract release from Watt? As long as he could avoid crises, he could keep his nerve from crumbling, but—*there were assassins everywhere!*

Erika was on her way to the lot by now. Martin swallowed.

He would meet her outside the studio. The broom-closet wasn't safe. He could be trapped there like a rat—

"Nonsense," Martin told himself with shivering firmness. "This isn't me. All I have to do is get a g-grip on m-myself. Come, now. Buck up. *Toujours I'audace!"*

But he went out of his office and downstairs very softly and cautiously. After all, one never knew. And when every man's hand was against one....

Quaking, the character-matrix of Ivan the Terrible stole toward a studio gate.

The taxi drove rapidly toward Bel-Air.

"But what were you doing up that tree?" Erika demanded.

Martin shook violently.

"A werewolf," he chattered. "And a vampire and a ghoul and—I *saw* them, I tell you. There I was at the studio gate, and they all came at me in a mob."

"But they were just coming back from dinner," Erika said. "You know Summit's doing night shooting on *Ab-*

bott and Costello Meet Everybody. Karloff wouldn't hur a fly."

"I kept telling myself that," Martin said dully, "but was out of my minjd with guilt and fear. You see, I'm ai abominable monster. But it's not my fault. It's environ mental. I grew up in brutal and degrading conditions— oh, look!" He pointed toward a traffic cop ahead. "Th(police! Traitors even hi the palace guards!"

"Lady, is that guy nuts?" the cabbie demanded.

"Mad or sane, I am Nicholas Martin," Martin announced, with an abrupt volte face. He tried to stand up commandingly, bumped his head, screamed *"Assassins!"'* and burrowed into a corner of the seat, panting horribly.

Erika gave him a thoughtful, worried look.

"Nick," she said, "how much have you had to drink? What's wrong?"

Martin shut his eyes and lay back against the cushions.

"Let me have a few minutes, Erika," he pleaded. "I'll be all right as soon as I recover from stress. It's only when I'm under stress that Ivan—"

"You can accept your contract release from Watt, can't you? Surely you'll be able to manage that."

"Of course," Martin said with feeble bravery. He thought it over and reconsidered. "If I can hold your hand," he suggested, taking no chances.

This disgusted Erika so much that for two miles there was no more conversation within the cab.

Erika had been thinking her own thoughts.

"You've certainly changed since this morning," she observed. "Threatening to make love to me, of all things. As if I'd stand for it. I'd like to see you try." There was a pause. Erika slid her eyes sidewise toward Martin. "I said I'd like to see you try," she repeated.

"Oh, you would, would you?" Martin said with hollow valor. He paused. Oddly enough his tongue, hitherto frozen stiff on one particular subject in Erika's presence, was now thoroughly loosened. Martin wasted no time on theory. Seizing his chance before a new stress might unexpectedly arise, he instantly poured out his heart to Erika, who visibly softened.

"But why didn't you ever say so before?" she asked.

"I can't imagine," Martin said. "Then you'll marry me?"

"But why were you acting so—"

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes," Erika said, and there was a pause. Martin moistened his lips, discovering that somehow he and Erika had moved close together. He was about to seal the bargain in the customary manner when a sudden thought struck him and made" him draw back with a little start.

Erika opened her eyes.

"Ah—" said Martin. "Um. I just happened to remember. There's a bad fib epidemic in Chicago. Epidemics spread like wildfire, you know. Why, it could be in Hollywood by now—especially with the prevailing westerly winds."

"I'm damned if I'm going to be proposed to and not kissed," Erika said in a somewhat irritated tone. "You kiss me!"

"But I might give you bubonic plague," Martin said nervously. "Kissing spreads germs. It's a well-known fact."

"Nick!"

"Well—I don't know—when did you last have a cold?"

Erika pulled away from him and went to sit in the, other corner.

"Ah," Martin said, after a long silence. "Erika?"

"Don't talk to me, you miserable man," Erika said. "You monster, you."

"I can't help it," Martin cried wildly. "I'll be a coward for twelve hours. It's not my fault. After eight tomorrow morning I'll—I'll walk into a lion-cage if you want, but tonight I'm as yellow as Ivan the Terrible! At least let me tell you what's been happening."

Erika said nothing. Martin instantly plunged into his long and improbable tale.

"I don't believe a word of it," Erika said, when he had finished. She shook her head sharply. "Just the same, I'm still your agent, and your career's still my responsibility. The first and only thing we have to do is get your contract release from Tolliver Watt. And that's *all* we're going to consider right now, do you hear?"

"But St. Cyr—"

"I'll do all the talking. You won't have to say a word. If St. Cyr tries to bully you, I'll handle him. But you've got to be there with me, or St. Cyr will make that an excuse to postpone things again. I know him."

"Now I'm under stress again," Martin said wildly. "I can't stand it. *I'm* not the Tsar of Russia."

"Lady," said the cab-driver, looking back, "if I was you, I'd sure as hell break off that engagement." "Heads will roll for this," Martin said ominously.

*t

"By mutual consent, agree to terminate . . . yes," Watt said, affixing his name to the legal paper that lay before him on the desk. "That does it. But where in the world is that fellow Martin? He came in with you, I'm certain."

"Did he?" Erika asked, rather wildly. She too, was wondering how Martin had managed to vanish so miraculously from her side. Perhaps he had crept with lightning rapidity under the carpet. She forced her mind from the thought and reached for the contract release Watt was folding.

"Wait," St. Cyr said, his lower lip jutting. "What about a clause giving us an option on Martin's next play?"

Watt paused, and the director instantly struck home.

"Whatever it may be, I can turn it into a vehicle for DeeDee, eh, DeeDee?" He lifted a sausage finger at the lovely star, who nodded obediently.

, "It's going to have an all-male cast," Erika said hastily. "And we're discussing contract releases, not options."

"He would give me an option if I had him here," St. Cyr growled, torturing his cigar horribly. "Why does everything conspire against an artist?" He waved a vast, hairy fist in the air. "Now I must break in a new writer, which is a great waste. Within a fortnight Martin would have been a St. Cyr writer. In fact, it is still possible."

"I'm afraid not, Raoul," Watt said resignedly. "You really shouldn't have hit

Martin at the studio today."

"But—but he would not dare charge me with assault. In Mixo-Lydia—"

"Why, hello, Nick," DeeDee said, with a bright smile. "What are you hiding behind those curtains for?"

Every eye was turned toward the window draperies, just in time to see the white, terrified face of Nicholas Martin flip out of sight like a scared chipmunk's. Erika, her heart dropping, said hastily, "Oh, that isn't Nick. It doesn't look a bit like him. You make a mistake, Dee-Dee."

"Did I?" DeeDee asked, perfectly willing to agree.

"Certainly," Erika said, reaching for the contract release in Watt's hand. "Now if you'll just let me have this, I'll—"

"Stop!" cried St. Cyr in a bull's bellow. Head sunk

between his heavy shoulders, he lumbered to the window and jerked the curtains aside.

"Ha!" the director said in a sinister voice. "Martin."

"It's a lie," Martin said feebly, making a desperate attempt to conceal his "stress-triggered panic. "I've abdicated."

St. Cyr, who had stepped back a pace, was studying Martin carefully. Slowly the cigar in his mouth began to tilt upwards. An unpleasant grin widened the director's mouth.

He shook a finger under Martin's quivering nostrils.

"You!" he said. "Tonight it is a different tune, eh? Today you were drunk. Now I see it all. Valorous with pots, like they say."

"Nonsense," Martin said, rallying his courage by a glance at Erika. "Who say? Nobody but you would say a thing like that. Now what's this all about?"

"What were you doing behind that curtain?" Watt asked.

"/ wasn't behind the curtain," Martin said, with great bravado. *"You* were. All of you. I was in front of the curtain. Can I help it if the whole lot of you conceal yourselves behind curtains in a library, like—like conspirators?" The word was unfortunately chosen. A panicky light flashed into Martin's eyes. "Yes, conspirators," he went on nervously. "You think I don't know, eh? Well, I do. You're all assassins, plotting and planning. So this is your headquarters, is it? All night your hired dogs have been at my heels, driving me like a wounded caribou to—"

"We've got to be going," Erika said desperately. "There's just time to catch the next carib—the next plane east." She reached for the contract release, but Watt suddenly put it in his pocket. He turned his chair toward Martin.

"Will you give us an option on your next play?" he demanded.

"Of course he will give us an option!" St. Cyr said, studying Martin's air of bravado with an experienced eye. "Also, there is to be no question of a charge of assault, for if there is I will beat you. So it is hi Mixo-Lydia. In fact, you dp not even want a release from your contract, Martin. It is all a mistake. I will turn you into a St. Cyr writer, and all will be well. So. Now you will ask Tolliver to tear up that release, will you not—*ha?"*

"Of course you won't, Nick," Erika cried. "Say so!"

There was a pregnant silence. Watt watched with sharp interest. So did the

unhappy Erika, torn between her responsibility as Martin's agent and her disgust at the man's abject cowardice. DeeDee watched too, her eyes very wide and a cheerful smile upon her handsome face. But the battle was obviously between Martin and Raoul St. Cyr.

Martin drew himself up desperately. Now or never he must force himself to be truly Terrible. Already he had a troubled expression, just like Ivan. He strove to look sinister too. An enigmatic smile played around his lips. For an instant he resembled the Mad Tsar of Russia, except, of course, that he was clean-shaven. With contemptuous, regal power Martin stared down the Mixo-Lydian. "

"You will tear up that release and sign an agreement giving us option on your next play too, ha?" St. Cyr said

—but a trifle uncertainly.

"I'll do as I please," Martin told him. "How would you like to be eaten alive by dogs?"

"I don't know, Raoul," Watt said. "Let's try to get this settled even if—"

"Do you want me to go over to Metro and take Dee-Dee with me?" St. Cyr cried, turning toward Watt. "He

•*will* sign!" And, reaching into an inner pocket for a pen, the burly dieector swung back toward Martin.

"Assassin!" cried Martin, misinterpreting the gesture.

A gloating smile appeared on St. Cyr's revolting features.

"Now we have him, Tolliver," he said, with heavy triumph, and these ominous words added the final stress to Martin's overwhelming burden. With a mad cry he rushed past St. Cyr, wrenched open a door, and fled.

From behind him came Erika's Valkyrie voice.

"Leave him alone! Haven't you done enough already? Now I'm going to get that contract release from you before I leave this room, Tolliver Watt, and I warn you, St. Cyr, if you—"

But by then Martin was five rooms away, and the voice faded. He darted on, hopelessly trying to make himself slow down and return to the scene of battle. The pressure was too strong. Terror hurled him down a corridor, into another room, and against a metallic object from which

he rebounded, to find himself sitting on the floor looking up at ENIAC Gamma the Ninety-Third.

"Ah, there you are," the robot said. "I've been searching all over space-tune for you. You forgot to give me a waiver of responsibility when you talked me into varying the experiment. The Authorities would be in my gears if I didn't bring back an eyeprinted waiver when a subject's scratched by variance.?

With a frightened glance behind him, Martin rose to his feet.

"What?" he asked confusedly. "Listen, you've got to change me back to myself. Everyone's trying to kill me. You're just in time. I can't wait twelve hours. Change me back to myself, quick!"

"Oh, I'm through with you," the robot said callously. "You're no longer a suitably unconditioned subject, after that last treatment you insisted on. I should have got the waiver from you then, but you got me all confused with Disraeli's oratory. Now here. Just hold this up to your left eye for twenty seconds." He extended a flat, glittering

little metal disk. "It's already sensitized and filled out. It only needs your eyeprint. Affix it, and you'll never see me again."

Martin shrank away.

"But what's going to happen to me?" he quavered, swallowing.

"How should I know? After twelve hours, the treatment will wear off, and you'll be yourself again. Hold this up to your eye, now."

"I will if you'll change me back to myself," Martin haggled.

"I can't. It's against the rules. One variance is bad enough, even with a filed waiver, but two? Oh, no. Hold this up to your left eye—"

"No," Martin said with feeble firmness. "I won't."

ENIAC studied him.

"Yes, you will," the robot said finally, "or I'll go boo at you."

Martin paled slightly, but he shook his head in desperate determination.

"No," he said doggedly. "Unless I get rid of Ivan's matrix right now, Erika will never marry me and I'll never get my contract release from Watt. All you have to do is put that helmet on my head and change me back to myself. Is that too much to ask?"

"Certainly, of a robot," ENIAC said stiffly. "No more shilly-shallying. It's lucky you are wearing the Ivan-matrix, so I can impose my will on you. Put your eyeprint on this. Instantly!" .

Martin rushed behind the couch and hid. The robot advanced menacingly. And at that moment, pushed to the last ditch, Martin suddenly remembered something.

He faced the robot.

"Wait," he said. "You don't understand. I can't eye-print that thing. It won't work on me. Don't you realize that? It's supposed to take the eyeprint—"

"-—of the rod-and-cone pattern of the retina," the robot said. "So—"

"So how can it do that unless I can keep my eye open for twenty seconds? My perceptive reaction-thresholds are Ivan's aren't they? Iv'can't control the reflex of blinking. I've got a coward's synapses. And they'd force me to shut my eyes tight the second that gimmick got too close to them."

"Hold them open," the robot suggested. "With your fingers."

"My fingers have reflexes too," Martin argued, moving toward a sideboard. "There's only one answer. I've got to get drunk. If I'm half stupefied with liquor, my reflexes will be so slow I won't be able to shut my eyes. And don't try to use force, either. If I dropped dead with fear, how could you get my eyeprint then?"

"Very easily," the robot said. "I'd pry open your lids—"

Martin hastily reached for a bottle on the sideboard, and a glass. But his hand swerved aside and gripped, instead, a siphon of soda water.

"—only," ENIAC went on, "the forgery might be detected."

Martin fizzled the glass full of soda and took a long drink.

"I won't be long getting drunk," he said, his voice thickening. "In fact, it's beginning to work already. See? I'm cooperating."

The robot hesitated.

"Well, hurry up about it," he said, and sat down.

Martin, about to take another drink, suddenly paused, staring at ENIAC. Then, with a sharply indrawn breath, he lowered the glass.

"What's the matter now?" the robot asked. "Drink your—what is it?"

"It's whiskey," Martin told the inexperienced automaton, "but now I see it all. You've put poison in it. So that's your plan, is it? Well, I won't touch another drop, and now you'll never get my eyeprint. I'm no fool."

"Cog Almighty," .the robot said, rising. "You poured that drink yourself! How could I have poisoned it? Drink!"

"I won't," Martin said, with a coward's stubborness, fighting back the growing suspicion tht the drink might really be toxic.

"You swallow that drink," ENIAC commanded, his voice beginning to quiver slightly. "It's perfectly harmless."

"Then prove it!" Martin said cunningly. "Would you be willing to switch glasses? Would you drink this poisoned brew yourself?"

"How do you expect me to drink?" the robot demanded. "I—" He paused. "All right, hand me the glass," he said. "I'll take a sip. Then you've got to drink the rest of it."

"Aha!" Martin said. "You betrayed yourself that time. You're a robot. You can't drink, remember? Not the same way that I can, anyhow. Now I've got you trapped, you assassin. *There's* your brew." He pointed to a floorlamp. "Do you dare to drink with me now, in your electrical fashion, or do you admit you are trying to poison me? Wait a minute, what am I saying? That wouldn't prove a—"

"Of course it would," the robot said hastily. "You're perfectly right, and it's very cunning of you. We'll drink together, and that will prove your whiskey's harmless—so you'll keep on drinking till your reflexes slow down, see?"

"Well," Martin began uncertainly, but the unscrupulous robot unscrewed a bulb from the floor-lamp, pulled the switch, and inserted his finger into the empty socket, which caused a crackling flash. "There," the robot said. "It isn't poisoned, see?"

"You're not swallowing it," Martin said suspiciously. "You're holding it in your mouth—I mean your finger."

ENIAC again probed the socket.

"Well, all right, perhaps," Martin said, in a doubtful fashion. "But I'm not going to risk your slipping a powder

in my liquor, you traitor. You're going to keep up with me, drink for drink, until I can eyeprint that gimmick of yours—or else I stop drinking. But does sticking your finger in that lamp really prove my liquor isn't poisoned? I can't quite—"

"Of course it does," the robot said quickly. "I'll prove it. I'll do it again . . . *f(t).* Powerful DC, isn't it? Certainly it proves it. Keep drinking, now."

His gaze watchfully on the robot, Martin lifted his glass of club soda.

"F ff ff i(t)!" cried the robot, some time later, sketching a singularly loose smile on its metallic face.

"Best fermented mammoth's milk I ever tasted," Martin agreed, lifting his tenth glass of soda-water. He felt slightly queasy and wondered if he might be drowning.

"Mammoth's milk?" asked ENIAC thickly. "What year is this?"

Martin drew a long breath. Ivan's capacious memory had served him very well so far. Voltage, he recalled, increased the frequency of the robot's thought-patterns and disorganized ENIAC's memory—which was being proved before his eyes. But the crux of his plan was yet to come... .

"The year of the Great Hairy One, of course," Martin said briskly. "Don't you remember?"

"Then you—" ENIAC strove to focus upon his drink-ing-companion. "You must be Mammoth-Slayer."

"That's it!" Martin cried. "Have another jolt. What about giving me the treatment now?"

"What treatment?"

Martin looked impatient. "You said you were going to impose the character-matrix of Mammoth-Slayer on my mind. You said *that* would insure my optimum ecological adjustment in this temporal phase, and nothing else would."

"Did I? But you're not Mammoth-Slayer," ENIAC said confusedly. "Mammoth-Slayer was the son of the Great Hairy One. What's your mother's name?"

"The Great Hairy One," Martin replied, at which the robot grated its hand across its gleaming forehead.

"Have one more jolt," Martin suggested. "Now take out the ecologizer and put it on my head."

"Like this?" ENIAC asked, obeying. "I keep feeling I've forgotten something important. *F (t)."*

Martin adjusted the crystal helmet on his skull. "Now,"

he commanded. "Give me the character-matrix of Mammoth-Slayer, son of the Great Hairy One."

"Well—all right," ENIAC said dizzily. The red ribbons swirled. There was a,-, flash from the helmet. "There," the robot said. "It's done. It may take a few minutes to begin functioning, but then fof twelve hours you'll—wait! Where are you going?" *. *f*

But Martin had already departed.

The robot stuffed the helmet and the quarter-mile of red ribbon back for the last tune. He lurched to the floor-lamp, muttering something about one for the road. Afterward, the room lay empty. A fading murmur said, *"F (t)."*

"Nick!" Erika gasped, staring at the figure in the doorway. "Don't stand like that! You frighten me!"

Everyone in the room looked up abruptly at her cry, and so were just in time to see a horrifying change take place hi Martin's shape. It was an illusion, of course, but an alarming one. His knees slowly bent until he was half-crouching, his shoulders slumped as though bowed by the weight of enormous back and shoulder muscles, and his arms swung forward until their knuckles hung perilously near the floor.

Nicholas Martin had at last achieved a personality whose ecological norm would put him on a level with Raoul St. Cyr.

"Nick!" Erika quavered.

Slowly Martin's jaw protruded till his lower teeth were hideously visible. Gradually his eyelids dropped until he was peering up out of tiny, wicked sockets. Then, slowly, a perfectly shocking grin broadened Mr. Martin's mouth.

"Erika," he said throatily. "Mine!"

And with that, he shambled forward, seized the horrified girl in his arms, and bit her on the ear.

"Oh, Nick," Erika murmured, closing her eyes. "Why didn't you ever—no, no, *no!* Nick! Stop it! The contract release. We've got to—Nick, what are you doing?" She snatched at Martin's departing form, but too late.

For all his ungainly and unpleasant gait, Martin covered ground fast. Almost instantly he was clambering over Watt's desk as the most direct route to that startled tycoon. DeeDee looked on, a little surprised, St. Cyr lunged forward.

"In Mixo-Lydia—" he began. "Ha! So!" He picked up Martin and threw him across the room.

"Oh, you beast," Erika cried, and flung herself upon the director, beating at his brawny chest. On second thought, she used her shoes on his shins with more effect. St. Cyr, no gentleman, turned her around, pinioned her arms behind her, and glanced up at Watt's alarmed cry.

"Martin! What are you doing?"

There was reason for his inquiry. Apparently unhurt by St. Cyr's toss, Martin had hit the floor, rofied over and over like- a ball, knocked down a floor-lamp with a crash, and uncurled, with an unpleasant expression on his face. He rose crouching, bandy-legged, his arms swinging low, a snarl curling his lips.

"You take my mate?" the pithecanthropic Mr. Martin inquired throatily, rapidly losing all touch with the twentieth century. It was a rhetorical question. He picked up the lamp-standard—he did'not have to bend to do it— tore off the silk shade as he would have peeled foliage from a tree-limb, and balanced the weapon in his hand. Then he moved forward, carrying the lamp-standard like a spear.

"I," said Martin, "kill."

He then endeavored, with the most admirable single-heartedness, to carry out his expressed intention. The first thrust of the blunt, improvised spear rammed into St. Cyr's solar plexus and drove him back against the wall with a booming thud. This seemed to be what Martin wanted. Keeping one end of his spear pressed into the director's belly, he crouched lower, dug his toes into the rug, and did his very best to drill a hole in St. Cyr.

"Stop it!" cried Watt, flinging himself into the conflict. Ancient reflexes took over. Martin's arm shot out. Watt shot off in the opposite direction.

The lamp broke.

Martin looked pensively at the pieces, tentatively began to bite one, changed his mind, and looked at St. Cyr instead. The gasping director, mouthing threats, curses and objections, drew himself up, and shook a huge fist at Martin.

"I," he announced, "shall kill you with my bare hands. Then I go over to MGM with DeeDee. In Mixo-Lydia—"

Martin lifted his own fists toward his face. He regarded them. He unclenched them slowly, while a terrible grin spread across his face. And then, with every tooth showing, and with the hungry gleam of a mad tiger in his tiny little eyes, he lifted his gaze to St. Cyr's throat.

Mammoth-Slayer was not the son of the Great Hairy One for nothing.

Martin sprang.

So did St. Cyr—in another direction, screaming with sudden terror. For, after all, he was only a medievalist. The feudal man is far more civilized than the so-called man of Mammoth-Slayer's primordially direct era, and as a man recoils from < a

small but murderous wildcat, so St. Cyr fled in sudden civilized horror from an attacker who was, literally, afraid of nothing.

He sprang through the window and, shrieking, vanished into the night.

Martin was taken by surprise. When Mammoth-Slayer leaped at an enemy, the enemy leaped at him too, and so Martin's head slammed against the wall with disconcerting force. Dimly he heard diminishing, terrified cries. Laboriously he crawled to his feet and sat back against the wall, snarling, quite ready....

"Nick!" Erika's voice called. "Nick, it's me! Stop it! *Stop it!* DeeDee—"

"Ugh?" Martin said thickly, shaking his head. "Kill." He growled softly, blinking through red-rimmed little eyes at the scene around him. It swam back slowly into focus. Erika was struggling with DeeDee near the window.

"You let me go," DeeDee cried. "Where Raoul goes, I

go."

"DeeDee!" pleaded a new voice. Martin glanced aside to see Tolliver Watt crumpled in a corner, a crushed lamp-shade half obscuring his face.

With a violent effort Martin straightened up. Walking upright seemed unnatural, somehow, but it helped submerge Mammoth-Slayer's worst instincts, Besides, with St. Cyr gone, stresses were slowly subsiding, so that Mammoth-Slayer's dominant trait was receding from the active foreground.

Martin tested his tongue cautiously, relieved to find he was still capable of human speech.

"Uh," he said. "Arrgh ... ah. Watt."

Watt blinked at him anxiously through the lamp-shade.

"Urgh . . . Ur—release," Martin said, with a violent effort. "Contract release. Gimme."

Watt had courage. He crawled to his feet, removing the lamp-shade.

"Contract release!" he snapped. "You madman! Don't

you realize what you've done? DeeDee's walking out on me. DeeDee, don't go. We will bring Raoul back—"

"Raoul told me to quit if he quit," DeeDee said stubbornly.

"You don't have to do what St. Cyr tells you," Erika said, hanging onto the struggling star.

"Don't I?" DeeDee asked, astonished. "Yes, I do. I always have."

"DeeDee," Watt said frantically, "I'll give you the finest contract on earth—a ten-year contract—look, here it is." He tore out a well-creased document. "All you have to do is sign, and you can have anything you want. Wouldn't you like that?"

"Oh, yes," DeeDee said. "But Raoul wouldn't like it." She broke free from Erika.

"Martin!" Watt told the playwright frantically, "Get St. Cyr back. Apologize to him. I don't care how, but get him back! If you don't, I—I'll never give you your release."

Martin was observed to slump slightly—perhaps with hopelessness. Then, again, perhaps not.

"I'm sorry," DeeDee said. "I liked working for you, Tolliver. But I have to do what Raoul says, of course." And she moved toward the window.

Martin had slumped further down, till his knuckles quite brushed the rug. His angry little eyes, glowing with baffled rage, were fixed on DeeDee. Slowly his lips

peeled back, exposing every tooth in his head.

"You," he said, in an ominous growl.

DeeDee paused, but only briefly.

Then the enraged roar of a wild beast reverberated through the room. *"You come back!"* bellowed the infuriated Mammoth-Slayer, and with one agile bound sprang to the window, seized DeeDee and slung her under one arm. Wheeling, he glared jealously at the shrinking Watt and reached for Erika. In a trice he had the struggling forms of both girls captive, one under each arm. His wicked little eyes glanced from one to another. Then, playing no favorites, he bit each quickly on the ear.

"Nick!" Erika cried. "How dare you!"

"Mine," Mammoth-Slayer informed her hoarsely.

"You bet I am," Erika said, "but that works both ways. Put down that hussy you've got under your other arm."

Mammoth-Slayer was observed to eye DeeDee doubtfully.

"Well," Erika said tartly, "make up your mind."

"Both," said the uncivilized playwright. "Yes."

"No!" Erika said.

"Yes," DeeDee breathed in an entirely new tone. Limp as a dishrag, the lovely creature hung from Martin's arm and gazed up at her captor with idolatrous admiration. t ,»

"Oh, you hussy," teika said. "What about St. Cyr?"

"Him," DeeDee said scornfully. "He hasn't got a thing, the sissy. I'll never look at him again." She turned her adoring gaze back to Martin.

"Pah," the latter grunted, tossing DeeDee into Watt's lap. "Yours. Keep her." He grinned approvingly at Erika. "Strong she. Better."

Both Watt and DeeDee remained motionless, staring at Martin.

"You," he said, thrusting a finger at DeeDee. "You stay with him. Ha?" He indicated Watt.

DeeDee nodded'in slavish adoration.

"You sign contract?"

Nod.

Martin looked significantly into Watt's eyes. He extended his hand.

"The contract release," Erika explained, upside-down. "Give it to him before he pulls your head off."

Slowly Watt pulled the contract release from his pocket and held it out. But Martin was already shambling toward the window. Erika reached back hastily and snatched the document.

"That was a wonderful act," she told Nick, as they reached the street. "Put me down now. We can find a cab some—"

"No act," Martin growled. "Real. Till tomorrow. After that—" He shrugged. "But tonight, Mammoth-Slayer." He attempted to climb a palm tree, changed his mind, and shambled on, carrying the now pensive Erika. But it was not until a police car drove past that Erika screamed. . . .

"I'll bail you out tomorrow," Erika told Mammoth-Slayer, struggling between two large patrolmen.

Her words were drowned in an infuriated bellow.

Thereafter events blurred, to solidify again for the irate Mammoth-Slayer only when he was thrown in a cell, where he picked himself up with a threatening roar. "I kill!" he announced, seizing the bars.

"Arrrgh!"

"Two in one night," said a bored voice, moving away outside. "Both in Bel-Air, too. Think they're hopped up? We couldn't get a coherent story out of either one."

The bars shook. "An annoyed voice from one of the bunks said to shut up, and added that there had been already enough trouble from nincompoops without—here it paused, hesitated, and uttered a shrill, sharp, piercing cry.

Silence prevailed, momentarily, in the cell-block as Mammoth-Slayer, son of the Great Hairy One, turned slowly to face Raoul St. Cyr.

Juke Box

jerry foster told the bartender that nobody loved him. The bartender, with the experience of his trade, said that Jerry was mistaken, and how about another drink. "Why not?" said the unhappy Mr. Foster, examining

the scanty contents of his wallet. " 'I'll take the daughter of the vine to spouse. Nor heed the music of a distant drum.' That's Omar."

"Sure," the bartender said surprisingly. "But you want to look out you don't go out by the same door that in you went. No brawls allowed here. This isn't East Fifth, chum."

"You may call me chum," Foster said, reverting to the main topic, "but you don't mean it. I'm nobody's pal. Nobody loves me."

"What about that babe you brought in last night?"

Foster tested his drink. He was a good-looking, youngish man with slick blond hair and a rather hazy expression in his blue eyes.

"Betty?" he murmured. "Well, the fact is, a while ago I was down at the Tom-Tom with Betty and this redhead came along. So I ditched Betty. Then the redhead iced me. Now I'm lonely, and everyone hates me."

"You shouldn't of ditched Betty, maybe," the bartender suggested.

"I'm fickle," Foster said, tears springing to his eyes. "I can't help it. Women are my downfall. Gimme another drink and tell me your name."

"Austin."

"Austin. Well, Austin, I'm nearly in trouble. Did you notice who won the fifth at Santa Anita yesterday?"

"Pig's Trotters, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Foster said, "but I laid my dough right on the nose of White Flash. That's why I'm here. Sammy comes around to this joint now, doesn't he?"

"That's right."

"I'm lucky," Foster said. "I got the money to pay him. Sammy is a hard man when you don't pay off."

"I wouldn't know," the bartender said. "Excuse me."

He moved off to take care of a couple of vodka col-linses.

"So you hate me too," Foster said, and, picking up his drink, wandered away

from the bar.

He was surprised to see Betty sitting alone in a booth, watching him. But he was not at all surprised to see that her blond hair, her limpid eyes, her pink-and-white skin had lost ah[1] attraction for him. She bored him. Also, she was going to make a nuisance of herself.

Foster ignored the girl and went further back, to where a bulky oblong object was glowing in polychromatic colors against the far wall. It was what the manufacturers

insist on terming an automatic phonograph, in spite of the more aptly descriptive word juke-box.

This was a lovely juke-box. It had lots of lights and colors. Moreover, it wasn't watching Foster, and it kept its mouth shut. *

Foster draped himself over the juke-box and patted its sleek sides. \ •"

"You're my girl," he announced. "You're beautiful. I love you madly, do you hear? Madly."

He could feel Betty's gaze on his back. He swigged his drink and smoothed the juke-box's flanks, glibly protesting his sudden affection for the object. Once he glanced around. Betty was starting to get up.

Foster hastily found a nickel in his pocket and slipped it into the coin-lever, but before he could push it in, a stocky, dark man wearing horn-rimmed glasses entered the bar, nodded at Foster, and moved quickly to a booth where a fat person in tweeds was sitting. There was a short consultation, during which money changed hands, and the stocky man made a note in a small book he brought from his pocket.

Foster took out his wallet. He had had trouble with Sammy before, and wanted no more. The bookie was insistent on his pound of flesh. Foster counted his money, blinked, and counted it again, while his stomach fell several feet. Either he had been short-changed, or he had lost some dough. He was short.

Sammy wouldn't like that.

Forcing his fogged brain to think, Foster wondered how he could gain time. Sammy had already seen him. If he could duck out the back.

It had become altogether too silent in the bar. He needed noise to cover his movements. He saw the nickel in the juke-box's coin-lever and hastily pushed it in.

Money began to spew out of the coin return slot.

Foster got his hat under the slot almost instantly. Quarters, dimes, and nickels popped out in a never-ending stream. The juke-box broke into song. A needle scratched over the black disc. The torchy mourning of "My Man" came out sadly. It covered the tinkling of the corns as they filled Foster's hat.

After a while the money stopped coming out of the juke-box. Foster stood there, thanking his personal gods,

as he saw Sammy moving toward him. The bookie glanced at Foster's hat and blinked.

"Hi, Jerry. What gives?"

"I hit a jackpot," Foster said.'

"Not on the juke-box!"

"No, down at the Onyx," Foster said, naming a private club several blocks away. "Haven't had a chance to get these changed into bills yet. Want to help me out?"

"I'm no cash register," Sammy said. "I'll take mine in green."

The juke-box stopped playing "My Man" and broke into "Always." Foster put his jingling hat on top of the phonograph and counted out bills. He didn't have enough, but he made the balance up out of quarters he fished from the hat.

"Thanks," Sammy said. "Too bad your nag didn't make it."

" *'With a love that's true, always—'"* the juke-box sang fervently.

"Can't be helped," Foster said. "Maybe next time I'll hit 'em."

"Want anything on Oaklawn?"

" *'When the things you've planned, need a helping hand—'"*

Foster had been leaning on the juke-box. On the last two words, a tingling little shock raced through him. Those particular two words jumped out of nothing, impinged on the surface of his brain, and sank hi indelibly, like the stamp of a die. He couldn't hear anything else. They echoed and re-echoed.

"Uh—helping hand," he said hazily. "Helping—"

"A sleeper?" Sammy said. "Okay, Helping Hand in the third, at Oaklawn. The usual?"

The room started to turn around. Foster managed to nod. After a time he discovered that Sammy was gone. He saw his drink on the juke-box, next to his hat, and swallowed the cool liquid in three quick gulps. Then he bent and stared into the cryptic innards of the automatic phonograph.

"It can't be," he whispered. "I'm drunk. But not drunk enough. I need another shot."

A quarter rolled out of the coin-return slot, and Foster automatically caught it.

"No!" he gulped. "Oh-h-h!" He stuffed his pockets with the booty from the hat, held on to his glass with

the grip of a drowning man, and went toward the bar. On the way he felt someone touch his sleeve.

"Jerry," Be^ty said. "Please."

He ignored her. He went on to the bar and ordered another drink. -

"Look, Austin," he said. "That juke-box you got back there. Is it working all right?"

Austin squeezed a l$ne. He didn't look up.

"I don't hear any complaints."

"But—"

Austin slid a replenished glass toward Foster.

"Excuse me," he said, and went to the other end of the bar.

Foster stole a look at the juke-box. It sat against the wall glowing enigmatically.

"I don't exactly know what to think," he said to no one in particular.

A record started playing. The juke-box sang throatily:

" *'Leave us face it, we're in love. . . .'"*

The truth was, Jerry Foster was feeling pretty low in those days. He was essentially a reactionary, so it was a mistake for him to have been born in an era of great change. He needed the feel of solid ground under his feet. And the ground wasn't so solid any more, what with the newspaper headlines and new patterns for living emerging out of the vast technological and sociological changes the

mid-Twentieth Century offered.

You've got to be elastic to survive in a changing culture. Back in the stable Twenties, Foster would have got along beautifully, but now, in a word, he just wasn't on the ball. A man like that seeks stable security as his ultimo, and security seemed to have vanished.

The result was that Jerry Foster found himself out of a job, badly in debt, and drinking far more than he should have done. The only real advantage to that set-up was that alcohol buffered Foster's incredulity when he encountered the affectionate juke-box.

Not that he remembered it the next morning. He didn't recall what had happened for a couple of days, till Sammy looked him up and gave him nine hundred dollars, the result of Helping Hand coming *in* under the wire at Oaklawn. The long shot had paid off surprisingly.

Foster instantly went on a binge, finding himself eventually at a downtown bar he recognized. Austin was

off duty, however, and Betty wasn't present tonight. So Foster, tanked to the gills, leaned his elbow on polished mahogany and stared around. Toward the back was the juke-box. He ..blinked at it, trying to remember.

The juke-box began to play "I'll Remember April." The whirling confusion of insobriety focused down to a small, clear, cold spot in Foster's brain. He started to tingle. His mouth formed words:

"Remember April—Remember April?"

"All right!" said a fat, unshaven, untidy man standing next to him. "I heard you! I'll—What did you say?"

"Remember April," Foster muttered, quite automat-cally. The fat man spilled his drink.

"It isn't! It's March!"

Foster peered around dimly hi search of a calendar.

"It's April third," he affirmed presently. "Why?"

"I've got to get back, then," said the fat man hi desperation. He scrubbed at his sagging cheeks. "April already! How long have I been tight? You don't know? It's your business to know. April! One more drink, then." He summoned the bartender.

He was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a man with a hatchet. Foster, blearily eying the apparition, almost decided to get out in search of a quieter gin-mill. This new figure, bursting in from the street, was a skinny blond man with wild eyes and the shakes. Before anyone could stop nun, he had rushed the length of the room and lifted his hatchet threateningly above the juke-box.

"I can't stand it!" he cried hysterically. "You spiteful little—I'll fix you before you fix me!"

So saying, and ignoring the purposeful approach of the bartender, the blond man brought down his hatchet heavily on the juke-box. There was a blue crackle of flame, a tearing noise, and the blond man collapsed without a sound.

Foster stayed where he was. There was a bottle on the bar near him, and he captured it. Rather dimly, he realized what was happening. An ambulance was summoned. A doctor said the blond man had been painfully shocked, but was still

alive. The juke-box had a smashed panel, but appeared uninjured otherwise. Austin came from somewhere and poured himself a shot from under the bar.

"Each man kills the thing he loves," Austin said to Foster. "You're the guy who was quoting Omar at me the other night, aren't you?"

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"What?" Foster said.

Austin nodded at the motionless figure being loaded on a stretcher.

"Funny business. That fella used to come in all the time just to play the juke-box. He was in love with the thing. Sat here by the hour listening to it. Course, when I say he was in love with it, I'm merely using a figure of speech, catch?" | ;r

"Sure," Foster said.

"Then a couple of days ago he blows up. Crazy as a loon. I come in and find the guy on his knees hi front of the juke-box, begging it to forgive him for something or other. I don't get it. Some people shouldn't drink, I guess. What's yours?" '

"The same," Foster said, watching the ambulance men carry the stretcher out of the bar.

"Just mild electric shock," an intern said. "He'll be all right."

The juke-box clicked, and a new record swung across. Something must have gone wrong with the amplification, for the song bellowed out with deafening intensity.

" 'Chlo-eee!' " screamed the juke-box urgently, " *'Chlo-eeee!'"*

Deafened, fighting the feeling that this was hallucination, Foster found himself beside the juke-box. He clung to it against the mad billows of sound. He shook it, and the roaring subsided.

" 'Chlo-eee!'" the juke-box sang softly and sweetly.

There was confusion nearby, but Foster ignored it. He had been struck by an idea. He peered into the phonograph's innards through the glass pane. The record was slowing now, and as the needle lifted Foster could read the title on the circular label.

It said, "Springtime in the Rockies."

The record hastily lifted itself and swung back to concealment among the others in the rack. Another black disc moved over under the needle. It was "Twilight hi Turkey."

But what the juke-box played, with great expression, was: "We'll Always Be Sweethearts."

After a while the confusion died down. Austin came over, examined the phonograph, and made a note to get the broken panel replaced. Foster had entirely for-

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gotten the fat, unshaven, untidy man till he heard an irritated voice behind him say:

"It can't be April!"

"What?"

"You're a liar. It's still March."

"Oh, take a walk," said Foster, who was profoundly shaken, though he did not quite know why. The obvious reasons for his nervousness, he suspected, weren't the real ones.

"You're a liar, I said," the fat man snarled, breathing heavily in Foster's face. "It's March! You'll either admit it's March, or—or—"

But Foster had had enough. He pushed the fat man away and had taken two steps when a tingling shock raced through him and the small, cold, spot of clarity sprang into existence within his brain.

The juke-box started to play; "Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative."

"It's March!" the fat man yelped. "Isn't it March?"

"Yes," Foster said thickly. "It's M,arch."

All that night the song-title blazed in his mind. He went home with the fat man. He drank with the fat man. He agreed with the fat man. He never used a negative. And, by morning, he was surprised to find that the fat man had hired him as a song-writer for Summit Studios, simply because Foster didn't say no when he was asked whether he could write songs.

"Good," the fat man said. "Now I'd better get home. Oh, I am home, aren't I? Well, I gotta go to the studio tomorrow. We're starting a super-musical April second, and—This is April, isn't it?"

"Sure."

"Let's get some sleep. No, not that door. The swimming-pool's out there. Here, I'll show you a spare bedroom. You're sleepy, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Foster, who wasn't.

But he slept, nevertheless, and the next morning found himself at Summit Studios with the fat man, putting his signature on a contract. Nobody asked his qualifications. Taliaferro, the fat man, had okayed him. That was enough. He was given an office with a piano and a secretary, and sat dazedly behind his desk for most of the day, wondering how the devil it had all happened. At the commissary, however, he picked up some scraps of information.

Taliaferro was a big shot—a very big shot. He had one idiosyncrasy. He couldn't endure disagreement. Only yes-men were allowed around him. Those who worked for Taliaferro had to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative.

Foster got his assignment. A romantic love song for the new picture. A duet. Everyone took it for granted that Foster knew on4 note from another. He did, having studied piano in his youth, but counterpoint and the mysteries of minor keys were far beyond him.

That night he went back to the little downtown bar.

It was just a hunch, but he thought the juke-box might be able to help him. Not that he really believed hi such things, but at worst, he could hoist a few shots and try to figure a way out. But the juke-box kept playing one song over and over.

The odd thing was that nobody else heard that particular song. Foster discovered that quite by accident. To Austin's ears, the juke-box was going through an ordinary repertoire of modern popular stuff.

After that, Foster listened more closely. The song was a haunting duet, plaintive and curiously tender. It had overtones hi it that made Foster's spine tingle.

"Who wrote that thing?" he.asked Austin.

"Wasn't it Hoagy Carmichael?"

But they were talking at cross-purposes. The juke-box suddenly sang "I Dood It,"

and then relapsed into the duet.

"No," Austin said. "I guess it wasn't Hoagy. That's an old one. 'Dardanella.'"

But it wasn't "Dardanella."

Foster saw a piano at the back. He went to it and got out his notebook. First he wrote the lyrics. Then he tried to get the notes down, but they were beyond him, even with the piano as a guide. The best he could achieve was a sort of shorthand. His own voice was true and good, and he thought he might be able to sing the piece ao-curately, if he could find someone to put down the notes for him.

When he finished, he studied the juke-box more closely. The broken panel had been repaired. He patted the gadget in a friendly way and went away thinking hard.

His secretary's name was Lois Kennedy. She came into his office the next day while Foster was tapping at the piano

and helplessly endeavoring to write down the score.

"Let me help you, Mr. Foster," she said competently, casting a practised eye over the messy pages. "I—no, thanks^' Foster said.

"Are you bad on scores?" she asked as she smiled. "A lot of composers are that way. They play by ear, but they don't know G sharp from A flat." "They don't, eh?" Foster murmured. The girl eyed him intently. "Suppose you run through it, and I'll mark down a rough scoring."

Foster hit a few chords. "Phooey!" he said at last, and picked up the lyrics. Those were readable, anyway. He began to hum.

"Swell," Lois said. "Just sing it. I'll catch the melody." Foster's voice was true, and he found it surprisingly easy to remember the love song the juke-box had played. He sang it, and Lois presently played it on the piano, while Foster corrected and revised. At least he could tell what was wrong and what was right. And, since Lois had h'ved music since her childhood, she had little difficulty in recording the song on paper.

Afterwards she was enthusiastic. "It's swell," she said. "Something really new! Mr. Foster, you're good. And you're not lifting from Mozart, either. I'll shoot this right over to the big boy. Usually it's smart not to be hi too much of a hurry, but since this is your first job here, we'll chance it."

Taliaferro liked the song. He made a few useless suggestions, which Foster, with Lois's aid, incorporated, and sent down a list of what else was needed for the super-musical. He also called a conclave of the song-writers to listen to Foster's opus.

"I want you to hear what's good," Taliaferro told them. "This new find of mine is showing you up. I think we need new blood," he finished darkly, eying the wretched song-writers with ominous intensity.

But Foster quaked in his boots. For all he knew, his song might have been plagiarized. He expected someone in the audience to spring up and shout: "That new find of yours swiped his song from Berlin!" Or Gershwin or Porter or Hammerstein, as the case might be.

Nobody exposed him. The song *was* new. It established Foster as a double-threat man, since he had done both melody and lyrics himself.

He was a success.

Every night he had his ritual. Alone, he visited a certain downtown bar. When necessary, the juke-box helped him with his songs. It seemed to know exactly what was needed. It asked little in return. It served him with the unquestioning fidelity of 'Cigarette' in "Under Two Flags." And sometimes it played love songs aimed at Foster's ears and hlaft. It serenaded him. Sometimes, too, Foster thought he was going crazy.

Weeks passed. .Foster got all his assignments done at the little downtown bar, and later whipped them into suitable shape with his secretary's assistance. He had begun to notice that she was a strikingly pretty girl, with attractive eyes and lips. Lois seemed amenable, but so far Foster had held back from any definite commitment. He felt unsure of his new triumphs.

But he blossomed like the rose. His bank account grew fat, he looked sleeker and drank much less, and he visited the downtown bar every night. Once he asked Austin about it.

"That juke-box. Where'd it come from?"

"I don't know," Austin said. "It was here before I came."

"Well, who puts new records in it?"

"The company, I suppose."

"Ever see 'em do it?"

Austin thought. "Can't say I have. I guess the man conies around when the other bartender's on duty. It's got a new set of records on every day, though. That's good service."

Foster made a note to ask the other bartender about it. But there was no tune. For, the next day, he kissed Lois Kennedy.

That was a mistake. It was the booster charge. The next thing Jerry Foster knew, he was making the rounds with Lois, and it was after dark, and they were driving unsteadily along the Sunset Strip, discussing life and music.

"I'm going places," Foster said, dodging an oddly ambulatory telephone pole. "We're going places together."

"Oh, honey!" Lois said.

Foster stopped the car and kissed her.

"That calls for another drink," he remarked. "Is that a bar over there?"

The night wore on. Foster hadn't realized he had been under a considerable strain. Now the lid was off. It was wonderful to have. Lois in his arms, to kiss her, to feel her hair brushing his cheek. Everything became rosy.

Through the rosy mist he suddenly saw the face of Austin.

"The same?" Austin inquired.

Foster blinked. He was sitting in a booth, with Lois beside him. He had his arm around the girl, and he had an idea he had just kissed her.

"Austin," he said, "how long have we been here?" "About an hour. Don't you remember, Mr. Foster?" "Darling," Lois murmured, leaning heavily against her escort.

Foster tried to think. If was difficult. "Lois," he finally said, "haven't I got another song to write?" "It'll keep."

"No. That torch song. Taliaferro wants it Friday." "That's four days away."

"Now I'm here, I might as well get the song," Foster said, with alcoholic insistence, and stood up.

"Kiss me," Lois murmured, leaning toward him. He obeyed, though he had a feeling that there was more important business to be attended to. Then he stared around, located the juke-box, and went toward it. "Hello, thdre," he said, patting the sleek, glowing sides. "I'm back. Drunk, too. But that's all right. Let's have that song."

The juke-box was silent. Foster felt Lois touch his arm.

"Come on back. We don't want music."

"Wait a minute, hon."

Foster stared at the juke-box. Then he laughed.

"I know," he said, and pulled out a handful of change. He slid a nickel into the coin-lever and pushed the lever hard.

Nothing happened.

"Wonder what's wrong with it?" Foster muttered. "I'll need that song by Friday."

He decided that there were a lot of things he didn't know about, and ought to. The muteness of the juke-box puzzled him.

All of a sudden he remembered something that had happened weeks ago, the blond man who had attacked

the juke-txxswiQr a hatchet and had only got shocked for his pains. The blond man he vaguely recalled, used to spend hours *en tete-a-tete* with the juke-box.

"What a dope!" Foster said thickly.

Lois asked a question.

"I should have checked up before," he answered her. "Maybe I can find, oat—oh, nothing, Lois. Nothing at all." I '

Then he went after Austin. Austin gave him the blond man's name and, an hour later, Foster found himself sitting by a white hospital bed, looking down at a man's ravaged face under faded blond hair. Brashness, judicious tipping, and a statement that he was a relative had got him this far. Now he sat there and watched and felt questions die as they formed on his lips.

When he finally mentioned the juke-box, it was easier. He simply sat and listened.

"They carried me out of the bar on a stretcher," the blond man said. "Then a car skidded and came right at me. I didn't feel any pain. I still don't feel anything. The driver—she said she'd heard somebody shouting her name. Chloe. That startled her so much she lost control, and hit me. You know who yelled 'Chloe,' don't you?"

Foster thought back. There was a memory somewhere.

The juke-box had begun to play "Chloe," and the amplification had gone haywire, so the song had bellowed out thunderously for a short time.

"I'm paralyzed," the blond man said. "I'm dying, too. I might as well. I think I'll be safer. She's vindictive and plenty smart."

"She?"

"A spy. Maybe there's all sorts of gadgets masquerading as—as things we take for granted. I don't know. They substituted that juke-box for the original one. It's alive. No, not it! *She!* It's a she, all right!"

And—"Who put her there?" The blond man said, in answer to Foster's question. "Who are—they? People from another world or another time? Martians? They want information about us, I'll bet, but they don't dare appear personally. They plant gadgets that we'll take for granted, like that juke-box, to act as spies. Only this one got out of control a little. She's smarter than the others."

He pushed himself up on the pillow, his eyes glaring at the little radio beside him.

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"Even that!" he whispered. "Is that an ordinary, regular radio? Or is it one of their masquerading gadgets, spying on us?"

He fell back.

"I began to understand quite a while ago," the man continued weakly. "She put the ideas in my head. More than once she pulled me out of a jam. Not now, though. She won't forgive me. Oh, she's feminine, all right. When I got on her bad side, I was sunk. She's smart, for a jukebox. A mechanical brain? Or—I don't know.

"I'll never know, now. I'll be dead pretty soon. And that'll be all right with me."

The nurse came in then....

Jerry Foster was coldly frightened. And he was drunk. Main Street was bright and roaring as he walked back, but by the time he had made up his mind, it was after closing hour and a chill silence went hand in hand with the darkness. The street lights didn't help much.

"If I were sober I wouldn't believe this," he mused, listening to his hollow footfalls on the pavement. "But I do believe it. I've got to fix things up with that—jukebox!"

Part of his mind guided him into an alley. Part of his mind told him to break a window, muffling the clash with his coat, and the same urgent, sober part of his mind guided him through a dark kitchen and a swinging door.

Then he was in the bar. The booths were vacant. A faint, filtered light crept through the Venetian blinds shielding the street windows. Against a wall stood the black, silent bulk of the juke-box.

Silent and unresponsive. Even when Foster inserted a nickel, nothing happened. The electric cord was plugged in the socket, and he threw the activating switch, but that made no difference.

"Look," he said. "I was drunk. Oh, this is crazy. It can't be happening. You're not alive— *Are you alive?* Did you put the finger on that guy I just saw in the hospital? Listen!"

It was dark and cold. Bottles glimmered against the mirror behind the bar. Foster went over and opened one. He poured the whiskey down his throat.

After a while, it didn't seem so fantastic for him to be standing there arguing with a juke-box.

"So you're feminine," he said. "I'll bring you flowers 239

tomorrow. I'm really beginning to believe! Of course I believe! I can't write songs. Not by myself. You've got to help me. I'll never look at a—another girl."

He tilted the bottle^again.

"You're just hi the sulks," he said. "You'll come out of it. You love me. You know you do. This is crazy!"

The bottle had r4ySteriously vanished. He went behind the bar to find another. Then, with a conviction that made him freeze motionless, he knew that there was

someone else in the room.

He was hidden in the shadows where he stood. Only his eyes moved as he looked toward the newcomers. There were two of them, and they were not human.

They—moved—toward the juke-box, in a rather indescribable fashion. One of them pulled out a small, shining cylinder from the juke-box's interior.

Foster, sweat drying on his cheeks, could hear them thinking.

"Current report for the last twenty-four hours, Earth time. Put in a fresh recording cylinder. Change the records, too."

Foster watched them change the records. Austin had said that the discs were replaced daily. And the blond man, dying in the hospital, had said other things. It couldn't be real. The creatures he stared at could not exist. They blurred before his eyes.

"A human is here," one of them thought. "He has seen us. We had better eliminate him."

The blurry, inhuman figures came toward him. Foster, trying to scream, dodged around the end of the bar and ran toward the juke-box. He threw his arms around its unresponsive sides and gasped:

"Stop them! Don't let them kill me!"

He couldn't see the creatures now but he knew that they were immediately behind him. The clarity of panic sharpened his vision. One title on the juke-box's list of records stood out vividly. He thrust his forefinger against the black button beside the title "Love Me Forever."

Something touched his shoulder and tightened, drawing him back.

Lights flickered within the juke-box. A record swung out. The needle lowered into its black groove.

The juke-box started to play "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You."

COLD WAR

Chapter i. *Last of the Pughs*

I’ll never have a cold in the haid again without I think of little Junior Pugh. Now there was a repulsive brat if ever I saw one. Built like a little gorilla, he was. Fat, pasty face, mean look, eyes so close together you could poke ‘em both out at once with one finger. His paw thought the world of him though. Maybe that was natural, seeing as how little Junior was the image of his pappy.

“The last of the Pughs,” the old man used to say stickin’ his chest out and beamin’ down at the little gorilla. “Finest little lad that ever stepped.”

It made my blood run cold sometimes to look at the two of ‘em to-gether. Kinda sad, now, to think back to those happy days when I didn’t know either of ‘em. You may not believe it but them two Pughs, father and son, between ‘em came within *that* much of conquerin’ the world.

Us Hogbens is quiet folks. We like to keep our heads down and lead quiet lives in our own little valley, where nobody comes near with-outen we say so. Our neighbors

and the folks in the village are used to us by now. They know we try hard not to act conspicuous. They make allowances.

If Paw gets drunk, like last week, and flies down the middle of Main Street in his red underwear most people make out they don't notice, so's not to embarrass Maw. They know he'd walk like a decent Chris-tian if he was sober.

The thing that druv Paw to drink that time was Little Sam, which is our baby we keep in a tank down-cellar, startin' to teethe again. First time since the War Between the States. We'd figgered he was through teething, but with Little Sam you never can tell. He was mighty rest-less, too.

A perfesser we keep in a bottle told us once Little Sam e-mitted sub-sonic somethings when he yells but that's just his way of talking. Don't mean a thing. It makes your nerves twiddle, that's all. Paw can't stand it. This time it even woke up Grandpaw in the attic and he hadn't stirred since Christmas. First thing after he got his eyes open he bust out madder'n a wet hen at Paw.

"I see ye, wittold knave that ye are!" he howled. 'Plying again, is it?

Oh, sic a reowfule sigte! I'll ground ye, ywis!" There was a far-away thump.

"You made me fall a good ten feet!" Paw hollered from away down the valley. "It ain't fair. I could of busted something!"

"Ye'll bust us all, with your dronken carelessness," Grandpaw said. "Flying in full sight of the neighbors! People get burned at the stake for less. You want mankind to find out all about us? Now shut up and let me tend to Baby."

Grandpaw can always quiet the baby if nobody else can. This time he sung him a little song in Sanskrit and after a bit they was snoring a duet.

I was fixing up a dingus for Maw to sour up some cream for sour-cream biscuits. I didn't have much to work with but an old sled and some pieces of wire but I didn't need much. I was trying to point the top end of the wire north-northeast when I seen a pair of checked pants rush by in the woods.

It was Uncle Lem. I could hear him thinking. "It *ain't* me!" he was saying, real loud, inside his haid. "Git back to yer work, Saunk. I ain't within a mile of you. Yer Uncle Lem's a fine old feller and never tells lies. Think I'd fool ye, Saunkie boy?"

"You shore would," I thunk back. "If you could. What's up, Uncle Lem?"

At that he slowed down and started to saunter back in a wide circle.

"Oh, I just had an idy yer Maw might like a mess of blackberries," he thunk, kicking a pebble very nonchalant. "If anybody asks you say you ain't seen me. It's no lie. You ain't."

"Uncle Lem," I thunk, real loud, "I gave Maw my bounden word I wouldn't let you out of range without me along, account of the last time you got away—"

"Now, now, my boy," Uncle Lem thunk fast. "Let bygones be by-gones."

"You just can't say no to a friend, Uncle Lem," I reminded him, tak-ing a last turn of the wire around the runner. "So you wait a shake till I get this cream soured and we'll both go together, wherever it is you have in mind."

I saw the checked pants among the bushes and he come out in the open and give me a guilty smile. Uncle Lem's a fat little feller. He means well, I guess, but he can be talked into most anything by most anybody, which is why we have to keep a close eye on him.

"How you gonna do it?" he asked me, looking at the creamjug. "Make the little

critters work faster?"

"Uncle Lem!" I said. "You know better'n that. Cruelty to dumb ani-mals is something I can't abide. Them there little critters work hard enough souring milk the way it is. They're such teentsy-weentsy fellers I kinda feel sorry for 'em. Why, you can't even see 'em without you go kinda crosseyed when you look. Paw says they're enzymes. But they can't be. They're too teeny."

"Teeny is as teeny does," Uncle Lem said. "How you gonna do it, then?"

"This here gadget," I told him, kinda proud, "will send Maw's cream-jug ahead into next week some time. This weather, don't take cream more'n a couple of days but I'm giving it plenty of time. When I bring it back—bingo, it's sour." I set the jug on the sled.

"I never seen such a do-lass brat," Uncle Lem said, stepping forward and bending a wire crosswise. "You better do it thataway, on account of the thunderstorm next Tuesday. All right now, shoot her off."

So I shot her off. When she come back, sure enough, the cream was sour enough to walk a mouse. Crawling up the can there was a hornet from next week, which I squashed. Now that was a mistake. I knowed it the minute I touched the jug. Dang Uncle Lem, anyhow.

He jumped back into the underbrush, squealing real happy.

"Fooled you that time, you young stinker," he yelled back. "Let's see you get your thumb outa the middle of next week!"

It was the time-lag done it. I mighta knowed. When he crossed that wire he didn't have no thunderstorm in mind at all. Took me nigh onto ten minutes to work myself loose, account of some feller called Inertia, who mixes in if you ain't careful when you fiddle around with time. I don't understand much about it myself. I ain't got my growth yet. Uncle Lem says he's already forgot more'n I'll ever know.

With that head start I almost lost him. Didn't even have time to change into my store-bought clothes and I knowed by the way he was all dressed up fit to kill he was headed for somewheres fancy.

He was worried, too. I kept running into little stray worrisome thoughts he'd left behind him, hanging like teeny little mites of clouds on the bushes. Couldn't make out much on account of they was shred-ding away by the time I got there but he'd shore done something he shouldn't. That much *anybody* coulda told. They went something like this:

"Worry, worry—wish I hadn't done it—oh, heaven help me if Grandpaw ever finds out—oh, them nasty Pughs, how could I a-been such a fool? Worry, worry—pore ole feller, such a good soul, too, never done nobody no harm and look at me now.

"That Saunk, too big for his britches, teach him a thing or two, ha-

ha. Oh, worry, worry—never mind, brace up, you good ole boy, every-thing's bound to turn out right in the end. You deserve the best, bless you, Lemuel. Grandpaw'll never find out."

Well, I seen his checkered britches high-tailing through the woods after a bit, but I didn't catch up to him until he was down the hill, across the picnic grounds at the edge of town and pounding on the sill of the ticket-window at the railroad station with a Spanish dubloon he snitched from Paw's seachest.

It didn’t surprise me none to hear him asking for a ticket to State Center. I let him think I hadn’t caught up. He argued something tur-rible with the man behind the window but finally he dug down in his britches and fetched up a silver dollar, and the man calmed down.

The train was already puffing up smoke behind the station when Uncle Lem darted around the corner. Didn’t leave me much time but I made it too—just. I had to fly a little over the last half-dozen yards but I don’t think anybody noticed.

Once when I was just a little shaver there was a Great Plague in London, where we were living at the time, and all us Hogbens had to clear out. I remember the hullabaloo in the city but looking back now it don’t seem a patch on the hullabaloo in State Center station when the train pulled in. Times have changed, I guess.

Whistles blowing, horns honking, radios yelling bloody murder— seems like every invention in the last two hundred yeafs had been noisier than the one before it. Made my head ache until I fixed up something Paw once called a raised decibel threshold, which was pure showing-off.

Uncle Lem didn’t know I was anywhere around. I took care to think real quiet but he was so wrapped up in his worries he wasn’t paying no mind to nothing. I followed him through the crowds in the station and out onto a wide street full of traffic. It was a relief to get away from the trains.

I always hate to think what’s going on inside the boiler, with all the little bitty critters so small you can’t hardly see ‘em, pore things, flying around all hot and excited and bashing their heads together. It seems plumb pitiable.

Of course, it just don’t do to think what’s happening inside the au-tomobiles that go by.

Uncle Lem knowed right where he was headed. He took off down the Street so fast I had to keep reminding myself not to fly, trying to keep up. I kept thinking I ought to get in touch with the folks at home, in case this turned into something I couldn’t handle, but I was plumb

stopped everywhere I turned. Maw was at the church social that after-noon and she whopped me the last time I spoke to her outa thin air right in front of the Reverend Jones. He ain’t used to us Hogbens yet.

Paw was daid drunk. No good trying to wake him up. And I was scared to death I *would* wake the baby if I tried to call on Grandpaw.

Uncle Lem scuttled right along, his checkered legs a-twinkling. He was worrying at the top of his mind, too. He’d caught sight of a crowd in a side-street gathered around a big truck, looking up at a man stand-ing on it and waving bottles in both hands.

He seemed to be making a speech about headaches. I could hear him all the way to the corner. There was big banners tacked along the sides of the truck that said, PUGH HEADACHE CURE.

“Oh, worry, worry!” Uncle Lem thunk. “Oh, bless my toes, what *am* I going to do? I never *dreamed* anybody’d marry Lily Lou Mutz. Oh, worry!”

Well, I reckon we’d all been surprised when Lily Lou Mutz up and got herself a husband awhile back—around ten years ago, I figgered. But what it had to do with Uncle Lem I couldn’t think. Lily Lou was just about the ugliest female that ever

walked. Ugly ain't no word for her, pore gal.

Grandpaw said once she put him in mind of a family name of Gor-gon he used to know. Not that she wasn't a goodhearted critter. Being so ugly, she put up with a lot in the way of rough acting-up from the folks in the village—the riff-raff lot, I mean.

She lived by herself in a little shack up the mountain and she musta been close onto forty when some feller from the other side of the river come along one day and rocked the whole valley back on its heels by asking her to marry up with him. Never saw the feller myself but I heard tell he wasn't no beauty-prize winner neither.

Come to think of it, I told myself right then, looking at the truck— come to think of it, feller's name was Pugh.

Chapter 2. *A Fine Old Feller*

Next thing I knowed, Uncle Lem had spotted somebody under a lamp-post on the sidewalk, at the edge of the crowd. He trotted over. It seemed to be a big gorilla and a little gorilla, standing there watch-ing the feller on the truck selling bottles with both hands.

"Come and get it," he was yelling. "Come and get your bottle of Pugh's Old Reliable Headache Cure while they last!"

"Well, Pugh, here I am," Uncle Lem said, looking up at the big gorilla. "Hello, Junior," he said right afterward, glancing down at the little gorilla. I seen him shudder a little.

You shore couldn't blame him for that. Two nastier specimens of the human race I never did see in all my born days. If they hadn't been *quite* so pasty-faced or just the least mite slimmer, maybe they wouldn't have put me so much in mind of two well-fed slugs, one growed-up and one baby-sized. The paw was all dressed up in a Sunday-meeting suit with a big gold watch-chain across his front and the way he strutted you'd a thought he'd never had a good look in a mirror.

"Howdy, Lem," he said, casual-like. "Right on time, I see. Junior, say howdy to Mister Lem Hogben. You owe Mister Hogben a lot, sonny." And he laughed a mighty nasty laugh.

Junior paid him no mind. He had his beady little eyes fixed on the crowd across the street. He looked about seven years old and mean as they come.

"Shall I do it now, paw?" he asked in a squeaky voice. "Can I let 'em have it now, paw? Huh, paw?" From the tone he used, I looked to see if he'd got a machine-gun handy. I didn't see none but if looks was ever mean enough to kill Junior Pugh could of mowed the crowd right down.

"Manly little feller, ain't he, Lem?" Paw Pugh said, real smug. "I tell you, I'm mighty proud of this youngster. Wish his de~r grandpaw coulda lived to see him. A fine old family line, the Pughs is. Nothing like it anywhere. Only trouble is, Junior's the last of his race. You see why I got in touch with you, Lem."

Uncle Lem shuddered again. "Yep," he said. "I see, all right. But you're wasting your breath, Pugh. I ain't a-gonna do it."

Young Pugh spun around in his tracks.

“Shall I let him have it, paw?” he squeaked, real eager. “Shall I, paw? Now, paw? Huh?”

“Shaddup, sonny,” the big feller said and he whammed the little feller across the side of the haid. Pugh’s hands was like hams. He shore was built like a gorilla.

The way his great big arms swung down from them big hunched shoulders, you’d of thought the kid would go flying across the street when his paw whopped him one. But he was a burly little feller. He just staggered a mite and then shook his haid and went red in the face.

He yelled out, loud and squeaky, “Paw, I warned you! The last time you whammed me I warned you! Now I’m gonna let you have it!”

He drew a deep breath and his two little teeny eyes got so bright

I coulda sworn they was gonna touch each other across the middle of his nose. His pasty face got bright red.

“Okay, Junior,” Paw Pugh said, real hasty. “The crowd’s ready for you. Don’t waste your strength on me, sonny. Let the crowd have it!”

Now all this time I was standing at the edge of the crowd, listening

and watching Uncle Lem. But just then somebody jiggled my arm and

a thin kinda voice said to me, real polite, “Excuse me, but may I ask

a question?”

I looked down. It was a skinny man with a kind-hearted face. He had a notebook in his hand.

“It’s all right with me,” I told him, polite. “Ask away, mister.”

“I just wondered how you feel, that’s all,” the skinny man said, hold-ing his pencil over the notebook ready to write down something.

“Why, peart,” I said. “Bight kind of you to inquire. Hope you’re feel-ing well too, mister.”

He shook his head, kind of dazed. “That’s the trouble,” he said. “I just don’t understand it. I feel fine.”

“Why not?” I asked. “Fine day.”

“Everybody here feels fine,” he went right on, just like I hadn’t spoke. “Barring normal odds, everybody’s in average good health in this crowd. But in about five minutes or less, as I figure it—” He looked at his wrist-watch.

Just then somebody hit me right on top of the haid with a red-hot sledge-hammer.

Now you shore can’t hurt a Hogben by hitting him on the bald. Any-body’s a fool to try. I felt my knees buckle a little but I was all right in a couple of seconds and I looked around to see who’d whammed me.

Wasn’t a soul there. But oh my, the moaning and groaning that was going up from that there crowd! People was a-clutching at their fore-heads and a-staggering around the street, clawing at each other to get to that truck where the man was handing out the bottles of headache cure as fast as he could take in the dollar bills.

The skinny man with the kind face rolled up his eyes like a duck in thunder.

“Oh, my head!” he groaned. “V/hat did I tell you? Oh, my head!” Then he sort of tottered away, fishing in his pocket for money.

Well, the family always did say I was slow-wilted but you’d have to be downright feeble-minded if you didn’t know there was something mighty peculiar going on around here. I’m no ninny, no matter what Maw says. I turned around and looked

for Junior Pugh.

There he stood, the fat-faced little varmint, red as a turkey-gobbler, all swole up and his mean little eyes just a-flashing at the crowd.

"It's a hex," I thought to myself, perfectly calm. "I'd never have be-lieved it but it's a real hex. Now how in the world—"

Then I remembered Lily Lou Mutz and what Uncle Lem had been thinking to himself. And I began to see the light.

The crowd had gone plumb crazy, fighting to get at the headache cure. I purty near had to bash my way over toward Uncle Lem. I fig-gered it was past time I took a hand, on account of him being so soft in the heart and likewise just about as soft in the haid.

"Nosirree," he was saying, firm-like. "I won't do it. Not by no manner of means I won't."

"Uncle Lem," I said.

I bet he jumped a yard into the air.

"Saunk!" he squeaked. He flushed up and grinned sheepish and then he looked mad, but I could tell he was kinda relieved, too. "I told you not to foller me," he said.

"Maw told me not to let you out of my sight," I said. "I promised Maw and us Hogbens never break a promise. What's going on here, Uncle Lem?"

"Oh, Saunk, everything's gone dead wrong!" Uncle Lem wailed out. "Here I am with a heart of gold and I'd just as soon be dead! Meet Mister Ed Pugh, Saunk. He's trying to get me kilt."

"Now Lem," Ed Pugh said. "You know that ain't so. I just want my rights, that's all. Pleased to meet you, young fellow. Another Hogben, I take it. Maybe you can talk your uncle into—"

"Excuse me for interrupting, Mister Pugh," I said, real polite. "But maybe you'd better explain. All this is purely a mystery to me."

He cleared his throat and threw his chest out, important-like. I could tell this was something he liked to talk about. Made him feel pretty big, I could see.

"I don't know if you was acquainted with my dear departed wife, Lily Lou Mutz that was," he said. "This here's our little child, Junior. A fine little lad he is too. What a pity we didn't have eight or ten more just like him." He sighed real deep.

"Well, that's life. I'd hoped to marry young and be blessed with a whole passel of younguns, being as how I'm the last of a fine old line. I don't mean to let it die out, neither." Here he gave Uncle Lem a mean look. Uncle Lem sorta whimpered.

"I ain't a-gonna do it," he said. "You can't make me do it."

"We'll see about that," Ed Pugh said, threatening. "Maybe your young relative here will be more reasonable. I'll have you know I'm getting to be a power in this state and what I says goes."

"Paw," little Junior squeaked out just then, "Paw, they're kinda slow-

ing down. Kin I give it to 'em double-strength this time, Paw? Betcha I could kill a few if I let myself go. Hey, Paw—"

Ed Pugh made as if he was gonna clonk the little varmint again, but I guess he thought better of it.

"Don't interrupt your elders, sonny," he said. "Paw's busy. Just tend to your job

and shut up." He glanced out over the moaning crowd. "Give that bunch over beyond the truck a little more treatment," he said. "They ain't buying fast enough. But no double-strength, Junior. You gotta save your energy. You're a growing boy."

He turned back to me. "Junior's a talented child," he said, very proud. "As you can see. He inherited it from his dear dead-and-gone mother, Lily Lou. I was telling you about Lily Lou. It was my hope to marry young, like I said, but the way things worked out, somehow I just didn't get around to wifin' till I'd got well along into the prime of life."

He blew out his chest like a toadfrog, looking down admiring. I never did see a man that thought better of himself. "Never found a woman who'd look at—I mean, never found the right woman," he went on, "till the day I met Lily Lou Mutz."

"I know what you mean," I said, polite. I did, too. He musta searched a long, long ways before he found somebody ugly enough herself to look twice at him. Even Lily Lou, pore soul, musta thunk a long time afore she said yes.

"And that," Ed Pugh went on, "is where your Uncle Lem comes in. It seems like he'd give Lily Lou a bewitchment quite some while back."

"I never!" Uncle Lem squealed. "And anyway, how'd I know she'd get married and pass it on to her child? Who'd ever think Lily Lou would—"

"He gave her a bewitchment," Ed Pugh went right on talking. "Only she never told me till she was a-layin' on her death-bed a year ago. Lordy, I sure woulda whopped her good if I'd knowed how she held out on me all them years! It was the hex Lemuel gave her and she in-herited it on to her little child."

"I only done it to protect her," Uncle Lem said, right quick. "You know I'm speaking the truth, Saunk boy. Pore Lily Lou was so pizon ugly, people used to up and heave a clod at her now and then afore they could help themselves. Just automatic-like. Couldn't blame 'em. I often fought down the impulse myself.

"But pore Lily Lou, I shore felt sorry for her. You'll never know how long I fought down my good impulses, Saunk. But my heart of gold does get me into messes. One day I felt so sorry for the pore hideous critter I gave her the hexpower. Anybody'd have done the same, Saunk."

"How'd you do it?" I asked, real interested, thinking it might come in handy someday to know. I'm young yet, and I got lots to learn.

Well, he started to tell me and it was kinda mixed up. Bight at first I got a notion some furrin feller named Gene Chromosome had done it for him and after I got straight on that part he'd gone cantering off into a rigamarole about the alpha waves of the brain.

Shucks, I knowed that much my own self. Everybody musta noticed the way them little waves go a-sweeping over the tops of people's haids when they're thinking. I've watched Grandpaw sometimes when he had as many as six hundred different thoughts follering each other up and down them little paths where his brain is. Hurts my eyes to look too close when Grandpaw's thinking.

"So that's how it is, Saunk," Uncle Lem wound up. "And this ,here little rattlesnake's inherited the whole shebang."

"Well, why don't you get this here Gene Chromosome feller to un-scramble Junior and put him back the way other people are?" I asked. "I can see how easy you could do it. Look here, Uncle Lem." I focused down real sharp on Junior and

made my eyes go funny the way you have to when you want to look inside a person.

Sure enough, I seen just what Uncle Lem meant. There was teensy-weensy little chains of fellers, all hanging onto each other for dear life, and skinny little rods jiggling around inside them awful teensy cells everybody's made of—except maybe Little Sam, our baby.

"Look here, Uncle Lem," I said. "All you did when you gave Lily Lou the hex was to twitch these here little rods over *that-away* and patch 'em onto them little chains that wiggle so fast. Now why can't you switch 'em back again and make Junior behave himself? It oughta be easy."

"It would be easy," Uncle Lem kinda sighed at me. "Saunk, you're a scatterbrain. You wasn't listening to what I said. I can't switch 'em back without I kill Junior."

"The world would be a better place," I said.

"I know it would. But you know what we promised Grandpaw? No more killings."

"But Uncle Lem!" I bust out. "This is turrible! You mean this nasty little rattlesnake's gonna go on all his life hexing people?"

"Worse than that, Saunk," pore Uncle Lem said, almost crying. "He's gonna pass the power on to his descendants, just like Lily Lou passed it on to him."

For a minute it sure did look like a dark prospect for the human race. Then I laughed.

"Cheer up, Uncle Lem," I said. "Nothing to worry about. Look at

the little toad. There ain't a female critter alive who'd come within a mile of him. Already he's as repulsive as his daddy. And remember, he's Lily Lou Mutz's child, too. Maybe he'll get even horribler as he grows up. One thing's sure—he ain't never gonna get married."

"Now there's where you're wrong," Ed Pugh busted in, talking real loud. He was red in the face and he looked mad. "Don't think I ain't been listening," he said. "And don't think I'm gonna forget what you said about my child. I told you I was a power in this town. Junior and me can go a long way, using his talent to help us.

"Already I've got on to the board of aldermen here and there's gonna be a vacancy in the state senate come next week—unless the old coot I have in mind's a lot tougher than he looks. So I'm warning you, young Hogben, you and your family's gonna pay for them insults."

"Nobody oughta get mad when he hears the gospel truth about him-self," I said. "Junior *is* a repulsive specimen."

"He just takes getting used to," his paw said. "All us Pughs is hard to understand. Deep, I guess. But we got our pride. And I'm gonna make sure the family line never dies out. Never, do you hear that, Lemuel?"

Uncle Lem just shut his eyes up tight and shook his head fast. "No-sirree," he said. "I'll never do it. Never, never, never, never—"

"Lemuel," Ed Pugh said, real sinister. "Lemuel, do you want me to set Junior on you?"

"Oh, there ain't no use in that," I said. "You seen him try to hex me along with the crowd, didn't you? No manner of use, Mister Pugh. Can't hex a Hogben."

"Well—" He looked around, searching his mind. "Hm-m. I'll think of something. I'll—soft-hearted, aren't you? Promised your Grandpappy you wouldn't kill

nobody, hey? Lemuel, open your eyes and look over there across the street. See that sweet old lady walking with the cane? How'd you like it if I had Junior drop her dead in her tracks?"

Uncle Lemuel just squeezed his eyes tighter shut.

"I won't look. I don't know the sweet old thing. If she's that old, she ain't got much longer anyhow. Maybe she'd be better off dead. Probably got rheumatiz something fierce."

"All right, then, how about that purty young girl with the baby in her arms? Look, Lemuel. Mighty sweet-looking little baby. Pink ribbon in its bonnet, see? Look at them dimples. Junior, get ready to blight them where they stand. Bubonic plague to start with maybe. And after that—"

"Uncle Lem," I said, feeling uneasy. "I dunno what Grandpaw would say to this. Maybe—"

Uncle Lem popped his eyes wide open for just a second. He glared at me, frantic.

"I can't help it if I've got a heart of gold," he said. "I'm a fine old feller and everybody picks on me. Well, I won't stand for it. You can push me just so far. Now I don't care if Ed Pugh kills off the whole human race. I don't care if Grandpaw *does* find out what I done. I don't care a hoot about nothing no more." He gave a kind of wild laugh.

"I'm gonna get out from under. I won't know nothing about nothing. I'm gonna snatch me a few winks, Saunk."

And with that he went rigid all over and fell flat on his face on the sidewalk, stiff as a poker.

Chapter 3. *Over a Barrel*

Well, worried as I was, I had to smile. Uncle Lem's kinda cute some-times. I knowed he'd put hisseif to sleep again, the way he always does when trouble catches up with him. Paw says it's catalepsy but cats sleep a lot lighter than that.

Uncle Lem hit the sidewalk flat and kinda bounced a little. Junior give a howl of joy. I guess maybe he figgered he'd had something to do with Uncle Lem falling over. Anyhow, seeing somebody down and helpless, Junior naturally rushed over and pulled his foot back and kicked Uncle Lem in the side of the haid.

Well, like I said, us Hogbens have got pretty tough haids. Junior let out a howl. He started dancing around nursing his foot in both hands.

"I'll hex you good!" he yelled at Uncle Lem. "I'll hex you good, you— you ole Hogben, you!" He drew a deep breath and turned purple in the face and— And then it happened.

It was like a flash of lightning. I don't take no stock in hexes, and I had a fair idea of what was happening, but it took me by surprise. Paw tried to explain to me later how it worked and he said it just stimu-lated the latent toxins inherent in the organism. It made Junior into a catalytoxic agent on account of the way the rearrangement of the desoxyribonucleic acid his genes was made of worked on the kappa waves of his nasty little brain, stepping them up as much as thirty mi-crovolts.

But shucks, you know Paw. He's too lazy to figger the thing out in English. He just steals them fool words out of other folks' brains when he needs 'em.

What really happened was that all the pizon that little varmint had

bottled up in him, ready to let go on the crowd, somehow seemed to r'ar back and smack Uncle Lem right in the face. I never seen such a hex. And the awful part was—it worked.

Because Uncle Lem wasn't resisting a mite now he was asleep. Red-hot pokers wouldn't have waked him up and I wouldn't put red-hot pokers past little Junior Pugh. But he didn't need 'em this time. The hex hit Uncle Lem like a thunderbolt.

He turned pale green right before our eyes.

Somehow it seemed to me a turrible silence fell as Uncle Lem went green. I looked up, surprised. Then I realized what was happening. All that pitiful moaning and groaning from the crowd had stopped.

People was swigging away at their bottles of headache cure, rubbing their foreheads and kinda laughing weak-like with relief. Junior's whole complete hex had gone into Uncle Lem and the crowd's headaches had naturally stopped right off.

"What's happened here?" somebody called out in a kinda familiar voice. "Has that man fainted? Why don't you help him? Here, let me by—I'm a doctor."

It was the skinny man with the kind-looking face. He was still drink-ing out of the headache bottle as he pushed his way through the crowd toward us but he'd put his notebook away. When he saw Ed Pugh he flushed up angrylike.

"So it's you, is it, Alderman Pugh?" he said. "How is it you're always around when trouble starts? What did you do to this poor man, any-how? Maybe this time you've gone too far."

"I didn't do a thing," Ed Pugh said. "Never touched him. You watch your tongue, Dr. Brown, or you'll regret it. I'm a powerful man in this here town."

"Look at that!" Dr. Brown yells, his voice going kinda squeaky as he stares down at Uncle Lem. "The man's dying! Call an ambulance, some-body, quick!"

Uncle Lem was changing color again. I had to laugh a little, inside my haid. I knowed what was happening and it was kinda funny. Every-body's got a whole herd of germs and viruses and suchlike critters swarming through them all the time, of course.

When Junior's hex hit Uncle Lem it stimulated the entire herd some-thing turrible, and a flock of little bitty critters Paw calls antibodies had to get to work pronto. They ain't really as sick as they look, being white by nature.

Whenever a pizon starts chawing on you these pale little fellers grab up their shooting-irons and run like crazy to the battlefield in your in-

sides. Such fighting and yelling and swearing you never seen. It's a regular Bull Run.

That was going on right then inside Uncle Lem. Only us Hogbens have got a special militia of our own inside us. And they got called up real fast.

They was swearing and kicking and whopping the enemy so hard Uncle Lem had gone from pale green to a sort of purplish color, and big yeller and blue spots was beginning to bug out all over him where it showed. He looked oncommon sick. Course it didn't do him no real harm. The Hogbens militia can lick any germ that breathes.

But he sure looked revolting.

The skinny doctor crouched down beside Uncle Lem and felt his pulse.

"Now you've done it," he said, looking up at Ed Pugh. "I don't know how you've worked this, but for once you've gone too far. This man seems to have bubonic plague. I'll see you're put under control this time and that young Kallikak of yours, too."

Ed Pugh just laughed a little. But I could see he was mad.

"Don't you worry about me, Dr. Brown," he said, mean. "V/hen I get to be governor—and I got my plans all made—that there hospital you're so proud of ain't gonna operate on state funds no more. A fine thing!

"Folks laying around in hospitals eating their fool heads off! Make 'em get out and plough, that's what I say. Us Pughs never gets sick. I got lots of better uses for state money than paying folks to lay around in bed when I'm governor."

All the doctor said was, "Where's that ambulance?"

"If you mean that big long car making such a noise," I said, "it's about three miles off but coming fast. Uncle Lem don't need no help, though. He's just having an attack. We get 'em in the family all the time. It don't mean nothing."

"Good heavens!" the doc said, staring down at Uncle Lem. "You mean he's had this before and lived?" Then he looked up at me and smiled all of a sudden. "Oh, I see," he said. "Afraid of hospitals, are you? Well, don't worry. We won't hurt him."

That surprised me some. He was a smart man. I'd fibbed a little for just that reason. Hospitals is no place for Hogbens. People in hospitals are too danged nosy. So I called Uncle Lem real loud, inside my head.

"Uncle Lem," I hollered, only thinking it, not out loud. "Uncle Lem, wake up quick! Grandpaw'll nail your hide to the barn door if'n you let yourself get took to a hospital. You want 'em to find out about them

two hearts you got in your chest? And the way your bones are fixed and the shape of your gizzard? Uncle Lem! Wake up!"

It wasn't no manner of use. He never even twitched.

Right then I began to get really scared. Uncle Lem had sure landed me in the soup. There I was with all that responsibility on my shoul-ders and I didn't have the least idea how to handle it. I'm just a young feller after all. I can hardly remember much farther back than the great fire of London, when Charles II was king, with all them long curls a-hanging on his shoulders. On him, though, they looked good.

"Mister Pugh," I said, "you've got to call off Junior. I can't let Uncle Lem get took to the hospital. You know I can't."

"Junior, pour it on," Mister Pugh said, grinning real nasty. "I want a little talk with young Hogben here." The doctor looked up, puzzled, and Ed Pugh said, "Step over here a mite, Hogben. I want a private word with you. Junior, bear down!"

Uncle Lem's yellow and blue spots got green rings around their out-side edges. The doctor sorta gasped and Ed Pugh took my arm and pulled me back. When we was out of earshot he said to me, confiden-tial, fixing me with his tiny little eyes:

"I reckon you know what I want, Hogben. Lem never did say he *couldn't,* he only said he wouldn't, so I know you folks can do it for me."

"Just exactly what is it you want, Mister Pugh?" I asked him.

"You know. I want to make sure our fine old family line goes on. I want there

should always be Pughs. I had so much trouble getting married off myself and I know Junior ain't going to be easy to wife. Women don't have no taste nowadays.

"Since Lily Lou went to glory there hasn't been a woman on earth ugly enough to marry a Pugh and I'm skeered Junior'll be the last of a great line. With his talent I can't bear the thought. You just fix it so our family won't never die out and I'll have Junior take the hex off Lemuel."

"If I fixed it so your line didn't die out," I said, "I'd be fixing it so everybody else's line *would* die out, just as soon as there was enough Pughs around."

"What's wrong with that?" Ed Pugh asked, grinning. "Way I see it we're good strong stock." He flexed his gorilla arms. He was taller than me, even. "No harm in populatin' the world with good stock, is there? I figger given time enough us Pughs could conquer the whole danged world. And you're gonna help us do it, young Hogben."

"Oh, no," I said. "Oh, no! Even if I knowed how—"

There was a turrible noise at the end of the street and the crowd

scattered to make way for the ambulance, which drawed up at the curb beside Uncle Lem. A couple of fellers in white coats jumped out with a sort of pallet on sticks. Dr. Brown stood up, looking real relieved.

"Thought you'd never get here," he said. "This man's a quarantine case, I think. Heaven knows what kind of results we'll find when we start running tests on him. Hand me my bag out of the back there, will you? I want my stethoscope. There's something funny about this man's heart."

Well, *my* heart sunk right down into my boots. We was goners and I knowed it—the whole Hogben tribe. Once them doctors and scientists find out about. us we'll never know a moment's peace again as long as we live. We won't have no more privacy than a corncob.

Ed Pugh was watching me with a nasty grin on his pasty face.

"Worried, huh?" he said. "You gotta right to be worried. I know about you Hogbens. All witches. Once they get Lem in the hospital, no telling what they'll find out. Against the law to be witches, prob-ably. You've got about half a minute to make up your mind, young Hogben. What do you say?"

Well, what could I say? I couldn't give him a promise like he was asking, could I? Not and let the whole world be overrun by hexing Pughs. Us Hogbens live a long time. We've got some pretty important plans for the future when the rest of the world begii~s to catch up with us. But if by that time the rest of the world is all Pughs, it won't hardly seem worth while, somehow. I couldn't say yes.

But if I said no Uncle Lem was a goner. Us Hogbens was doomed either way, it seemed to me.

Looked like there was only one thing to do. I took a deep breath, shut my eyes, and let out a desperate yell inside my head.

"Grandpawl" I hollered.

"Yes, my boy?" said a big deep voice in the middle of my brain. You'd athought he'd been right alongside me all the time, just waiting to be called. He was a hundred-odd miles off, and sound asleep. But when a Hogben calls in the tone of voice *I* called in he's got a right to expect an answer—quick. I got it.

Mostly Grandpaw woulda dithered around for fifteen minutes, asking cross questions and not listening to the answers, and talking in all kinds of queer old-fashioned dialects, like Sanskrit, he's picked up through the years. But this time he seen it was serious.

"Yes, my boy?" was all he said.

I flapped my mind wide open like a school-book in front of him. There wasn't no time for questions and answers. The doe was getting

out his dingus to listen to Uncle Lem's two hearts beating out of tune and once he heard that the jig would be up for us Hogbens.

"Unless you let me kill 'em, Grandpaw," I added. Because by that time I knowed he'd read the whole situation from start to finish in one fast glance.

It seemed to me he was quiet an awful long time after that. The doe had got the dingus out and he was fitting its little black arms into his ears. Ed Pugh was watching me like a hawk. Junior stood there all swole up with pizon, blinking his mean little eyes around for some-body to shoot it at. I was half hoping he'd pick on me. I'd worked out a way to make it bounce back in his face and there was a chance it might even kill him.

I heard Grandpaw give a sorta sigh in my mind.

"They've got us over a barrel, Saunk," he said. I remember being a little surprised he could speak right plain English when he wanted to. "Tell Pugh we'll do it."

"But Grandpaw—" I said.

"Do *as I say!"* It gave me a headache, he spoke so firm. "Quick, Saunk! Tell Pugh we'll give him what he wants."

Well, I didn't dare disobey. But this once I really came close to de-fying Grandpaw.

It stands to reason even a Flogben has got to get senile someday, and I thought maybe old age had finally set in with Grandpaw at last.

What I thunk at him was, "All right, if you say so, but I sure hate to do it. Seems like if they've got us going and coming, the least we can do is take our medicine like Hogbens and keep all that pizon bot-tled up in Junior stead of spreading it around the world." But out loud I spoke to Mister Pugh.

"All right, Mister Pugh," I said, real humble. "You win. Only, call off your hex. Quick, before it's too late."

Chapter ~. Pughs A-Coming

Mister Pugh had a great big yellow automobile, low-slung, without no top. It went awful fast. And it was sure awful noisy. Once I'm pretty sure we run over a small boy in the road but Mister Pugh paid him no mind and I didn't dare say nothing. Like Grandpaw said, the Pughs had us over a barrel.

It took quite a lot of palaver before 1 convinced 'em they'd have to

come back to the homestead with me. That was part of Grandpaw's orders.

"How do I know you won't murder us in cold blood once you get us out there in the wilderness?" Mister Pugh asked.

“I could kill you right here if I wanted,” I told him. “I would too but Grandpaw says no. You’re safe if Grandpaw says so, Mister Pugh. The word of a Hogben ain’t never been broken yet.”

So he agreed, mostly because I said we couldn’t work the spells ex-cept on home territory. We loaded Uncle Lem into the back of the car and took off for the hills. Had quite an argument with the doc, of course. Uncle Lem sure was stubborn.

He wouldn’t wake up nohow but once Junior took the hex off Uncle Lem faded out fast to a good healthy color again. The doc just didn’t believe it coulda happened, even when he saw it. Mister Pugh had to threaten quite a lot before we got away. We left the doe sitting on the curb, muttering to himself and rubbing his haid dazed like.

I could feel Grandpaw a-studying the Pughs through my mind all the way home. He seemed to be sighing and kinda shaking his haid— such as it is—and working out problems that didn’t make no manner of sense to me.

When we drawed up in front of the house there wasn’t a soul in sight. I could hear Grandpaw stirring and muttering on ,his gunnysack in the attic but Paw seemed to have went invisible and he was too drunk to tell me where he was when I asked. The baby was asleep. Maw was still at the church sociable and Grandpaw said to leave her be.

“We can work this out together, Saunk,” he said as soon as I got outa the car. “I’ve been thinking. You know that sled you fixed up to sour your Maw’s cream this morning? Drag it out, son. Drag it out.”

I seen in a flash what he had in mind. “Oh, no, Grandpaw!” I said, right out loud.

“Who you talking to?” Ed Pugh asked, lumbering down outa the car. “I don’t see nobody. This your homestead? Ratty old dump, ain’t it? Stay close to me, Junior. I don’t trust these folks any farther’n I can see em.

“Get the sled, Saunk,” Grandpaw said, very firm. “I got it all worked out. We’re gonna send these two gorillas right back through time, to a place they’ll really fit.”

“But Grandpaw!” I hollered, only inside my head this time. “Let’s talk this over. Lemme get Maw in on it anyhow. Paw’s right smart when he’s sober. Why not wait till he wakes up? I think we oughta

get the Baby in on it too. I don’t think sending ‘em back through time’s a good idea at all, Grandpaw.”

“The Baby’s asleep,” Grandpaw said. “You leave him be. He read himself to sleep over his Einstein, bless his little soul.”

I think the thing that worried me most was the way Grandpaw was talking plain English. He never does when he’s feeling normal. I thought maybe his old age had all caught up with him at one bank, and knocked all the sense outa his—so to speak—haid.

“Grandpaw,” I said, trying to keep calm. “Don’t you see? If we send ‘em back through time and give ‘em what we promised it’ll make every-thing a million times worse than before. You gonna strand ‘em back there in the year one and break your promise to ‘em?”

“Saunk!” Grandpaw said.

“I know. If we promised we’d make sure the Pugh line won’t die Out, then we gotta make sure. But if we send ‘em back to the year one that’ll mean all the time

between then and now they'll spend spreading out and spreading out. More Pughs every generation.

"Grandpaw, five seconds after they hit the year one, I'm liable to feel my two eyes rush together in my haid and my face go all fat and pasty like Junior. Grandpaw, everybody in the world may be Pughs if we give 'em that much time to spread out in!"

"Cease thy chirming, thou chilce dolt," Grandpaw hollered. "Do my bidding, young fool!"

That made me feel a little better but not much. I went and dragged out the sled. Mister Pugh put up quite a argument about that.

"I ain't rid on a sled since I was so high," he said. "Why should I git on one now? This is some trick. I won't do it."

Junior tried to bite me.

"Now Mister Pugh," I said, "you gotta cooperate or we won't get nowheres. I know what I'm doing. Just step up here and set down. Junior, there's room for you in front. That's fine."

If he hadn't seen how worried I was I don't think he'd a-done it. But I couldn't hide how I was feeling.

"Where's your Grandpaw?" he asked, uneasy. "You're not going to do this whole trick by yourself, are you? Young ignorant feller like you? I don't like it. Suppose you made a mistake?"

"We give our word," I reminded him. "Now just kindly shut up and let me concentrate. Or maybe you don't want the Pugh line to last forever?"

"That was the promise," he says, settling himself down. "You gotta do it. Lenune know when you commence."

"All right, Saunk," Grandpaw says from the attic, right brisk. "Now you watch. Maybe you'll learn a thing or two. Look sharp. Focus your eyes down and pick out a gene. Any gene."

Bad as I felt about the whole thing I couldn't help being interested. When Grandpaw does a thing he does it up brown. Genes are mighty slippery little critters, spindle-shaped and awful teensy. They're partners with some skinny guys called chromosomes, and the two of 'em show up everywhere you look, once you've got your eyes focused just right.

"A good dose of ultraviolet ought to do the trick," Grandpaw mut-tered. "Saunk, you're closer."

I said, "All right, Grandpaw," and sort of twiddled the light as it sifted down through the pines above the Pughs. Ultraviolet's the color at the *other* end of the line, where the colors stop having names for most people.

Grandpaw said, "Thanks, son. Hold it for a minute."

The genes began to twiddle right in time with the light waves. Junior said, "Paw, something's tickling me."

Ed Pugh said, "Shut up."

Grandpaw was muttering to himself. I'm pretty sure he stole the words from that perfesser we keep in the bottle, but you can't tell, with Grandpaw. Maybe he was the first person to make 'em up in the be-ginning.

"The euchromatin," he kept muttering. "That ought to. fix it. Ultra-violet gives us

hereditary mutation and the euchromatin contains the genes that transmit heredity. Now that other stuff's heterochromatin and *that* produces evolutionary change of the cataclysmic variety.

"Very good, very good. We can always use a new species. Hum-m-m. About six bursts of heterochromatinic activity ought to do it." He was quiet for a minute. Then he said, "Ich am eldre and ek magti! Okay, Saunk, take it away."

I let the ultraviolet go back where it came from.

"The year one, Grandpaw?" I asked, very doubtful.

"That's close enough," he said. "Wite thou the way?"

"Oh yes, Grandpaw," I said. And I bent over and give them the nec-essary push.

The last thing I heard was Mister Pugh's howl.

"What's that you're doin'?" he hollered at me. "V/hat's the idea? Look out, there, young Hogben or—what's this? Where we goin'? Young Saunk, I warn you, if this is some trick I'll set Junior on you! I'll send you such a hex as even you-u. .

Then the howl got real thin and small and far away until it wasn't

no more than the noise a mosquito makes. After that it was mighty quiet in the dooryard.

I stood there all braced, ready to stop myself from turning into a Pugh if I could. Them little genes is tricky fellers.

I knowed Grandpaw had made a turrible mistake.

The minute them Pughs hit the year one and started to bounce back through time toward now I knowed what would happen.

I ain't sure how long ago the year one was, but there was plenty of time for the Pughs to populate the whole planet. I put two fingers against my nose to keep my eyes from banging each other when they started to rush together in the middle like all us Pughs' eyes do— "You ain't a Pugh yet, son," Grandpaw said, chuckling. "Kin ye see

'em?"

"No," I said. "V/hat's happening?"

"The sled's starting to siow down," he said. "Now it's stopped. Yep, it's the year one, all right. Look at all them men and women flockin' outa the caves to greet their new company! My, my, what great big shoulders the men have got. Bigger even than Paw Pugh's.

"An' ugh—just look at the women! I declare, little Junior's positively handsome alongside them folks! He won't have no trouble finding a wife when the time comes."

"But Grandpaw, that's turrible!" I said.

"Don't sass your elders, Saunk," Grandpaw chuckled. "Looka there now. Junior's just pulled a hex. Another little child fell over flat on his ugly face. Now the little child's mother is knocking Junior endwise. Now his pappy's sailing into Paw Pugh. Look at that fight! Just look at it! Oh, I guess the Pugh family's well took care of, Saunk."

"But what about our family?" I said, almost wailing.

"Don't you worry," Grandpaw said. "Time'll take care of that. Wait a minute, let me watch. Hm-m. A generation don't take long when you know how to look. My,

my, what ugly little critters the ten baby Pughs was! They was just like their pappy and their grandpappy.

"I wish Lily Lou Mutz could see her grandbabies. I shorely do. Well, now, ain't that cute? Every one of them babies growed up in a flash, seems like, and each of 'em has got ten babies of their own. I like to see my promises working out, Saunk. I said I'd do this, and I done it."

I just moaned.

"All right," Grandpaw said. "Let's jump ahead a couple of centuries. Yep, still there and spreading like crazy. Family likeness is still strong, too. Hum-rn. Another thousand years and—well, I declare! If it ain't Ancient Greece! Hasn't changed a bit, neither. What do you know, Saunk!" He cackled right Out, tickled pink.

"Remember what I said once about Lily Lou putting me in mind of an old friend of mine named Gorgon? No wonder! Perfectly natural. You ought to see Lily Lou's great-great-great-grandbabies! No, on sec-ond thought, it's lucky you can't. Well, well, this is shore interesting."

He was still about three minutes. Then I heard him laugh.

"Bang," he said. "First heterochromatinic burst. Now the changes start."

"What changes, Grandpaw?" I asked, feeling pretty miserable.

"The changes," he said, "that show your old Grandpaw ain't such a fool as you thought. I know what I'm doing. They go fast, once they start. Look there now, that's the second change. Look at them little genes mutate!"

"You mean," I said, "I ain't gonna turn into a Pugh after all? But Grandpaw, I thought we'd promised the Pughs their line wouldn't die out."

"I'm keeping my promise," Grandpaw said, dignified. "The genes will carry the Pugh likeness right on to the toot of the judgment horn, just like I said. And the hex power goes right along with it."

Then he laughed.

"You better brace yourself, Saunk," he said. "When Paw Pugh went sailing off into the year one seems like he uttered a hex threat, didn't he? Well, he wasn't fooling. It's a-coming at you right nc~iw."

"Oh, Lordy!" I said. "There'll be a million of 'em by the time they get here! Grandpaw! What'll I do?"

"Just brace yourself," Grandpaw said, real unsympathetic. "A million, you think? Oh, no, lots more than a million."

"How many?" I asked him.

He started in to tell me. You may not believe it but he's *still* telling me. It takes that long. There's that many of 'em.

You see, it was like with that there Jukes family that lived down south of here. The bad ones was always a mite worse than their children and the same dang thing happened to Gene Chromosome and his kin, so to speak. The Pughs stayed Pughs and they kept the hex power—and I guess you might say the Pughs conquered the whole world, after all.

But it could of been worse. The Pughs could of stayed the same size down through the generations. Instead they got smaller—a whole lot smaller. When I knowed 'em they was bigger than most folks—Paw Pugh, anyhow.

But by the time they'd done filtering the generations from the year one, they'd

shrunk so much them little pale fellers in the blood was about their size. And many a knock-down drag-out fight they have with ‘em, too.

Them Pugh genes took such a beating from the heterochromatinic bursts Grandpaw told me about that they got whopped all outa their proper form. You might call ‘em a virus now—and of course a virus is exactly the same thing as a gene, except the virus is friskier. But heavens above, that’s like saying the Jukes boys is exactly the same as George Washington!

The hex hit me—hard.

I sneezed something tumble. Then I heard Uncle Lem sneezing in his sleep, lying back there in the yaller car. Grandpaw was still droning on about how many Pughs was a-coming at me right that minute, so there wasn’t no use asking questions. I fixed my eyes different and looked right down into the middle of that sneeze to see what had tickled me— Well, you never seen so many Junior Pughs in all your born days!

It was the hex, all right. Likewise, them Pughs is still busy, hexing every-body on earth, off and on. They’ll do it for quite a time, too, since the Pugh line has got to go on forever, account of Grandpaw’s promise.

They tell me even the microscopes ain’t never yet got a good look at certain viruses. The scientists are sure in for a surprise someday when they focus down real close and see all them pasty-faced little devils, ugly as sin, with their eyes set real close together, wiggling around hexing everybody in sight.

It took a long time—since the year one, that is—but Gene Chromosome fixed it up, with Grandpaw’s help. So Junior Pugh ain’t a pain in the neck no more, so to speak.

But I got to admit he’s an awful cold in the haid.

CALL HIM DEMON

Chapter 1. Wrong Uncle

A long time afterward she went back to Los Angeles and drove past Grandmother Keaton's house. It hadn't changed a great deal, really, but what had seemed an elegant mansion to her childish, 1920 eyes was now a big ramshackle frame structure, gray with scaling paint.

After twenty-five years the—insecurity—wasn't there any more, but there still persisted a dull, irrational, remembered uneasiness, an echo of the time Jane Larkin had spent in that house when she was nine, a thin, big-eyed girl with the Buster Brown bangs so fashionable then.

Looking back, she could remember too much and too little. A child's mind is curiously different from an adult's. When Jane went into the living-room under the green glass chandelier, on that June day in 1920, she made a dutiful round of the family, kissing them all. Grandmother Keaton and chilly Aunt Bessie and the four uncles. She did not hesitate- when she came to the new uncle—who was different.

The other kids watched her with impassive eyes. They knew. They saw she knew.

But they said nothing just then. Jane realized she could not mention the—the trouble—either, until they brought it up. That was part of the silent etiquette of childhood. But the whole house was full of uneasiness. The adults merely sensed a trouble, something vaguely wrong. The children, Jane saw, *knew.*

Afterward they gathered in the back yard, under the big date-palm. Jane ostentatiously fingered her new necklace and waited. She saw the looks the others exchanged—looks that said, 'Do you think she really noticed?' And finally Beatrice, the oldest, suggested hide-and-seek.

'We ought to tell her, Bee,' little Charles said.

Beatrice kept her eyes from Charles.

'Tell her what? You're crazy, Charles.'

Charles was insistent but vague.

'You know.'

'Keep your old secret,' Jane said. 'I know what it is, anyhow. *He's* not my uncle.'

'See?' Emily crowed. 'She did too see it. I told you she'd notice.'

'It's kind of funny,' Jane said. She knew very well that the man

in the living-room wasn't her uncle and never had been, and he was pretending quite hard—hard enough to convince the grown-ups—that he had always been here. With the clear, unprejudiced eye of immaturity, Jane could see that he wasn't an ordinary grown-up. He was sort of—empty.

'He just came,' Emily said. 'About three weeks ago.'

'Three days,' Charles corrected, trying to help, but his temporal sense wasn't dependent on the calendar. He measured time by the yardstick of events, and days weren't standard size for him. They were longer when he was sick or when it rained, and far too short when he was riding the merry-go-round at Ocean Park or playing games in the back yard.

'It was three weeks,' Beatrice said.

'Where'd he come from?' Jane asked.

There were secret glances exchanged.

'I don't know,' Beatrice said carefully.

'He came out of a big round hole that kept going around," Charles said. 'It's like a Christmas tree through there, all fiery.'

'Don't tell lies,' Emily said. 'Did you ever truly see that, Charles?'

'No. Only sort of.'

'Don't *they* notice?' Jane meant the adults.

'No,' Beatrice told her, and the children all looked toward the house and pondered the inscrutable ways of grown-ups. 'They act like he's always been here. Even Granny. Aunt Bessie said he came before / did. Only I knew that wasn't right.'

'Three weeks,' Charles said, changing his mind.

'He's making them all feel sick,' Emily said. 'Aunt Bessie takes aspirins all the time."

Jane considered. On the face of it, the situation seemed a little silly. An uncle three weeks old? Perhaps the adults were merely pretending, as they sometimes did, with esoteric adult motives. But somehow that didn't seem quite the answer. Children are never deceived very long about such things.

Charles, now that the ice was broken and Jane no longer an outsider, burst

suddenly into excited gabble.

'Tell her, Bee! The real secret—you know. Can I show her the Road of Yellow Bricks? Please, Bee? Huh?'

Then the silence again. Charles was talking too much. Jane knew the Road of Yellow Bricks, of course. It ran straight through Oz from the Deadly Desert to the Emerald City.

After a long time Emily nodded.

'We got to tell her, you know,' she said. 'Only she might get scared. It's so dark.'

'You were scared,' Bobby said. 'You cried, the first time.'

'I didn't. Anyhow it—it's only make believe.'

'Oh, no!' Charles said. 'I reached out and touched the crown last time.'

'It isn't a crown,' Emily said. 'It's *him,* Ruggedo.'

Jane thought of the uncle who wasn't a real uncle—who wasn't a real person. 'Is *he* Ruggedo?' she asked.

The children understood.

'Oh, no,' Charles said. 'Ruggedo lives in the cellar. We give him meat. All red and bluggy. He *likes* it! Gobble, gobble!'

Beatrice looked at Jane. She nodded toward the clubhouse, which was a piano-box with a genuine secret lock. Then, somehow, quite deftly, she shifted the conversation onto another subject. A game of cowboys-and-Indians started presently and Bobby, howling terribly, led the route around the house.

The piano-box smelled pleasantly of acacia drifting through the cracks. Beatrice and Jane, huddled together in the warm dimness, heard diminishing Indian-cries in the distance. Beatrice looked curiously adult just now.

'I'm glad you came, Janie,' she said. "The little kids don't understand at all. It's pretty awful.'

'Who is he?'

Beatrice shivered. 'I don't know. I think he lives in the cellar.' She hesitated. 'You have to get to him through, the attic, though. I'd be awfully scared if the little kids weren't so—so—they don't seem to mind at all.'

'But Bee. Who *is* he?'

Beatrice turned her head and looked at Jane, and it was quite evident then that she could not or would not say. There was a barrier. But because it was important, she tried. She mentioned the Wrong Uncle.

"I think Ruggedo's the same as him. I know he is, really. Charles and Bobby say so—and they know. They know better than I do. They're littler . . . It's hard to explain, but—well it's sort of like the Scoodlers. Remember?'

The Scoodlers. That unpleasant race that dwelt in a cavern on the road to Oz and had the conventional ability to detach their heads and hurl them at passersby. After a moment the parallel became evident. A Scoodler could have his head in one place and his body in another. But both parts would belong to the same Scoodler.

Of course the phantom uncle had a head and a body both. But Jane could understand vaguely the possibility of his double nature, one of him moving deceptively through the house, focus of a strange malaise, and the other nameless, formless, nesting in a cellar and waiting for red meat. . . .

'Charles knows more than any of us about it,' Beatrice said. 'He was the one who

found out we'd have to feed R-Ruggedo. We tried different things, but it has to be raw meat. And if we

stopped—something awful would happen. We kids found that out.'

It was significant that Jane didn't ask how. Children take their equivalent of telepathy for granted.

'They don't know,' Beatrice added. 'We can't tell them.'

'No,' Jane said, and two girls looked at one another, caught in the terrible, helpless problem of immaturity, the knowledge that the mores of the adult world are too complicated to understand, and that children must walk warily.

Adults are always right. They are an alien race.

Luckily for the other children, they had come upon the Enemy in a body. One child alone might have had violent hysterics. But Charles, who made the first discoveries, was only six, still young enough so that the process of going insane in that particular way wasn't possible for him. A six-year-old is in a congenitally psychotic state; it is normal to him.

'And they've been sick ever since he came,' Beatrice said.

Jane had already seen that. A wolf may don sheepskin and slide unobserved into a flock, but the sheep are apt to become nervous, though they can not discover the source of their discomfort.

It was a matter of mood. Even he showed the same mood— uneasiness, waiting, sensing that something was wrong and not knowing what—but with *him* it was simply a matter of camouflage. Jane could tell he didn't want to attract attention by varying from the arbitrary norm he had chosen—that of the human form.

Jane accepted it. The uncle who was—empty—the one in the cellar called Ruggedo, who had to be fed regularly on raw meat, so that Something wouldn't happen. ...

A masquerader, from somewhere. He had power, and he had limitations. The obvious evidences of his power were accepted without question.

Children are realists. It was not incredible to them, for this hungry, inhuman stranger to appear among them—for here he was.

He came from somewhere. Out of time, or space, or an inconceivable place. He never had any human feelings; the children sensed that easily. He pretended very cleverly to be human, and he could warp the adult minds to implant artificial memories of his existence. The adults thought they remembered him. An adult will recognize a mirage; a child will be deceived. But conversely, an intellectual mirage will deceive an adult, not a child.

Ruggedo's power couldn't warp their minds, for those were neither quite human nor quite sane, from the adult standpoint. Beatrice, who was oldest, was afraid. She had the beginnings of empathy and imagination.

Little Charlie felt mostly excitement. Bobbie, the smallest, had already begun to be bored. . . .

Perhaps later Beatrice remembered a little of what Ruggedo looked like, but the others never did. For they reached him by a very strange road, and perhaps they were somewhat altered themselves during the time they were with him. He accepted or rejected food; that was all. Upstairs, the body of the Scoodler pretended to be human, while the Scoodler's head lay in that little, horrible nest he had made by

warping space, so he was invisible and intangible to anyone who didn't know how tp find the Road of Yellow Bricks.

What was he? Without standards of comparison—and there are none, in this world—he cannot be named. The children thought of him as Ruggedo. But he was not the fat, half-comic, inevitably frustrated Gnome King.

He was never that.

Call him demon.

As a name-symbol, it implies too much and not enough. But it will have to do. By the standard of maturity he was monster, alien, super-being. But because of what he did, and what he wanted—call him demon.

Chapter 2. *Raw, Red Meat*

one afternoon, a few days later, Beatrice hunted up Jane. 'How much money have you got, Janie?' she asked.

'Four dollars and thirty-five cents,' Jane said, after investigation. 'Dad gave me five dollars at the station. I bought some popcorn and—well—different things.'

'Gee, I'm glad you came when you did.' Beatrice blew out a long breath. Tacitly it was agreed that the prevalent socialism of childhood clubs would apply in this more urgent clubbing together of interests. Jane's small hoard was available not for any individual among them, but for the good of the group. 'We were running out of money,' Beatrice said. 'Granny caught us taking meat out of the icebox and we don't dare any more. But we can get a lot with your money.'

Neither of them thought of the inevitable time when that fund would be exhausted. Four dollars and thirty-five cents seemed fabulous, in that era. And they needn't buy expensive meat, so long as it was raw and bloody.

They walked together down the acacia-shaded street with its occasional leaning palms and drooping pepper-trees. They bought two pounds of hamburger and improvidently squandered twenty cents on sodas.

When they got back to the house, Sunday lethargy had set in. Uncles Simon and James had gone out for cigars, and Uncle

Lew and Bert were reading the papers, while Aunt Bessie crocheted. Grandmother Keaton read 'Young's Magazine', diligently seeking spicy passages. The two girls paused behind the beaded portieres, looking in.

'Come on, kids,' Lew said in his deep, resonant voice. 'Seen the funnies yet? Mutt and Jeff are good. And Spark Plug———'

'Mr. Gibson is good enough for me,' Grandmother Keaton said. 'He's a real artist. His people look like people.'

The door banged open and Uncle James appeared, fat, grinning, obviously happy from several beers. Uncle Simon paced him like a personified conscience.

'At any rate, it's quiet,' he said, turning a sour glance on Jane and Beatrice. 'The children make such a rumpus sometimes I can't hear myself think.'

'Granny,' Beatrice asked, 'where are the kids?'

'In the kitchen, I think, dear. They wanted some water for something.'

'Thanks.' The two girls went out, leaving the room filled with a growing atmosphere of sub-threshold discomfort. The sheep were sensing the wolf among them, but the sheepskin disguise was sufficient. They did not know. . . .

The kids were in the kitchen, busily painting one section of the comics with

brushes and water. When you did that, pictures emerged. One page of the newspaper had been chemically treated so that moisture would bring out the various colors, dull pastels, but singularly glamorous, in a class with the Japanese flowers that would bloom in water, and the Chinese paper-shelled almonds that held tiny prizes.

From behind her, Beatrice deftly produced the butcher's package.

'Two pounds,' she said. 'Janie had some money, and Merton's was open this afternoon. I thought we'd better. .. .'

Emily kept on painting diligently. Charles jumped up.

'Are we going up now, huh?'

Jane was uneasy. 'I don't know if I'd better come along. j__'

'I don't want to either,' Bobby said, but that was treason. Charles said Bobby was scared.

'I'm not. It just isn't any fun. I want to play something else.'

'Emily,' Beatrice said softly. 'You don't have to go this time.'

'Yes I do.' Emily looked up at last from her painting. 'I'm not scared.'

'I want to see the lights," Charles said. Beatrice whirled on him.

'You tell such lies, Charles! There aren't any lights.'

'There are so. Sometimes, anyhow.'

There aren't.'

'There are so. You're too dumb to see them. Let's go and feed him'

It was understood that Beatrice took command now. She was the oldest. She was also, Jane sensed, more afraid than the others, even Emily.

They went upstairs, Beatrice carrying the parcel of meat. She had already cut the string. In the upper hall they grouped before a door.

'This is the way, Jane,' Charles said rather proudly. 'W,e gotta go up to the attic. There's a swing-down ladder in the bathroom ceiling. We have to climb up on the tub to reach.'

'My dress,' Jane said doubtfully.

'You won't get dirty. Come on.'

Charles wanted to be first, but he was too short. Beatrice climbed to the rim of the tub and tugged at a ring in the ceiling. The trap-door creaked and the stairs ascended slowly, with a certain majesty, beside the tub. It wasn't dark up there. Light came vaguely through the attic windows.

'Come on, Janie,' Beatrice said, with a queer breathlessness, and they all scrambled up somehow, by dint of violent acrobatics.

The attic was warm, quiet and dusty. Planks were laid across the beams. Cartons and trunks were here and there.

Beatrice was already walking along one of the beams. Jane watched her.

Beatrice didn't look back; she didn't say anything. Once her hand groped out behind her: Charles, who was nearest, took it. Then Beatrice reached a plank laid across to another rafter. She crossed it. She went on—stopped—and came back, with Charles.

'You weren't doing it right,' Charles said disappointedly. 'You were thinking of the wrong thing.'

Beatrice's face looked oddly white in the golden, faint light.

Jane met her cousin's eyes. 'Bee——'

'You have to think of something else,' Beatrice said quickly. 'It's all right. Come on.'

Charles at her heels, she started again across the plank. Charles was saying something, in a rhythmic, mechanical monotone:

'One, two, buckle my shoe, Three, four, knock at the door, Five, six, pick up sticks——'

Beatrice disappeared.

'Seven, eight, lay them——'

Charles disappeared.

Bobby, his shoulders expressing rebelliousness, followed. And vanished.

Emily made a small sound.

'Oh—*Emily*!' Jane said.

But her youngest cousin only said, 'I don't want to go down there, Janie.'

'You don't have to.'

'Yes, I do,' Emily said. 'I'll tell you what. I won't be afraid if you come right after me. I always think there's something coming up behind me to grab—but if you promise to come right after, it'll be all right.'

'I promise,' Jane said.

Reassured, Emily walked across the bridge. Jane was watching closely this time. Yet she did not see Emily disappear. She was suddenly—gone. Jane stepped forward, and stopped as a sound came from downstairs.

'fane!' Aunt Bessie's voice, *'fane!'* It was louder and more peremptory now. 'Jane, where are you? Come here to me!'

Jane stood motionless, looking across the plank bridge. It was quite empty, and there was no trace of Emily or the other children. The attic was suddenly full of invisible menace. Yet she would have gone on, because of her promise, if——

'fane!'

Jane reluctantly descended and followed the summons to Aunt Bessie's bedroom. That prim-mouthed woman was pinning fabric and moving her lips impatiently.

'Where on earth have you been, Jane? I've been calling and calling.'

'We were playing,' Jane said. 'Did you want me, Aunt Bessie?'

'I should say I did,' Aunt Bessie said. 'This collar I've been crocheting. It's a dress for you. Come here and let me try it on. How you grow, child!'

And after that there was an eternity of pinning and wriggling, while Jane kept thinking of Emily, alone and afraid somewhere in the attic. She began to hate Aunt Bessie. Yet the thought of rebellion or escape never crossed her mind. The adults were absolute monarchs. As far as relative values went, trying on the collar was more important, at this moment, than anything else in the world. At least, to the adults who administered the world.

While Emily, alone and afraid on the bridge that led to—elsewhere. . . .

The uncles were playing poker. Aunt Gertrude, the vaudeville actress, had unexpectedly arrived for a few days and was talking with Grandmother Keaton and Aunt Bessie in the living-room. Aunt Gertrude was small and pretty, very charming, with bisque delicacy and a gusto for life that filled Jane with admiration. But she was subdued now.

'This place gives me the creeps,' she said, making a dart with her folded fan at Jane's nose. 'Hello, funny^face. Why aren't you playing with the other kids?'

'Oh, I'm .tired/ Jane said, wondering about Emily. It had been nearly an hour since——

'At your age I was never tired,' Aunt Gertrude said. 'Now look at me. Three a day and that awful straight man I've got—Ma, did I tell you———' The voices pitched lower.

Jane watched Aunt Bessie's skinny fingers move monotonously as she darted her crochet hook through the silk.

'This place is a morgue,' Aunt Gertrude said suddenly.. 'What's wrong with everybody? Who's dead?'

'It's the air,' Aunt Bessie said. 'Too hot the year round.' 'You play Rochester in winter, Bessie my girl, and you'll be glad of a warm climate. It isn't that, anyway. I feel like—mm-m —it's like being on stage after the curtain's gone up.' 'It's your fancy,' her mother said.

'Ghosts,' Aunt Gertrude said, and was silent. Grandmother Keaton looked sharply at Jane. 'Come over here, child,' she said.

Room was made on the soft, capacious lap that had held so many youngsters.

Jane snuggled against the reassuring warmth and tried to let her mind go blank, transferring all sense of responsibility to Grandmother Keaton. But it wouldn't work. There was something wrong in the house, and the heavy waves of it beat out from a center very near them.

The Wrong Uncle. Hunger and the avidity to be fed. The nearness of bloody meat tantalizing him as he lay hidden in his strange, unguessable nest elsewhere—otherwhere—in that strange place where the children had vanished.

He was down there, slavering for the food; he was up here, empty, avid, a vortex of hunger very nearby.

He was double, a double uncle, masked but terrifyingly clear. ...

Jane closed her eyes and dug her head deeper into Grandmother Keaton's shoulder.

Aunt Gertrude gossiped in an oddly tense voice, as if she sensed wrongness under the surface and was frightened subtly.

'I'm opening at Santa Barbara in a couple of days, Ma,' she said. 'I—what's wrong with this house, anyhow? I'm as jumpy as a cat today!—and I want you all to come down and catch the first show. It's a musical comedy. I've been promoted.'

'I've seen the "Prince of Pilsen" before,' Grandmother Keaton said.

'Not with me in it. It's my treat. I've engaged rooms at the hotel already. The kids have to come, too. Want to see your auntie act, Jane?' Jane nodded against her grandmother's shoulder.

'Auntie,' Jane said suddenly. 'Did you see all the uncles?'

'Certainly I did.'

'All of them? Uncle James and Uncle Bert and Uncle Simon and Uncle Lew?'

'The whole kaboodle. Why?'

'I just wondered.'

So Aunt Gertrude hadn't noticed the Wrong Uncle either. She wasn't truly

observant, Jane thought.

'I haven't seen the kids, though. If they don't hurry up, they won't get any of the presents I've brought. You'd never guess what I have for you, Janie.'

But Jane scarcely heard even that exciting promise. For suddenly the tension in the air gave way. The Wrong Uncle who had been a vortex of hunger a moment before was a vortex of ecstasy now. Somewhere, somehow, at last Ruggedo was being fed. Somewhere, somehow, that other half of the double uncle was devouring his bloody fare. ...

Jane was not in Grandmother Keaton's lap any more. The room was a spinning darkness that winked with tiny lights— Christmas tree lights, Charles had called them—and there was a core of terror in the center of the whirl. Here in the vanished room the Wrong Uncle was a funnel leading from that unimaginable nest where the other half of him dwelt, and through the funnel, into the room, poured the full ecstatic tide of his satiety.

Somehow in this instant Jane was very near the other children who must stand beside that spinning focus of darkness. She could almost sense their presence, almost put out her hand to touch theirs.

Now the darkness shivered and the bright, tiny lights drew together, and into her mind came a gush of impossible memories. She was too near *him.* And he was careless as he fed. He was not guarding his thoughts. They poured out, formless as an animal's filling the dark. Thoughts of red food, and of other times and places where that same red food had been brought him by other hands.

It was incredible. The memories were not of earth, not of this time or place. He had traveled far, Ruggedo. In many guises. He remembered now, in a flow of shapeless fissions, he remembered tearing through furred sides that squirmed away from his hunger, remembered the gush of hot sweet redness through the fur.

Not the fur of anything Jane had ever imagined before. . . .

He remembered a great court paved with shining things, and something in bright chains in the center, and rings of watching eyes as he entered and neared the sacrifice.

As he tore his due from its smooth sides, the cruel chains clanked around him as he fed. . . .

Jane tried to close her eyes and not watch. But it was not with

eyes that she watched. And she was ashamed and a little sickened because she was sharing in that feast, tasting the warm red sweetness widi Ruggedo in memory, feeling the spin of ecstasy through her head as it spun through his.

'Ah—the kids are coming now,' Aunt Gertrude was saying from a long way off.

Jane heard her dimly, and then more clearly, and then suddenly Grandmother Keaton's lap was soft beneath her again, and she was back in the familiar room. 'A herd of elephants on the stairs, eh?' Aunt Gertrude said.

They were returning. Jane could hear them too now. Really, they were making much less noise than usual. They were subdued until about half-way down the stairs, and then there was a sudden outburst of clattering and chatter that rang false to Jane's ears.

The children came in, Beatrice a little white, Emily pink and puffy around the eyes. Charles was bubbling over with repressed excitement, but Bobby, the smallest, was

glum and bored. At sight of Aunt Gertrude, the uproar redoubled, though Beatrice exchanged a quick, significant glance with Jane.

Then presents and noise, and the uncles coming back in; excited discussion of the trip to Santa Barbara—a strained cheeri-ness that, somehow, kept dying down into heavy silence.

None of the adults ever really looked over their shoulders, but —the feeling was of bad things to come.

Only the children—not even Aunt Gertrude—were aware of the complete *emptiness* of the Wrong Uncle. The projection of a lazy, torpid, semi-mindless entity. Superficially he was as convincingly human as if he had never focused his hunger here under this roof, never let his thoughts whirl through the minds of the children, never remembered his red, dripping feasts of other times and places.

He was very sated now. They could feel the torpor pulsing out in slow, drowsy waves so that all the grown-ups were yawning and wondering why. But even now he was empty. Not real. The 'Nobody-there' feeling was as acute as ever to all the small, keen, perceptive minds that saw him as he was.

Chapter 3. *Sated Eater*

later, at bedtime, only Charles wanted to talk about the matter. It seemed to Jane that Beatrice had grown up a little since the early afternoon. Bobby was reading 'The Jungle Book,' or pretending to, with much pleased admiration of the pictures showing Shere Khan, the tiger. Emily had turned her face to the wall and was pretending to be asleep.

'Aunt Bessie called me,' Jane told her, sensing a faint reproach.

'I tried as soon as I could to get away from her. She wanted to try that collar thing on me.'

'Oh.' The apology was accepted. But Beatrice still refused to talk. Jane went over to Emily's bed and put her arm around the little girl.

'Mad at me, Emily?'

'No.'

'You are, though. I couldn't help it, honey.'

'It was all right,' Emily said, 'I didn't care.'

'All bright and shiny,' Charles said sleepily. 'Like a Christmas tree.'

Beatrice whirled on him. 'Shut up!' she cried 'Shut up, Charles! Shut up, shut up, *shut up \'*

Aunt Bessie put her head into the room.

'What's the matter, children?' she asked.

'Nothing, Auntie,' Beatrice said. 'We were just playing.'

Fed, temporarily satiated, it lay torpid in its curious nest. The house was silent, the occupants asleep. Even the Wrong Uncle slept, for Ruggedo was a good mimic.

The Wrong Uncle was not a phantasm, not a mere projection of Ruggedo. As an amoeba extends a pseudopod toward food, so Ruggedo had extended and created the Wrong Uncle. But there the parallel stopped. For die Wrong Uncle was not an elastic extension diat could be witiidrawn at will. Rather, he—it—was a permanent limb, as a man's arm is. From the brain through the neural system die message goes, and the arm stretches out, the fingers constrict—and there is food in the hand's grip.

But Ruggedo's extension was less limited. It was not permanently bound bv rieid

natural laws of rr>c,ttpr. An arm may be painted black. And the Wrong Uncle looked and acted human, except to clear immature eyes.

There were rules to be followed, even by Ruggedo. The natural laws of a world could bind it to a certain extent. There were cycles. The life-span of a moth-caterpillar is run by cycles, and before it can spin its cocoon and metamorphose, it must eat— eat—eat. Not until the time of change had come can it evade its current incarnation. Nor could Ruggedo change, now, until die end of its cycle had come. Then there would be another metamorphosis, as there had already, in the unthinkable eternity of its past, been a million curious mutations.

But, at present, it was bound by the rules of its current cycle. The extension could not be witiidrawn. And the Wrong Uncle was a part of it, and it was a part of the Wrong Uncle.

The Scoodler's body and the Scoodler's head. Through the dark house beat the unceasing, drowsy waves of satiety—slowly, imperceptibly quickening toward that nervous pulse of avidity that always came after the processes of indigestion and digestion had been completed.

Aunt Bessie rolled over and began to snore. In another room, the Wrong Uncle, without waking, turned on his Back and also snored.

The talent of protective mimicry was well developed. ...

It was afternoon again, though by only half an hour, and the pulse in the house had changed subtly in tempo and mood.

'If we're going up to Santa Barbara,' Grandmother Keaton had said, 'I'm going to take the children down to the dentist today. Their teedi want cleaning, and it's hard enough to get an appointment with Dr. Hover for one youngster, not to mention four. Jane, your mother wrote me you'd been to the dentist a month ago, so you needn't go.'

After that the trouble hung unspoken over die children. But no one mentioned it. Only, as Grandmother Keaton herded the kids out on the porch, Beatrice waited till last. Jane was in the doorway, watching. Beatrice reached behind her without looking, fumbled, found Jane's hand, and squeezed it hard. That was all.

But the responsibility had been passed on. No words had been needed. Beatrice had said plainly that it was Jane's job now. It was her responsibility.

She dared not delay too long. She was too vividly aware of the rising tide of depression affecting the adults. Ruggedo was getting hungry again.

She watched her cousins till they vanished beneath the pepper-trees, and the distant rumble of the trolley put a period to any hope of their return. After that, Jane walked to the butcher shop, and bought two pounds of meat. She drank a soda. Then she came back to the house.

She felt the pulse beating out faster.

She got a tin pan from the kitchen and put the meat on it, and slipped up to die bathroom. It was hard to reach the attic with her burden and widiout help, but she did it. In the warm stillness beneath the roof she stood waiting, half-hoping to hear Aunt Bessie call again and relieve her of this duty. But no voice came.

The simple mechanics of what she had to do were sufficiently prosaic to keep fear at a little distance. Besides, she was scarcely nine. And it was not dark in the attic.

She walked along the rafter, balancing, till she came to the plank bridge. She felt

its resilient vibration underfoot.

'One, two, buckle my shoe, Three, four, knock at the door, Five, six, pick up sticks, Seven, eight——'

She missed the way twice. The third time she succeeded. The mind had to be at just die right pitch of abstraction . . . She crossed the bridge, and turned, and——

It was dim, almost dark, in this place. It smelled cold and hollow, of the underground. Without surprise she knew she was deep down, perhaps beneath the house, perhaps very far away from it. That was as acceptable to her as the rest of the strangeness. She felt no surprise.

Curiously, she seemed to know the way. She was going into a tiny enclosure, and yet at the same time she wandered for awhile through low-roofed, hollow spaces, endless, very dim, smelling of cold and moisture. An unpleasant place to the mind, and a dangerous place as well to wander through with one's little pan of meat.

It found the meat acceptable.

Looking back later, Jane had no recollection whatever of *it.* She did not know how she had proffered the food, or how it had been received, or where in that place of paradoxical space and smallness *it* lay dreaming of other worlds and eras.

She only knew that the darkness spun around her again, winking with little lights, as it devoured its food. Memories swirled from its mind to hers as if the two minds were of one fabric. She saw more clearly .this time. She saw a great winged thing caged in a glittering pen, and she remembered as Ruggedo remembered, and leaped with Ruggedo's leap, feeling the wings buffet about her and feeling her rending hunger rip into the body, and tasting avidly the hot, sweet, salty fluid bubbling out.

It was a mixed memory. Blending with it, other victims shifted beneath Ruggedo's grip, the feathery pinions becoming the beast of great clawed arms and the writhe of reptilian litheness. All his victims became one in memory as he ate.

One flash of another memory opened briefly toward the last. Jane was aware of a great swaying garden of flowers larger than herself, and of cowled figures moving silently among them, and of a victim with showering pale hair lying helpless upon the lip of one gigantic flower, held down with chains like shining blossoms. And it seemed to Jane that she herself went cowled among those silent figures, and that he—it—Ruggedo—in another guise walked beside her toward the sacrifice.

It was the first human sacrifice he had recalled. Jane would have liked to know more about that. She had no moral scruples, of course. Food was food. But the memory flickered smoothly into another picture and she never saw the end. She did not really need to see it. There was only one end to all these memories. Perhaps it was as well for her that Ruggedo did not dwell over-long on that particular moment of all his bloody meals.

'Seventeen, eighteen, Maids in waiting, Nineteen, twenty——'

She tilted precariously back across the rafters, holding her empty pan. The attic smelled dusty. It helped to take away the reek of remembered crimson from her mind. ...

When the children came back, Beatrice said simply, 'Did you?' and Jane nodded. The taboo still held. They would not discuss the matter more fully except in case of real need. And the drowsy, torpid heat in the house, the psychic emptiness of the Wrong Uncle, showed plainly that the danger had been averted again—for a time. . .

.

'Read me about Mowgli, Granny,' Bobby said. Grandmother Keaton settled down, wiped and adjusted her spectacles, and took up Kipling. Presently the other children were drawn into the charmed circle. Grandmother spoke of Shere Khan's downfall—of the cattle driven into the deep gulch to draw the tiger— and of the earth-shaking stampede that smashed the killer into bloody pulp.

'Well,' Grandmother Keaton said, closing the book, 'that's the end of Shere Khan. He's dead now.'

'No he isn't,' Bobby roused and said sleepily.

'Of course he is. Good and dead. The cattle killed him.'

'Only at the end, Granny. If you start reading at the beginning again, Shere Khan's right there.'

Bobby, of course, Was too young to have any conception of death. You were killed sometimes in games of cowboys-and-Indians, an ending neither regrettable nor fatal. Death is an absolute term that needs personal experience to be made understandable.

Uncle Lew smoked his pipe and wrinkled the brown skin around his eyes at Uncle Bert, who bit his lips and hesitated a long time between moves. But Uncle Lew won the chess game anyway. Uncle James winked at Aunt Gertrude and said he thought he'd take a walk, would she like to come along? She would.

After their departure, Aunt Bessie loked up, sniffed.

'You just take a whiff of their breaths when they come back, Ma,' she said. 'Why do you stand for it?'

But Grandmother Keaton chuckled and stroked Bobby's hair. He had fallen asleep on her lap, his hands curled into small fists, his cheeks faintly flushed.

Uncle Simon's gaunt figure stood by the window.

He watched through the curtains, and said nothing at all.

'Early to bed,' Aunt Bessie said, 'if we're going to Santa Barbara in the morning, children!"

And that was that.

Chapter 4. *End of the Game*

by morning Bobby was running a temperature, and Grandmother Keaton refused to risk his life in Santa Barbara. This made Bobby very sullen, but solved the problem the children had been wondering about for many hours. Also, a telephone call from Jane's father said that he was arriving that day to pick up his daughter, and she had a little brother now. Jane, who had no illusions about the stork, was relieved, and hoped her mother wouldn't be sick any more now.

A conclave was held in Bobby's bedroom before breakfast.

'You know what to do, Bobby,' Beatrice said. 'Promise you'll do it?'

'Promise. Uh-huh.'

'You can do it today, Janie, before your father comes. And you'd better get a lot of meat and leave it for Bobby.'

'I can't buy any meat without money,' Bobby said. Somewhat reluctantly Beatrice counted out what was left of Jane's small hoard, and handed it over. Bobby stuffed the change under his pillow and pulled at the red flannel wound around his neck.

'It scratches,' he said. 'I'm not sick, anyway.'

'It was those green pears you ate yesterday,' Emily said very meanly. 'You thought nobody saw you, didn't you?'

Charles came in; he had been downstairs. He was breathless.

'Hey, know what happened?' he said. *'He* hurt his foot. Now he can't go to Santa Barbara. I bet he did it on purpose.'

'Gosh,' Jane said. 'How?'

'He said he twisted it on the stairs. But I bet it's a lie. He just doesn't want to go.'

'Maybe he *can't go*—that far,' Beatrice said, with a sudden flash of intuition, and they spoke no more of the subject. But Beatrice, Emily and Charles were all relieved that the Wrong Uncle was not to go to Santa Barbara with them, after all.

It took two taxis to carry the travelers and their luggage. Grandmother Keaton, the Wrong Uncle, and Jane stood on the front porch and waved. The automobiles clattered off, and Jane promptly got some money from Bobby and went to the butcher store, returning heavy-laden.

The Wrong Uncle, leaning on a cane, hobbled into the sun-parlor and lay down. Grandmother Keaton made a repulsive but healthful drink for Bobby, and Jane decided not to do what she had to do until afternoon. Bobby read 'The Jungle Book,' stumbling over the hard words, and', for the while, the truce held.

Jane was not to forget that day quickly. The smells were sharply distinct; the odor of baking bread from the kitchen, the sticky-sweet flower scents from outside, the slightly dusty, rich-brown aroma exhaled by the sun-warmed rugs and furniture.

Grandmother Keaton went up to her bedroom to cold-cream her hands and face, and Jane lounged on the threshold, watching.

It was a charming room, in its comfortable, unimaginative way. The curtains were so stiffly starched that they billowed out in crisp whiteness, and the bureau was cluttered with fascinating objects—a pin-cushion shaped like a doll, a tiny red china shoe, with tinier gray china mice on it, a cameo brooch bearing a portrait of Grandmother Keaton as a girl.

And slowly, insistently, the pulse increased, felt even here, in this bedroom, where Jane felt it was a rather impossible intrusion.

Directly after lunch the bell rang, and it was Jane's father, come to take her back to San Francisco. He was in a hurry to catch the train, and there was time only for a hurried conversation before the two were whisked off in the waiting taxi. But Jane had found time to run upstairs and say good-by to Bobby— and tell him where the meat was hidden.

'All right, Janie,' Bobby said. 'Good-by.'

She knew she should not have left the job to Bobby. A nagging sense of responsibility haunted her all the way to the railroad station. She was only vaguely aware of adult voices saying the train would be very late, and of her father suggesting that the circus was in town. . . .

It was a good circus. She almost forgot Bobby and the crisis that would be mounting so dangerously unless he met it as he had promised. Early evening was blue as they moved with the crowd out of the tent. And then through a rift Jane saw a small, familiar figure, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. She *knew.*

Mr. Larkin saw Bobby in almost the same instant. He called sharply, and a moment later the two children were looking at one another, Bobby's plump face

sullen.

'Does your grandmother know you're here, Bobby?' Mr. Larkin said.

'Well, I guess not,' Bobby said.

'You ought to be paddled, young man. Come along, both of you. I'll have to phone her right away. She'll be worried to death.'

In the drug store, while he telephoned, Jane looked at her cousin. She was suffering the first pangs of maturity's burden, the knowledge of responsibility misused.

'Bobby,' she said. 'Did you?'

'You leave me alone,' Bobby said with a scowl. There was silence.

Mr. Larkin came back. 'Nobody answered. I've called a taxi. There'll be just time to get Bobby back before our train leaves.'

In the taxi also there was mostly silence. As for what might be happening at the house, Jane did not think of that at all. The

mind has its own automatic protections. And in any case, it was too late now. . . .

When the taxi drew up, the house was blazing with orange squares of windows in the dusk. There were men on the porch, and light glinted on a police officer's shield.

'You kids wait here,' Mr. Larkin said uneasily. 'Don't get out of the car.'

The taxi driver shrugged and pulled out a folded newspaper as Mr. Larkin hurried toward the porch. In the back seat Jane spoke to Bobby, her voice very soft.

'You didn't,' she whispered. It was not even an accusation.

'I don't care,' Bobby whispered back. 'I was tired of that game. I wanted to play something else.' He giggled. 'I won, anyhow,' he declared.

'How? What happened?'

'The police came, like I knew they would. *He* never thought of that. So I won.'

'But how?'

'Well, it was sort of like 'The Jungle Book.' Shooting tigers, remember? They tied a kid to a stake and, when the tiger comes —bang! Only the kids were all gone to Santa Barbara, and you'd gone too. So I used Granny. I didn't think she'd mind. She plays games with us a lot. And anyhow she was the only one left.'

'But Bobby, a kid doesn't mean a kid like us. It means a baby goat. And anyhow———'

'Oh!' Bobby whispered. 'Oh—well, anyhow, I thought Granny would be all right. She's too fat to run fast.' He grinned scornfully. *'He's* dumb,' he said. 'He should have known the hunters always come when you tie a kid out for the tiger. He doesn't know anything. When I told him I'd locked Granny in her room and nobody else was around, I thought he might guess.' Bobby looked crafty. 'I was smart. I told him through the window. I thought he might think about me being a kid. But he didn't. He went right upstairs—fast. He even forgot to limp. I guess he was pretty hungry by then.' Bobby glanced toward the swarming porch. Trob'ly the police have got him now,' he added carelessly. 'It was easy as pie. I won.'

Jane's mind had not followed these fancies.

Ts she dead?' she asked, very softly.

Bobby looked at her. The word had a different meaning for him. It had *no* meaning, beyond a phase in a game. And, to his knowledge, the tiger had never harmed the tethered kid.

Mr. Larkin was coming back to the taxi now, walking very slowly and not very straight.

Jane could not see his face. . ..

It was hushed up, of course, as much as possible. The children, who knew so much more than those who were shielding them,

were futilely protected from the knowledge of what had happened. As futilely as they in their turn, had tried to protect their elders. Except for the two oldest girls, they didn't particularly care. The game was over. Granny had had to go away on a long, long journey, and she would never be back.

They understood what *that* meant well enough.

The Wrong Uncle, on the other hand, had had to go away too, they were told, to a big hospital where he would be taken care of all his life.

This puzzled diem all a little, for it fell somewhat outride the limits of their experience. Death they understood very imperfectly, but this other thing was completely mystifying. They didn't greatly care, once their interest faded, though Bobby for some time listened to readings of 'The Jungle Book' with unusual attention, wondering if this time they would take the tiger away instead of killing him on the spot. They never did, of course. Evidently in real life tigers were different. . . .

For a long time afterward, in nightmares, Jane's perverse imagination dwelt upon and relived the things she would not let it remember when she was awake. She would see Granny's bedroom as she had seen it last, the starched curtains billowing, the sunshine, the red china shoe, the doll pin-cushion. Granny, rubbing cold cream into her wrinkled hands and looking up more and more nervously from time to time as the long, avid waves of hunger pulsed through the house from the thing in its dreadful hollow place down below.

It must have been very hungry. The Wrong Uncle, pretending to a wrenched ankle downstairs, must have shifted and turned upon the couch, that hollow man, empty and blind of everything but the need for sustenance, the one red food he could not live without. The empty automaton in the sunporch and the ravenous being in its warp below pulsing with one hunger, ravening for one food. . . .

It had been very wise of Bobby to speak through the window when he delivered his baited message.

Upstairs in the locked room, Granny must have discovered presently that she could not get out. Her fat, mottled fingers, slippery from cold-creaming, must have tugged vainly at the knob.

Jane dreamed of the sound of those footsteps many times. The tread she had never heard was louder and more real to her than any which had ever sounded in her ears. She knew very surely how they must have come bounding up the stairs, thump, thump, thump, two steps at a time, so that Granny would look up in alarm, knowing it could not be the uncle with his wrenched ankle. She would have jumped up then, her heart knocking, thinking wildly of burglars.

It can't have lasted long. The steps would have taken scarcely

the length of a heartbeat to come down the hall. And by now the house would be shaking and pulsing with one triumphant roar of hunger almost appeased. The thumping steps would beat in rhythm to it, the long quick strides coming with dreadful pur-posefulness down the hall. And then the key clicking in the lock. And

then——

Usually then Jane awoke. ...

A little boy isn't responsible. Jane told herself that many times, then and later. She didn't see Bobby again very often, and when she did he had forgotten a great deal; new experiences had crowded out the old. He got a puppy for Christmas, and he started to school. When he heard that the Wrong Uncle had died in the asylum he had to think hard to remember who they meant, for to the younger children the Wrong Uncle had never been a member of the family, only a part in a game they had played and won.

Gradually the nameless distress which had once pervaded the household faded-and ceased. It was strongest, most desperate, in the days just after Granny's death, but everyone attributed that to shock. When it died away they were sure.

By sheer accident Bobby's cold, limited logic had been correct. Ruggedo would not have been playing fair if he had brought still another Wrong Uncle into the game, and Bobby had trusted him to observe the rules. He did observe them, for they were a law he could not break.

Ruggedo and the Wrong Uncle were parts of a whole, in-dissolubly bound into their cycle. Not until the cycle had been successfully completed could the Wrong Uncle extension be retracted or the cord broken. So, in the end, Ruggedo was helpless.

In the asylum, the Wrong Uncle slowly starved. He would not touch what they offered. He knew what he wanted, but they would not give him that. The head and the body died together, and the house that had been Grandmother Keaton's was peaceful once more.

If Bobby ever remembered, no one knew it. He had acted with perfect logic, limited only by his experience. If you do something sufficiently bad, the policeman will come and get you. And he was tired of the game. Only his competitive instinct kept him from simply quitting it and playing something else.

As it was, he wanted to win—and he had won.

No adult would have done what Bobby did—but a child is of a different species. By adult standards, a child is not wholly sane. Because of the way his mind worked, then—because of what he did, and what he wanted———

Call him demon.

10. THE PIPER'S SON

The Green Man was climbing the glass mountains, and hairy, gnomish faces peered at him from crevices. This was only another step in the Green Man's endless, exciting odyssey. He'd had a great many adventures already—in the Flame Country} among the Dimension Changers, with the City Apes who sneered endlessly while their blunt, clumsy fingers fumbled at deathrays. The trolls, however, were masters of magic, and were trying to stop the Green Man with spells. Little whirlwinds of force spun underfoot, trying to trip the Green Man, a figure of marvelous muscular development, handsome as a god, and hairless from head to foot, glistening pale green. The whirlwinds formed a fascinating pattern. If you could thread a precarious path among them—avoiding the pale yellow ones especially—you could get through.

And the hairy gnomes watched malignantly, jealously, from their crannies in

the glass crags.

Al Burkhalter, having recently achieved the mature status of eight full years, lounged under a tree and masticated a grass blade. He was so immersed in his daydreams that his father had to nudge his side gently to bring comprehension into the half-closed eyes. It was a good day for dreaming, anyway—a hot sun and a cool wind blowing down from the white Sierra peaks to the east. Timothy grass sent its faintly musty fragrance along the channels of air, and Ed Burkhalter was glad that his son was second-generation since the Blowup. He himself had been born ten years after the last bomb had been dropped, but secondhand memories can be pretty bad too.

'Hello, Al,' he said, and the youth vouchsafed a half-lidded glance of tolerant acceptance.

'Hi, Dad.'

'Want to come downtown with me?'

'Nope,' Al said, relaxing instantly into his stupor.

Burkhalter raised a figurative eyebrow and half turned. On an impulse, then, he did something he rarely did without the tacit permission of the other party; he used his telepathic power to reach into Al's mind. There was, he admitted to himself, a certain hesitancy, a subconscious unwillingness on his part, to do this, even though Al had pretty well outgrown the nasty, inhuman formlessness of mental babyhood. There had been a time when Al's mind had been quite shocking in its alienage. Burkhalter

remembered a few abortive experiments he had made before Al's birth; few fathers-to-be could resist the temptation to experiment with embryonic brains, and that had brought back nightmares Burkhalter had not had since his youth. There had been enormous rolling masses, and an appalling vastness, and other things. Prenatal memories were ticklish, and should be left to qualified mnemonic psychologists.

But now Al was maturing, and daydreaming, as usual, in bright colors. Burkhalter, reassured, felt that he had fulfilled his duty as a monitor and left his son still eating grass and ruminating.

Just the same, there was a sudden softness inside of him, and the aching, futile pity he was apt to feel for helpless things that were as yet unqualified for conflict with that extraordinarily complicated business of living. Conflict, competition, had not died out when war abolished itself; the business of adjustment even to one's surroundings was a conflict, and conversation a duel. With Al, too, there was a double problem. Yes, language was in effect a tariff wall, and a Baldy could appreciate that thoroughly, since the wall didn't exist between Baldies.

Walking down the rubbery walk that led to town center, Burkhalter grinned wryly and ran lean fingers through his well-kept wig. Strangers were very often suprised to know that he was a Baldy, a telepath. They looked at him with wondering eyes, too courteous to ask how it felt to be a freak, but obviously avid. Burkhalter, who knew diplomacy, would be quite willing to lead the conversation.

'My folks lived near Chicago after the Blowup. That was why.'

'Oh.' Stare. Td heard that was why so many——' Startled pause.

'Freaks or mutations. There were both. I still don't know which class I belong to,' he'd add disarmingly.

'You're no freak!' They didn't protest too much.

'Well, some mighty queer specimens came out of the radioactive-affected areas around the bomb-targets. Funny things happened to the germ plasm. Most of 'em died out; they couldn't reproduce; but you'll still find a few creatures in sanitariums— two heads, you know. And so on.'

Nevertheless they were always ill at ease. 'You mean you can read my mind—now?'

T could, but I'm not. It's hard work, except with another tele-path. And we Baldies—well, we don't, that's all.' A man with abnormal muscle development wouldn't go around knocking people down. Not unless he wanted to be mobbed. Baldies were always sneakingly conscious of a hidden peril: lynch law. And wise Baldies didn't even imply that they had an ... extra sense. They just said they were different, and let it go at that.

But one question was always implied, though not always men-

tioned. 'If I were a telepath, I'd ... how much do you make a year?'

They were surprised at the answer. A mindreader certainly could make a fortune, if he wanted. So why did Ed Burkhalter stay a semantics expert in Modoc Publishing Town, when a trip to one of the science towns would enable him to get hold of secrets that would get him a fortune?

There was a good reason. Self-preservation was a part of it. For which reason Burkhalter, and many like him, wore toupees. Though there were many Baldies who did not.

Modoc was a twin town with Pueblo, across the mountain barrier south of the waste that had been Denver. Pueblo held the presses, photolinotypes, and the machines that turned scripts into books, after Modoc had dealt with them. There was a helicopter distribution fleet at Pueblo, and for the last week Oldfield, the manager, had been demanding the manuscript of 'Psychohistory,' turned out by a New Yale man who had got tremendously involved in past emotional problems, to the detriment of literary clarity. The truth was that he distrusted Burkhalter. And Burkhalter, neither a priest nor a psychologist, had to become both without admitting it to the confused author of 'Psychohistory.'

The sprawling buildings of the publishing house lay ahead and below, more like a resort than anything more utilitarian. That had been necessary. Authors were peculiar people, and often it was necessary to induce them to take hydrotherapic treatments before they were in shape to work out their books with the semantic experts. Nobody was going to bite them, but they didn't realize that, and either cowered in corners, terrified, or else blustered their way around, using language few could understand. Jem Quayle, author of 'Psychohistory,' fitted into neither group; he was simply baffled by the intensity of his own research. His personal history had qualified him too well for emotional involvements with the past—and that was a serious matter when a thesis of this particular type was in progress.

Dr. Moon, who was on the Board, sat near the south entrance, eating an apple which he peeled carefully with his silver-hiked dagger. Moon was fat, short, and shapeless; he didn't have much hair, but he wasn't telepath; Baldies were entirely hairless. He gulped and waved at Burkhalter.

'Ed . . . *urp* . . . want to talk to you."

'Sure,' Burkhalter said, agreeably coming to a standstill arid rocking on his heels.

Ingrained habit made him sit down beside the Boardman; Baldies, for obvious reasons, never stood up when non-telepaths were sitting. Their eyes met now on the same level. Burkhalter said, 'What's up?'

'The store got some Shasta apples flown in yesterday. Better

tell Ethel to get some before they're sold out. Here.' Moon watched his companion eat a chunk, and nod.

'Good. I'll have her get some. The copter's laid up for today, though; Ethel pulled the wrong gadget.'

'Foolproof,' Moon said bitterly. 'Huron's turning out some sweet models these days; I'm getting my new one from Michigan. Listen, Pueblo called me this morning on Quayle's book.'

'Oldfield?'

'Our boy,' Moon nodded. 'He says can't you send over even a few chapters.'

Burkhalter shook his head. 'I don't think so. There are some abstracts right in the beginning that just have to be clarified, and Quayle is——' He hesitated.

'What?'

Burkhalter thought about the Oedipus complex he'd uncovered in Quayle's mind, but that was sacrosanct, even though it kept Quayle from interpreting Darius with cold logic. 'He's got muddy thinking in there. I can't pass it; I tried it on three readers yesterday, and got different reactions from all of them. So far "Psychohistory" is all things to all men. The critics would lambaste us if we released the book as it is. Can't you string Oldfield along for a while longer?'

'Maybe,' Moon said doubtfully. 'I've got a subjective novella I could rush over. It's light vicarious eroticism, and that's harmless; besides, it's semantically O.K.'d. We've been holding it up for an artist, but I can put Duman on it. I'll do that, yeah. I'll shoot the script over to Pueblo and he can make the plates later. A merry life we lead, Ed.'

'A little too merry sometimes,' Burkhalter said. He got up, nodded, and went in search of Quayle, who was relaxing on one of the sun decks.

Quayle was a thin, tall man with a worried face and the abstract air of an unshelled tortoise. He lay on his flexiglass couch, direct sunlight toasting him from above, while the reflected rays sneaked up on him from below, through the transparent crystal. Burkhalter pulled off his shirt and dropped on a sunner beside Quayle. The author glanced at Burkhalter's hairless chest and half-formed revulsion rose in him: *A Baldy ...* no *privacy . . . none of his business . . . fake eyebrows and lashes; he's still a——*

Something ugly, at that point.

Diplomatically Burkhalter touched a button, and on a screen overhead a page of 'Psychohistory' appeared, enlarged and easily readable. Quayle scanned the sheet. It had code notations on it, made by the readers, recognized by Burkhalter as varied reactions to what should have been straight-line explanations. If three readers had got three different meanings out of that paragraph— well, what *did* Quayle mean? He reached delicately into the mind, conscious of useless guards erected against intrusion, mud

barricades over which his mental eye stole like a searching, quiet wind. No ordinary man could guard his mind against a Baldy. But Baldies could guard their

privacy against intrusion by other telepaths—adults, that is. There was a psychic selector band,

Here it came. But muddled a bit. *Darius:* that wasn't simply a word; it wasn't a picture, either; it was really a second *life.* But scattered, fragmentary. Scraps of scent and sound, and memories, and emotional reactions. Admiration and hatred. A burning impotence. A black tornado, smelling of pine, roaring across a map of Europe and Asia. Pine scent stronger now, and horrible humiliation, and remembered pain . . . eyes . . . *Get out!*

Burkhalter put down the dictograph mouthpiece and lay looking up through the darkened eye-shells he had donned. T got out as soon as you warned me to,' he said. T'm still out.'

Quayle lay there, breathing hard. 'Thanks,' he said. 'Apologies. Why you don't ask a duello———'

'I don't want to duel with you,' Burkhalter said. 'I've never put blood on my dagger in my life. Besides, I can see your side of it. Remember, this is my job, Mr. Quayle, and I've learned a lot of things—that I've forgotten again.'

'It's intrusion; I suppose. I tell myself that it doesn't matter, but my privacy—is important.'

Burkhalter said patiently, 'We can keep trying it from different angles until we find one that isn't too private. Suppose, for example, I asked you if you admired Darius.'

Admiration . . . and pine scent . . . and Burkhalter said quickly, T'm out. O.K.?' s,

'Thanks,' Quayle muttered. He turned on his side, away from the other man. After a moment he said, 'That's silly—turning over, I mean. You don't have to see my face to know what I'm thinking.'

'You have to put out the welcome mat before I walk in,' Burkhalter told him.

'I guess I believe that. I've met some Baldies, though, that were . . . that I didn't like.'

"There's a lot on that order, sure. I know the type. The ones who don't wear wigs.'

Quayle said, 'They'll read your mind and embarrass you just for the fun of it. They ought to be—taught better.'

Burkhalter blinked in the sunlight. 'Well, Mr. Quayle, it's this way. A Baldy's got his problems, too. He's got to orient himself to a world that isn't telepathic; and I suppose a lot of Baldies rather feel that they're letting their specialization go to waste There *are* jobs a man like me is suited for———'

'Man!' He caught the scrap of thought from Quayle. He ig nored it, his face as always a mobile mask, and went on.

'Semantics have always been a problem, even in countries speaking only one tongue. A qualified Baldy is a swell interpreter. And, though there aren't any Baldies on the detective forces, they often work with the police. It's rather like being a machine that can do only a few things.'

'A few things more than humans can,' Quayle said.

Sure, Burkhalter thought, if we could compete on equal footing with nontelepathic humanity. But would blind men trust one who could see? Would they play poker with him? A sudden, deep bitterness put an unpleasant taste in Burkhalter's mouth. What was the answer? Reservations for Baldies? Isolation? And would a nation of

blind men trust those with vision enough for that? Or would they be dusted off—the sure cure, the check-and-balance system that made war an impossibility.

He remembered when Red Bank had been dusted off, and maybe that had been justified. The town was getting too big for its boots, and personal dignity was a vital factor; you weren't willing to lose face as long as a dagger swung at your belt. Similarly, the thousands upon thousands of little towns that covered America, each with its peculiar speciality—helicopter manufacture for Huron and Michigan, vegetable farming for Conoy and Diego, textiles and education and art and machines—each little town had a wary eye on all the others. The science and research centers were a little larger; nobody objected to that, for technicians never made war except under pressure; but few of the towns held more than a few hundred families. It was check-and-balance in a most efficient degree; whenever a town showed signs of wanting to become a city—thence, a capital, thence, an imperialistic empire—it was dusted off. Though that had not happened for a long while. And Red Bank might have been a mistake.

Geopolitically k was a fine setup; sociologically it was acceptable, but brought necessary changes. There was subconscious swashbuckling. The rights of the individual had become more highly regarded as decentralization took place. And men learned.

They learned a monetary system based primarily upon barter. They learned to fly; nobody drove surface cars. They learned new things, but they did not forget the Blowup, and in secret places near every town were hidden the bombs that could utterly and fantastically exterminate a town, as such bombs had exterminated the cities during the Blowup.

And everybody knew how to make those bombs. They were beautifully, terribly simple. You could find the ingredients anywhere and prepare them easily. Then you could take your helicopter over a town, drop an egg overside—and perform an erasure.

Outside of the wilderness malcontents, the maladjusted people found in every race, nobody kicked. And the roaming tribes never

raided and never banded together in large groups—for fear of an erasure.

The artisans were maladjusted too, to some degree, but they weren't antisocial, so they lived where they wanted and painted, wrote, composed, and retreated into their own private worlds. The scientists, equally maladjusted in other lines, retreated to their slightly larger towns, banding together in small universes, and turned out remarkable technical achievements.

And the Baldies—found jobs where they could.

No non-telepath would have viewed the world environment quite as Burkhalter did. He was abnormally conscious of the human element, attaching a deeper, more profound significance to those human values, undoubtedly because he saw men in more than the ordinary dimensions. And also, in a way—and inevitably

—he looked at humanity from outside.

Yet he was human. The barrier that telepathy had raised made men suspicious of him, more so than if he had had two heads— then they could have pitied. As it was———

As it was, he adjusted the scanner until new pages of the typescript came

flickering into view above. 'Say when,' he told Quayle.

Quayle brushed back his gray hair. 'I feel sensitive all over,' he objected. 'After all, I've been under a considerable strain correlating my material.'

'Well, we can always postpone publication.' Burkhalter threw out the suggestion casually, and was pleased when Quayle didn't nibble. He didn't like to fail, either.

'No. No, I want to get the thing done now.'

'Mental catharsis———'

'Well, by a psychologist, perhaps. But not by——'

'—a Baldy. You know that a lot of psychologists have Baldy helpers. They get good results, too.'

Quayle turned on the tobacco smoke, inhaling slowly. 'I suppose .. . I've not had much contact with Baldies. Or too much

—without selectivity. I saw some in an asylum once. I'm not being offensive, ami?'

'No,' Burkhalter said. 'Every mutation can run too close to the line. There were lots of failures. The hard radiations brought about one true mutation: hairless telepaths, but they didn't all hew true to the line. The mind's a queer gadget—you know that. It's a colloid balancing, figuratively, on the point of a pin. If there's any flaw, telepathy's apt to bring it out. So you'll find that the Blowup caused a hell of a lot of insanity. Not only among the Baldies, but among the other mutations that developed then. Except that the Baldies are almost always paranoidal.'

'And dementia praecox,' Quayle said, finding relief from his own embarrassment in turning the spotlight on Burkhalter.

'And d.p. Yeah. When a confused mind acquires the telepathic instinct—a hereditary bollixed mind—it can't handle it all. There's disorientation. The paranoia group retreat into their own worlds, and the d.p.'s simply don't realize that *this* world exists. There are distinctions, but I think that's a valid basis.'

'In a way,' Quayle said, 'it's frightening. I can't think of any historical parallel.'

'No.'

'What do you think the end of it will be?'

'I don't know,' Burkhalter said thoughtfully. 'I think we'll be assimilated. There hasn't been enough time yet. We're specialized in a certain way, and we're useful in certain jobs.'

'If you're satisfied to stay there. The Baldies who won't wear wigs———'

'They're so bad-tempered I expect they'll all be killed off in duels eventually,' Burkhalter smiled. 'No great loss. The rest of us, we're getting what we want—acceptance. We don't have horns or halos.'

Quayle shook his head. 'I'm glad, I think, that I'm not a tele-path. The mind's mysterious enough anyway, without new doors opening. Thanks for letting me talk. I think I've got part of it talked out, anyway. Shall we try the script again?"

'Sure,' Burkhalter said, and again the procession of pages flickered on the screen above them. Quayle did seem less guarded; his thoughts were more lucid, and Burkhalter was able to get at the true meanings of many of the hitherto muddy statements. They worked easily, the telepath dictating rephrasings into his dictograph, and only twice did they have to hurdle emotional tangles. At noon they knocked off, and Burkhalter, with a friendy nod, took the dropper to his office,

where he found some calls listed on the visor. He ran off repeats, and a worried look crept into his blue eyes.

He talked with Dr. Moon in a booth at luncheon. The conversation lasted so long that only the induction cups kept the coffee hot, but Burkhalter had more than one problem to discuss. And he'd known Moon for a long time. The fat man was one of the few who were not, he thought, subconsciously repelled by the fact that Burkhalter was a Baldy.

'I've never fought a duel in my life, Doc. I can't afford to."

'You can't afford not to. You can't turn down the challenge, Ed. It isn't done.'

'But this fellow Reilly—I don't even know him.'

'I know of him,' Moon said. 'He's got a bad temper. Dueled a lot.'

Burkhalter slammed his hand down on the table. 'It's ridiculous. I won't do it!'

'Well,' Moon said practically, 'your wife can't fight him. And

if Ethel's been reading Mrs. Reilly's mind and gossiping, Reilly's got a case.'

'Don't you think we know the dangers of that?' Burkhalter asked in a low voice. 'Ethel doesn't go around reading minds any more than I do. It'd be fatal—for us. And for any other Baldy.'

'Not the hairless ones. The ones who won't wear wigs. They——'

'They're fools. And they're giving all the Baldies a bad name. Point one, Ethel doesn't read minds; she didn't read Mrs. Reilly's. Point two, she doesn't gossip.'

'La Reilly is obviously an hysterical type,' Moon said. 'Word got around about this scandal, whatever it was, and Mrs. Reilly remembered she'd seen Ethel lately. She's the type who needs a scapegoat anyway. I rather imagine she let word drop herself, and had to cover up so her husband wouldn't blame her.'

'I'm not going to accept Reilly's challenge,' Burkhalter said doggedly.

'You'll have to.'

'Listen, Doc, maybe——'

'What?[1]

'Nothing. An idea. It might work. Forget about that; I think I've, got the right answer. It's the only one, anyway. I can't afford a duel and that's flat.'

'You're not a coward.'

'There's one thing Baldies are afraid of,' Burkhalter said, 'and that's public opinion. I happen to know I'd kill Reilly. That's the reason why I've never dueled in my life.'

Moon drank coffee. 'Hm-m-m. I think——'

'Don't. There was something else. I'm wondering if I ought to send Al off to a special school.'

'What's wrong with the kid?'

'He's turning out to be a beautiful delinquent. His teacher called me this morning. The playback was something to hear. He's talking funny and acting funny. Playing nasty little tricks on his friends—if he has any left by now.'

'All kids are cruel.'

'Kids don't know what cruelty means. That's why they're cruel; they lack empathy. But Al's getting———' Burkhalter gestured helplessly. 'He's turning into a young tyrant. He doesn't seem to give a care about anything, according to his teacher.'

"That's not too abnormal, so far.'

'That's not the worst. He's become very egotistical. Too much so. I don't want him to turn into one of the wigless Baldies you were mentioning.' Burkhalter didn't mention the other possibility; paranoia, insanity.

'He must pick things up somewhere. At home? Scarcely, Ed. Where else does he go?'

'The usual places. He's got a normal environment.'

'I should think,' Moon said, 'that a Baldy would have unusual opportunities in training; a youngster. The mental rapport— eh?'

'Yeah. But—I don't know. The trouble is,' Burkhalter said almost inaudibly, T wish to God I wasn't different. We didn't ask to be telepaths. Maybe it's all very wonderful in the long run, but I'm one person, and I've got my own microcosm. People who deal in long-term sociology are apt to forget that. They can figure out the answers, but it's every individual man—or Baldy— who's got to fight his own personal battle while he's alive. And it isn't as clear-cut as a battle. It's worse; it's the necesssity of watching yourself every second, of fitting yourself into a world that doesn't want you.'

Moon looked uncomfortable. 'Are you being a little sorry for yourself, Ed?'

Burkhalter shook himself. T am, Doc. But I'll work it out.'

'We both will,' Moon said, but Burkhalter didn't really expect much help from him. Moon would be willing, but it was horribly different for an ordinary man to conceive that a Baldy was— the same. It was the difference that men looked for, and found.

Anyway, he'd have to settle matters before he saw Ethel again. He could easily conceal the knowledge, but she would recognize a mental barrier and wonder. Their marriage had been the more ideal because of the additional rapport, something that compensated for an inevitable, half-sensed estrangement from the rest of the world.

'How's "Psychohistory" going?' Moon asked after a while.

'Better than I expected. I've got a new angle on Quayle. If I talk about myself, that seems to draw him out. It gives him enough confidence to let him open his mind to me. We may have those first chapters ready for Oldfield, in spite of everything.'

'Good. Just the same, he can't rush us. If we've got to shoot out books that fast, we might as well go back to the days of semantic confusion. Which we won't!'

'Well,' Burkhalter said, getting up, 'I'll smoosh along. See you.'

'About Reilly——'

'Let it lay.' Burkhalter went out, heading for the address his visor had listed. He touched the dagger at his belt. Dueling wouldn't do for Baldies, but——

A greeting thought crept into his mind, and, under the arch that led into the campus, he paused to grin at Sam Shane, a New Orleans area Baldy who affected a wig of flaming red. They didn't bother to talk.

Personal question, involving mental, moral and physical well-being.

A satisfied glow. And you, Burkhalter? For an instant Burkhalter half-saw what the symbol of his name meant to Shane.

Shadow of trouble.

A warm, willing anxiousness to help. There was a bond between Baldies.

Burkhalter thought: But everywhere I'd go there'd be the same suspicion. We're freaks.

More so elsewhere, Shane thought. There are a lot of us in Modoc Town. People are invariably more suspicious where they're not in daily contact with—Us.

The boy———

I've trouble too, Shane thought. It's worried me. My two girls——

Delinquency?

Yes.

Common denominators?

Don't know. More than one of Us have had the same trouble with our kids.

Secondary characteristic of the mutation? Second generation emergence?

Doubtful, Shane thought, scowling in his mind, shading his concept with a wavering question. We'll think it over later. Must go.

Burkhalter sighed and went on his way. The houses were strung out around the central industry of Modoc, and he cut through a park toward his destination. It was a sprawling curved building, but it wasn't inhabited, so Burkhalter filed Reilly for future reference, and, with a glance at his timer, angled over a hillside toward the school. As he expected, it was recreation time, and he spotted Al lounging under a tree, some distance from his companions, who were involved in a pleasantly murderous game of Blowup.

He sent his thought ahead.

The Green Man had almost reached the top of the mountain. The hairy gnomes were pelting on his trail, most unfairly shooting sizzling light-streaks at their quarry, but the Green Man was agile enough to dodge. The rocks were leaning——

'Al.'

—inward, pushed by the gnomes, ready to———

'Al!' Burkhalter sent his thought with the word, jolting into the boy's mind, a trick he very seldom employed, since youth was practically defenseless against such invasion.

'Hello, Dad,' Al said, undisturbed. 'What's up?'

'A report from your teacher.'

'I didn't do anything.'

'She told me what it was. Listen, kid. Don't start getting any funny ideas in your head.'

'I'm not.'

'Do you think a Baldy is better or worse than a non-Baldy?'

Al moved his feet uncomfortably. He didn't answer.

'Well,' Burkhalter said, 'the answer is both and neither. And here's why. A Baldy can communicate mentally, but he lives in a world where most people can't.'

'They're dumb,' Al opined.

'Not so dumb, if they're better suited to their world than you are. You might as well say a frog's better than a fish because he's amphibian.' Burkhalter briefly amplified and explained the terms telepathically.

'Well ... oh, I get it, all right.'

'Maybe,' Burkhalter said slowly, 'what you need is a swift kick in the pants. The thought wasn't so hot. What was it again?'

Al tried to hide it, blanking out. Burkhalter began to lift the barrier, an easy matter

for him, but stopped. Al regarded his father in a most unfilial way—in fact, as a sort of boneless fish That had been clear.

'If you're so egotistical,' Burkhalter pointed out, 'maybe you can see it this way. Do you know why there aren't any Baldies in key positions?'

'Sure I do,' Al said unexpectedly. "They're afraid.'

'Of what, then?'

'The——' That picture had been very curious, a commingling of something vaguely familiar to Burkhalter. 'The non-Baldies.'

'Well, if we took positions where we could take advantage of our telepathic function, non-Baldies would be plenty envious— especially if we were successes. If a Baldy even invented a better mousetrap, plenty of people would say he'd stolen the idea from some non-Baldy's mind. You get the point?'

'Yes, Dad.' But he hadn't. Burkhalter sighed and looked up. He recognized one of Shane's girls on a nearby hillside, sitting alone against a boulder. There were other isolated figures here and there. Far to the east the snowy rampart of the Rockies made an irregular pattern against blue sky.

'Al,' Burkhalter said, T don't want you to get a chip on your shoulder. This is a pretty swell world, and the people in it are, on the whole, nice people. There's a law of averages. It isn't sensible for us to get too much wealth or power, because that'd militate against us—and we don't need it anyway. Nobody's poor. We find our work, we do it, and we're reasonably happy. We have some advantages non-Baldies don't have; in marriage, for example. Mental intimacy is quite as important as physical. But I don't want you to feel that being a Baldy makes you a god. It doesn't. I can still,' he added thoughtfully, 'spank it out of you, in case you care to follow out that concept in your mind at the moment.'

Al gulped and beat a hasty retreat. 'I'm sorry. I won't do it again.'

'And keep your hair on, too. Don't take your wig off in class. Use the stickum stuff in the bathroom closet.'

'Yes, but . . . Mr. Venner doesn't wear a wig.'

'Remind me to do some historical research with you on zoot-suiters,' Burkhalter said. 'Mr. Venner's wiglessness is probably his only virtue, if you consider it one.'

'He makes money.'

'Anybody would, in that general store of his. But people don't buy from him if they can help it, you'll notice. That's what I mean by a chip on your shoulder. He's got one. There are Baldies like Venner, Al, but you might, sometimes, ask the guy if he's happy. For your information, I am. More than Venner, anyway. Catch?'

'Yes, Dad.' Al seemed submissive, but it was merely that. Burkhalter, still troubled, nodded and walked away. As he passed near the Shane girl's boulder he caught a scrap:— *at the summit of the Glass Mountains, rolling rocks back at the gnomes until——*

He withdrew; it was an unconscious habit, touching minds that were sensitive, but with children it was definitely unfair. With adult Baldies it was simply the instinctive gesture of tipping your hat; one answered or one didn't. The barrier could be erected; there could be a blank-out; or there could be the direct snub of concentration on a single thought, private and not to be intruded on.

A copter with a string of gliders was coming in from the south: a freighter laden

with frozen foods from South America, to judge by the markings. Burkhalter made a note to pick up an Argentine steak. He'd got a new recipe he wanted to try out, a charcoal broil with barbecue sauce, a welcome change from the short-wave cooked meats they'd been having for a week. Tomatoes, chile, mm-m—what else? Oh, yes. The duel with Reilly. Burkhalter absently touched his dagger's hilt and made a small, mocking sound in his throat. Perhaps he was innately a pacifist. It was rather difficult to think of a duel seriously, even though everyone else did, when the details of a barbecue dinner were prosaic in his mind.

So it went. The tides of civilization rolled in century-long waves across the continents, and each particular wave, though conscious of its participation in the tide, nevertheless was more preoccupied with dinner. And, unless you happened to be a thousand feet tall, had the brain of a god and a god's lifespan, what was the difference? People missed a lot—people like Venner, who was certainly a crank, not batty enough to qualify for the asylum, but certainly a potential paranoid type. The man's refusal to wear a wig labeled him as an individualist, but as an exhibitionist, too. If he didn't feel ashamed of his hairlessness, why should he

bother to flaunt it? Besides, the man had a bad temper, and if people kicked him around, he asked for it by starting the kicking himself.

But as for Al, the kid was heading for something approaching delinquency. It couldn't be the normal development of childhood, Burkhalter thought. He didn't pretend to be an expert, but he was still young enough to remember his own formative years, and he had had more handicaps than Al had now; in those days, Baldies had been very new and very freakish. There'd been more than one movement to isolate, sterilize, or even exterminate the mutations.

Burkhalter sighed. If he had been born before the Blowup, it might have been different. Impossible to say. One could read history, but one couldn't live it. In the future, perhaps, there might be telepathic libraries in which that would be possible. So many opportunities, in fact—and so few that the world was ready to accept as yet. Eventually Baldies would not be regarded as freaks, and by that time real progress would be possible.

But people don't make history—Burkhalter thought. Peoples do that. Not the individual.

He stopped by Reilly's house again, and this time the man answered, a burly, freckled, squint-eyed fellow with immense hands and, Burkhalter noted, fine muscular co-ordination. He rested those hands on the Dutch door and nodded.

'Who's you, mister?'

'My name's Burkhalter.'

Comprehension and wariness leaped into Reilly's eyes. 'Oh. I see. You got my call?'

'I did,' Burkhalter said. 'I want to talk to you about it. May I come in?'

'O.K.' He stepped back, opening the way through a hall and into a spacious living-room, where diffused light filtered through glassy mosaic walls. 'Want to set the time?'

'I want to tell you you're wrong.'

'Now wait a minute,' Reilly said, patting the air. 'My wife's out now, but she gave me the straight of it. I don't like this business of sneaking into a man's mind; it's

crooked. You should have told *your* wife to mind her business—or keep her tongue quiet.'

Burkhalter said patiently, 'I give you in my word, Reilly, that Ethel didn't read your wife's mind.'

'Does she say so?'

'I ... well, I haven't asked her.'

'Yeah,' Reilly said with an air of triumph.

'I don't need to. I know her well enough. And . . . well, I'm Baldy myself.'

'I know you are,' Reilly said. Tor all I know, you may be reading my mind now.' He hesitated. 'Get out of my house. I

like my privacy. We'll meet at dawn tomorrow, if that's satisfactory with you. Now get out." He seemed to have something on his mind, some ancient memory, perhaps, that he didn't wish exposed.

Burkhalter nobly resisted the temptation. 'No Baldy would read——'

'Go on, get out!'

'Listen! You wouldn't have a chance in a duel with me!'

'Do you know how many notches I've got?' Reilly asked.

'Ever dueled a Baldy?'

'I'll cut the notch deeper tomorrow. Get out, d'you hear?'

Burkhalter, biting his lips, said, 'Man, don't you realize that in a duel I could read your mind?'

'I don't care . . . what?'

'I'd be half a jump ahead of you. No matter how instinctive your actions would be, you'd know them a split second ahead of time in your mind. And I'd know all your tricks and weaknesses, too. Your technique would be an open book to me. Whatever you thought of———'

'No.' Reilly shook his head. 'Oh, no. You're smart, but it's a phony set-up.'

Burkhalter hesitated, decided, and swung about, pushing a chair out of the way. 'Take out your dagger,' he said. 'Leave the sheath snapped on; I'll show you what I mean.'

Reilly's eyes widened. 'If you want it now——'

'I don't.' Burkhalter shoved another chair away. He undipped his dagger, sheath and all, from his belt, and made sure the little safety clip was in place. 'We've room enough here. Come on.'

Scowling, Reilly took out his own dagger, held it awkwardly, baffled by the sheath, and then suddenly feinted forward. But Burkhalter wasn't there; he had anticipated, and his own leather sheath slid up Reilly's belly.

'That,' Burkhalter said, 'would have ended the fight.'

For answer Reilly smashed a hard dagger-blow down, curving at the last moment into a throat-cutting slash. Burkhalter's free hand was already at his throat; his other hand, with the sheathed dagger, tapped Reilly twice over the heart. The freckles stood out boldly against the pallor of the larger man's face. But he was not yet ready to concede. He tried a few more passes, clever, well-trained cuts, and they failed, because Burkhalter had anticipated them. His left hand invariably covered the spot where Reilly had aimed, and which he never struck.

Slowly Reilly let his arm fall. He moistened his lips and swallowed. Burkhalter

busied himself reclipping his dagger in place.

'Burkhalter,' Reilly said, 'you're a devil.'

'Far from it. I'm just afraid to take a chance. Do you really think being a Baldy is a snap?'

'But, if you can read minds——'

'How long do you think I'd last if I did any dueling? It would be too much of a set-up. Nobody would stand for it, and I'd end up dead. I can't duel, because it'd be murder, and people would know it was murder. I've taken a lot of cracks, swallowed a lot of insults, for just that reason. Now, if you like, I'll swallow another and apologize. I'll admit anything you say. But I can't duel with you, Reilly.'

'No, I can see that. And—I'm glad you came over." Reilly was still white. Td have walked right into a set-up.'

'Not my set-up,' Burkhalter said. 'I wouldn't have dueled. Baldies aren't so lucky, you know. They've got handicaps—like this. That's why they can't afford to take chances and antagonize people, and why we never read minds, unless we're asked to do so.'

'It makes sense. More or less.' Reilly hesitated. 'Look, I withdraw that challenge. O.K.?'

'Thanks,' Burkhalter said, putting out his hand. It was taken rather reluctantly. 'We'll leave it at that, eh?'

'Right.' But Reilly was still anxious to get his guest out of the house.

Burkhalter walked back to the Publishing Center and whistled tunelessly. He could tell Ethel now; in fact, he had to, for secrets between them would have broken up the completeness of their telepathic intimacy. It was not that their minds lay bare to each other, it was, rather, that any barrier could be sensed by the other, and the perfect *rapport* wouldn't have been so perfect. Curiously, despite this utter intimacy, husband and wife managed to respect one another's privacy.

Ethel might be somewhat distressed, but the trouble had blown over, and, besides, she was a Baldy too. Not that she looked it, with her wig of fluffy chestnut hair and those long, curving lashes. But her parents had lived east of Seattle during the Blowup, and afterward, too, before the hard radiation's effects had been thoroughly studied.

The snow-wind blew down over Modoc and fled southward along the Utah Valley. Burkhalter wished he was in his copter, alone in the blue emptiness of the sky. There was a quiet, strange peace up there that no Baldy ever quite achieved on the earth's surface, except in the depths of a wilderness. Stray fragments of thoughts were always flying about, subsensory, but like the almost-unheard whisper of a needle on a phonograph record, never ceasing. That, certainly, was why almost all Baldies loved to fly and were expert pilots. The high waste deserts of the air were their blue hermitages.

Still, he was in Modoc now, and overdue for his interview with

Quayle. Burkhalter hastened his steps. In the main hall he met Moon, said briefly and cryptically that he'd taken care of the duel, and passed on, leaving the fat man to stare a question after him. The only visor call was from Ethel; the playback said she was worried about Al, and would Burkhalter check with the school. Well, he had already done se—unless the boy had managed to get into more trouble since then.

Burkhalter put in a call and reassured himself. Al was as yet unchanged.

He found Quayle in the same private solarium, and thirsty. Burkhalter ordered a couple of dramzowies sent up, sincere had no objection to loosening Quayle's inhibitions. The gray-haired author was immersed in a sectional historical globe map, illuminating each epochal layer in turn as he searced back through time.

'Watch this,' he said, running his hand along the row of buttons. 'See how the German border fluctuates?' It fluctuated, finally vanishing entirely as semimodern times were reached. 'And Portugal. Notice its zone of influence? Now——' The zone shrank steadily from 1600 on, while other countries shot out radiating lines and assumed sea power.

Burkhalter sipped his dramzowie. 'Not much of that now.'

'No, since . . . what's the matter?'

'How do you mean?'

'You look shot.'

'I didn't know I showed it,' Burkhalter said wryly. 'I just finagled my way out of a duel.'

'That's one custom I never saw much sense to,' Quayle said. 'What happened? Since when can you finagle out?'

Burkhalter explained, and the writer took a drink and snorted. 'What a spot for you. Being a Baldy isn't such an advantage after all, I guess.'

'It has distinct disadvantages at times.' On impulse Burkhalter mentioned his son. 'You see my point, eh? I don't *know,* really, what standards to apply to a young Baldy. He is a mutation, after all. And the telepathic mutation hasn't had time to work out yet. We can't rig up controls, because guinea pigs and rabbits won't breed telepaths. That's been tried, you know. And—well, the child of a Baldy needs very special training so he can cope with his ultimate maturity.'

'You seem to have adjusted well enough.'

'I've—learned. As most sensible Baldies have. That's why I'm not a wealthy man, or in politics. We're really buying safety for our species by foregoing certain individual advantages. Hostages to destiny—and destiny spares us. But we get paid too, in a way. In the coinage of future benefits—negative benefits, really, for we ask only to be spared and accepted—and so we have to deny ourselves a lot of present, positive benefits. An appeasement to fate.'

'Paying the piper,' Quayle nodded.

'We are the pipers. The Baldies as a group, I mean. And our children. So it balances; we're really paying ourselves. If I wanted to take unfair advantage of my telepathic power—my son wouldn't live very long. The Baldies would be wiped out. Al's got to learn that, and he's getting pretty antisocial.'

'All children are antisocial,' Quayle pointed out. 'They're utter individualists. I should think the only reason for worrying would be if the boy's deviation from the norm were connected with his telepathic sense.'

'There's something in that.' Burkhalter reached out left-handedly and probed delicately at Quayle's mind, noting that the antagonism was considerably lessened. He grinned to himself and went on talking about his own troubles. 'Just the same, the boy's father to die man. Arid an adult Baldy has got to be pretty well adjusted, or he's sunk.'

'Environment is as important as heredity. One complements the other. If a child's reared correctly, he won't have much trouble—unless heredity is involved.'

'As it may be. There's so little known about the telepathic mutation. If baldness is one secondary characteristic, maybe— something else—emerges in the diird or fourth generations. I'm wondering if telepathy is really good for the mind.'

Quayle said, 'Humph. Speaking personally, it makes me nervous———'

'Like Reilly.'

'Yes,' Quayle said, but he didn't care much for the comparison. 'Well—anyhow, if a mutation's a failure, it'll die out. It won't breed true.'

'What about hemophilia?'

'How many people have hemophilia?' Quayle asked. 'I'm trying to look at it from the angle of a psychohistorian. If there'd been telepaths in the past, things might have been different.'

'How do you know there weren't?' Burkhalter asked.

Quayle blinked. 'Oh. Well. That's true, too. In medieval times they'd have been called wizards—or saints. The Duke-Rhine experiments—but such accidents would have been abortive. Nature fools around trying to hit the ... ah ... the jackpot, and she doesn't always do it on the first try.'

'She may not have done it now.' That was habit speaking, the ingrained caution of modesty. 'Telepathy may be merely a semi-successful try at something pretty unimaginable. A sort of four-dimensional sensory concept, maybe.'

'That's too abstract for me.' Quayle was interested, and his own hesitancies had almost vanished; by accepting Burkhalter as a telepath, he had tacitly wiped away his objections to telepathy per se. 'The old-time Germans always had an idea they were

different; so did the ... ah ... what was that Oriental race? They had the islands off the China coast?'

'The Japanese,' said Burkhalter, who had a good memory for trifles.

'Yes. They knew, very definitely, that they were a superior race because they were directly descended from gods. They were short in stature; heredity made them self-conscious when dealing with larger races. But the Chinese aren't tall, the Southern Chinese, and they weren't handicapped in that way.'

'Environment, then?'

'Environment, which caused propaganda. The . . . ah .'. . die Japanese took Buddhism, and altered it completely into Shinto, to suit their own needs. The samurai, warrior-knights, were the ideals, the code of honor was fascinatingly cockeyed. The principle of Shinto was to worship your superiors and subjugate your inferiors. Ever seen the Japanese jewel-trees?'

T don't remember them. What are they?'

'Miniature replicas of espaliered trees, made of jewels, widi trinkets hanging on the branches. Including a mirror—always. The first jewel-tree was made to lure the Moon-goddess out of a cave where she was sulking. It seems the lady was so intrigued by the trinkets and by her face reflected in the mirror that she came out of her hideout. All the Japanese morals were dressed up in pretty clothes; that was the bait. The old-tune Germans did much die same thing. The last German dictator, Poor Hitler they called him—I forget why, but there was some reason—he revived the old Siegfried legend. It was racial paranoia. The Germans worshipped die

house-tyrant, not die mother, and diey had extremely strong family ties. That extended to the state. They symbolized Poor Hitler as their All-Father, and so eventually we got the Blowup. And, finally, mutations.'

'After the deluge, me,' Burkhalter murmured, finishing his dramzowie. Quayle was staring at nothing.

'Funny,' he said after a while. 'This All-Father business——'

'Yes?'

'I wonder if you know how powerfully it can affect a man?'

Burkhalter didn't say anything. Quayle gave him a sharp glance.

'Yes,' the writer said quietly. 'You're a man, after all. I owe you an apology, you know.'

Burkhalter smiled. 'You can forget that.'

'I'd radier not,' Quayle said. 'I've just realized, pretty suddenly, that the telepathic sense isn't so important. I mean—it doesn't make you *different.* I've been talking to you——'

'Sometimes it takes people years before they realize what you're finding out,' Burkhalter remarked. 'Years of living and working with something they think of as a Baldy.'

'Do you know what I've been concealing in my mind?' Quayle asked.

'No. I don't."

'You lie like a gentleman. Thanks. Well, here it is, and I'm telling you by choice, because I want to. I don't care if you got the information out of my mind already; I just want to tell you of my own free will. My father ... I imagine I hated him . . . was a tyrant, and I remember one time, when I was just a kid and we were in the mountains, he beat me and a lot of people were looking on. I've tried to forget that for a long time. Now'— Quayle shrugged—'it doesn't seem quite so important.'

Tm not a psychologist,' Burkhalter said. 'If you want my personal reaction, I'll just say that it doesn't matter. You're not a little boy any more, and the guy I'm talking to and working with is the adult Quayle.'

'Hm-m-m. Ye-es. I suppose I knew that all along—how unimportant it was, really. It was simply having my privacy violated. ... I think I know you better now, Burkhalter. You can—walk in.'

'We'll work better,' Burkhalter said, grinning. 'Especially with Darius.'

Quayle said, 'I'll try not to keep any reservation in my mind. Frankly, I won't mind telling you—the answers. Even when they're personal.'

'Check on that. D'you want to tackle Darius now?"

'O.K.,' Quayle said, and his eyes no longer held suspicious wariness. 'Darius I identify with my father——'

It was smooth and successful. That afternoon they accomplished more than they had during the entire previous fortnight. Warm with satisfaction on more than one point, Burkhalter stopped off to tell Dr. Moon that matters were looking up, and then set out toward home, exchanging thoughts with a couple of Baldies, his co-workers, who were knocking off for the day. The Rockies were bloody with the western light, and the coolness of the wind was pleasant on Burkhalter's cheeks, as he hiked homeward.

It was fine to be accepted. It proved that it could be done. And a Baldy often

needed reassurance, in a world peopled by suspicious strangers. Quayle had been a hard nut to crack, but— Burkhalter smiled.

Ethel would be pleased. In a way, she'd had a harder time than he'd ever had. A woman would, naturally. Men were desperately anxious to keep their privacy unviolated by a woman, and as for non-Baldy women—well, it spoke highly for Ethel's glowing personal charm that she had finally been accepted by the clubs and feminine groups of Modoc. Only Burkhalter knew Ethel's desperate hurt at being bald, and not even her husband had ever seen her unwigged.

His thought reached out before him into the low, double-winged house on the hillside, and interlocked with hers in a warm intimacy. It was something more than a kiss. And, as always, there was the exciting sense of expectancy, mounting and mounting till the last door swung open and they touched physically. *This,* he thought, *is why I was born a Baldy; this is worth losing worlds for.*

At dinner that rapport spread out to embrace Al, an intangible, deeply-rooted something that made the food taste better and the water like wine. The word *home,* to telepaths, had a meaning that non-Baldies could not entirely comprehend, 'for it embraced a bond they could not know. There were small, intangible caresses.

Green Man going down the Great Red Slide; the Shaggy Dwarfs trying to harpoon him as he goes.

'Al,' Ethel said, 'are you still working on your Green Man?'

Then something utterly hateful and cold and deadly quivered silently in the air, like an icicle jaggedly smashing through golden, fragile glass. Burkhalter dropped his napkin and looked up, profoundly shocked. He felt Ethel's thought shrink back, and swiftly reached out to touch and reassure her with mental contact. But across the table the little boy, his cheeks still round with the fat of babyhood, sat silent and wary, realizing he had blundered, and seeking safety in complete immobility. His mind was too weak to resist probing, he knew, and he remained perfectly still, waiting, while the echoes of a thought hung poisonously in silence.

Burkhalter said, 'Come on, Al.' He stood up. Ethel started to speak.

'Wait, darling. Put up a barrier. Don't listen in.' He touched her mind gently and tenderly, and then he took Al's hand and drew the boy after him out into the yard. Al watched his father out of wide, alert eyes.

Burkhalter sat on a bench and put Al beside him. He talked audibly at first, for clarity's sake, and for another reason. It was distinctly unpleasant to trick the boy's feeble guards down, but it was necessary.

'That's a very queer way to think of your mother,' he said. 'It's a queer way to think of me.' Obscenity is more obscene, profanity more profane, to a telepathic mind, but this had been neither one. It had been—cold and malignant.

And this is flesh of my flesh, Burkhalter thought, looking at the boy and remembering the eight years of his growth. *Is the mutation to turn into something devilish?*

Al was silent.

Burkhalter reached into the young mind. Al tried to twist free and escape, but his father's strong hands gripped him. Instinct, not reasoning, on the boy's part, for minds can touch over long distances.

He did not like to do this, for increased sensibility had gone with sensitivity, and

violations are always violations. But ruthless-ness was required. Burkhalter searched. Sometimes he threw key words violently at Al, and surges of memory pulsed up in response.

In the end, sick and nauseated, Burkhalter let Al go and sat alone on the bench, watching the red light die on the snowy peaks. The whiteness was red-stained. But it was not too late. The man was a fool, had been a fool from the beginning, or he would have known the impossibility of attempting such a thing as this.

The conditioning had only begun. Al could be reconditioned. Burkhalter's eyes hardened. And would be. *And would be.* But not yet, not until the immediate furious anger had given place to sympathy and understanding.

Not yet.

He went into the house, spoke briefly to Ethel, and televised the dozen Baldies who worked with him in the Publishing Center. Not all of them had families, but none was missing when, half an hour later, they met in the back room of the Pagan Tavern downtown. Sam Shane had caught a fragment of Burkhalter's knowledge, and all of them read his emotions. Welded into a sympathetic unit by their telepathic sense, they waited till Burkhalter was ready.

Then he told them. It didn't take long, via thought. He told them about the Japanese jewel-tree with its glittering gadgets, a shining lure. He told them of racial paranoia and propaganda. And that the most effective propaganda was sugar-coated, disguised so that the motive was hidden.

A Green Man, hairless, heroic—symbolic of a Baldy.

And wild, exciting adventures, the lure to catch the young fish whose plastic minds were impressionable enough to be led along the roads of dangerous madness. Adult Baldies could listen, but they did not; young telepaths had a higher threshold of mental receptivity, and adults do not read the books of their children except to reassure themselves that there is nothing harmful in the pages. And no adult would bother to listen to the Green Man mindcast. Most of them had accepted it as the original daydream of their own children.

'I did,' Shane put in. 'My girls——'

'Trace it back,' Burkhalter said. 'I did.'

The dozen minds reached out on the higher frequency, the children's wavelength, and something jerked away from them, startled and apprehensive.

'He's the one," Shane nodded.

They did not need to speak. They went out of the Pagan Tavern in a compact, ominous group, and crossed the street to the

general store. The door was locked. Two of the men burst it open with their shoulders.

They went through the dark store and into a back room where a man was standing beside an overturned chair. His bald skull gleamed in an overhead light. His mouth worked impotently.

His thought pleaded with them—was driven back by an implacable deadly wall.

Burkhalter took out his dagger. Other slivers of steel glittered for a little while———

And were quenched.

Venning's scream had long since stopped, but his dying thought of agony lingered

within Burkhalter's mind as he walked homeward. The wigless Baldy had not been insane, no. But he had been paranoidal.

What he had tried to conceal, at the last, was quite shocking. A tremendous, tyrannical egotism, and a furious hatred of non-telepaths. A feeling of self-justification that was, perhaps, insane. *And—we are the Future! The Baldies! God made us to rule lesser men!*

Burkhalter sucked in his breath, shivering. The mutation had not been entirely successful. One group had adjusted, the Baldies who wore wigs and had become fitted to their environment. One group had been insane, and could be discounted; they were in asylums.

But the middle group were merely paranoid. They were not insane, and they were not sane. They wore no wigs.

Like Yenning.

And Yenning had sought disciples. His attempt had been foredoomed to failure, but he had been one man.

One Baldy—paranoid.

There were others, many others.

Ahead, nestled into the dark hillside, was the pale blotch that marked Burkhalter's home. He sent his thought ahead, and it touched Ethel's and paused very briefly to reassure her.

Then it thrust on, and went into the sleeping mind of a little boy who, confused and miserable, had finally cried himself to sleep. There were only dreams in that mind now, a little discolored, a little stained, but they could be cleansed. And would be.

THE PIPER'S SON

THE Green Man was climbing the glass mountains, and hairy, gnomish faces peered at him from crevices. This was only another step in the Green Man's endless, exciting odyssey. He'd had a great many adventures already—in the Flame Country, among the Dimension Changers, with the City Apes 'who sneered endlessly while their blunt, clumsy fingers fumbled at deathrays. The trolls, however, were masters of magic, and were trying to stop the Green Man with spells. Little whirlwinds of force spun underfoot, trying to trip the Green Man, a figure of marvelous muscular development, handsome as a god, and hairless from head to foot, glistening pale green. The whirlwinds formed a fascinating pattern. If you could thread a precarious path among them—avoiding the pale yellow ones especially—you could get through.

And the hairy gnomes watched malignantly, jealously, from their crannies in the glass crags.

Al Burkhalter, having recently achieved the mature status of eight full years, lounged under a tree and masticated a grass blade. He was so immersed in his daydreams that his father had to nudge his side gently to bring comprehension into the half-closed eyes. It was a good day for dreaming, anyway—a hot sun and a cool wind blowing down from the white Sierra peaks to the east. Timothy grass sent its faintly musty fragrance along the channels of air, and Ed Burkhalter was

glad that his son was second-generation since the Blowup. He himself had been born ten years after the last bomb had been dropped, but secondhand memories can be pretty bad too.

"Hello, Al," he said, and the youth vouchsafed a half-lidded glance of tolerant acceptance.

"Hi, Dad."

"Want to come downtown with me?"

"Nope," Al said, relaxing instantly into his stupor.

Burkhalter raised a figurative eyebrow and half turned. On an impulse, then, he did something he rarely did without the tacit permission of the other party; he used his telepathic

power to reach into Al's mind. There was, he admitted to himself, a certain hesitancy, a subconscious unwillingness on his part, to do this, even though Al had pretty well outgrown the nasty, inhuman formlessness of mental babyhood. There had been a time when Al's mind had been quite shocking in its alienage. Burkhalter remembered a few abortive experiments he had made before Al's birth; few fathers-to-be could resist the temptation to experiment with embryonic brains, and that had brought back nightmares Burkhalter had not had since his youth. There had been enormous rolling masses, and an appalling vastness, and other things. Prenatal memories were ticklish, and should be left to .qualified mnemonic psychologists.

But now Al was maturing, and daydreaming, as usual, in bright colors. Burkhalter, reassured, felt that he had fulfilled his duty as a monitor and left his son still eating grass and ruminating.

Just the same there was a sudden softness inside of him, and the aching, futile pity he was apt to feel for helpless things that were as yet unqualified for conflict with that extraordinarily complicated business of living. Conflict, competition, had not died out when war abolished itself; the business of adjustment even to one's surroundings was a conflict, " and conversation a duel. With Al, too, there was a double problem. Yes, language was in effect a tariff wall, and a Baldy could appreciate that thoroughly, since the wall didn't exist between Baldies.

Walking down the rubbery walk that led to town center, Burkhalter grinned wryly and ran lean fingers through his well-kept wig. Strangers were very often surprised to know that he was a Baldy, a telepath. They looked at him with wondering eyes, too courteous to ask how it felt to be a freak, but obviously avid. Burkhalter, who knew diplomacy, would be quite willing to lead the conversation.

"My folks lived near Chicago after the Blowup. That was why."

"Oh." Stare. "I'd heard that was why so many—" Startled pause.

"Freaks or mutations. There were both. I still don't know which class I belong to," he'd add disarmingly.

"You're no freak!" They did protest too much.

"Well, some mighty queer specimens came out of the radio-active-affected areas around the bomb-targets. Funny things happened to the germ plasm. Most of 'em died out; they

couldn't reproduce; but you'll still find a few creatures in sanitariums—two heads, you know. And so on."

Nevertheless they were always ill-at-ease. "You mean you can read my mind—now?"

"I could, but I'm not. It's hard work, except with another telepath. And we Baldies—well, we don't, that's all." A man with abnormal muscle development wouldn't go around knocking people down. Not unless he wanted to be mobbed. Baldies were always sneakingly conscious of a hidden peril: lynch law. And wise Baldies didn't even imply that they had an... extra sense. They just said they were different, and let it go at that.

But one question was always implied, though not always mentioned. "If I were a telepath, I'd... how much do you make a year?"

They were surprised at the answer. A mindreader certainly could make a fortune, if he wanted. So why did Ed Burkhalter stay a semantics expert in Modoc Publishing Town, when a trip to one of the science towns would enable him to get hold of secrets that would get him a fortune?

There was a good reason. Self-preservation was part of it. For which reason Burkhalter, and many like him, wore toupees. Though there were many Baldies who did not.

Modoc was a twin town with Pueblo, across the mountain barrier south of the waste that had been Denver. Pueblo held the presses, photolinotypes, and the machines that turned scripts into books, after Modoc had dealt with them. There was a helicopter distribution fleet at Pueblo, and for the last week Oldfield, the manager, had been demanding the manuscript of "Psychohistory," turned out by a New Yale man who had got tremendously involved in past emotional problems, to the detriment of literary clarity. The truth was that he distrusted Burkhalter. And Burkhalter, neither a priest nor a psychologist, had to become both without admitting it to the confused author of "Psychohistory."

The sprawling buildings of the publishing house lay ahead and below, more like a resort than anything more utilitarian. That had been necessary. Authors were peculiar people, and often it was necessary to induce them to take hydrotherapic treatments before they were in shape to work out their books with the semantic experts. Nobody was going to bite them, but they didn't realize that, and either cowered in corners, terrified, or else blustered their way around, using

*language few could understand. Jem Quayle, author of "Psy-chohistory," fitted into neither group; he was simply baffled by the intensity of his own research. His personal history had qualified him too well for emotional involvements with the past—and that was a serious matter when a thesis of this particular type was in progress. **

Dr. Moon, who was on the Board, sat near the south entrance, eating an apple which he peeled carefully with his silver-hilted dagger. Moon was fat, short, and shapeless; he didn't have much hair, but he wasn't a telepath; Baldies were entirely hairless. He gulped and waved at Burkhalter.

"Ed ... urp... *want to talk to you."*

"Sure," Burkhalter said, agreeably coming to a standstill and rocking on his heels. Ingrained habit made him sit down beside the Boardman; Baldies, for obvious reasons, never stood up when non-telepaths were sitting. Their eyes met now on the same level. Burkhalter said, "What's up?"

"The store got some Shasta apples flown in yesterday. Better tell Ethel to get some before they're sold out. Here." Moon watched his companion eat a chunk, and nod.

"Good. I'll have her get some. The copter's laid up for today, though; Ethel pulled the wrong gadget."

"Foolproof," Moon said bitterly. "Huron's turning out some sweet models these days; I'm getting my new one from Michigan. Listen, Pueblo called me this morning on Quayle's book."

"Oldfield?"

"Our boy," Moon nodded. "He says can't you send over even a few chapters."

Burkhalter shook his head. "I don't think so. There are some abstracts right in the beginning that just have to be clarified, and Quayle is—" He hesitated.

"What?"

Burkhalter thought about the Oedipus complex he'd uncovered in Quayle's mind, but that was sacrosanct, even though it kept Quayle from interpreting Darius with cold logic. "He's got muddy thinking in there. I can't pass it; I tried it on three readers yesterday, and got different reactions from all of them. So far 'Psychohistory' is all things to all men. The critics would lambaste us if we released the book as is. Can't you string Oldfield along for a while longer?"

"Maybe," Moon said doubtfully. "I've got a subjective novella I could rush over. It's light vicarious eroticism, and that's harmless; besides, it's semantically O.K.'d. We've been

holding it up for an artist, but I can put Duman on it. I'll do that, yeah. I'll shoot the script over to Pueblo and he can make the plates later. A merry life we lead, Ed."

"A little too merry sometimes," Burkhalter said. He got up, nodded, and went in search of Quayle, who was relaxing on one of the sun decks.

Quayle was a thin, tall man with a worried face and the abstract air of an unshelled tortoise. He lay on his flexiglass couch, direct sunlight toasting him from above, while the reflected rays sneaked up on him from below, through the transparent crystal. Burkhalter pulled off his shirt and dropped on a sunner beside Quayle. The author glanced at Burkhalter's hairless chest and half-formed revulsion rose in him: A Baldy ... *no* privacy ... none of his business ... fake eyebrows and lashes; he's still a—

Something ugly, at that point.

Diplomatically Burkhalter touched a button, and on a screen overhead a page of "Psychohistory" appeared, enlarged and easily readable. Quayle scanned the sheet. It had code notations on it, made by the readers, recognized by Burkhalter as varied reactions to what should have been straight-line explanations. If three readers had got three different meanings out of that paragraph—well, what did *Quayle mean? He reached delicately into the mind, conscious of useless guards erected against intrusion, * mud barricades over which his mental eye stole like a searching, quiet wind. No ordinary man could guard his mind against a Baldy. But Baldies could guard their privacy against intrusion by other telepaths —adults, that is. There was a psychic selector band, a—*

Here it came. But muddled a bit. Darius: *that wasn't simply a word; it wasn't a*

picture, either; it was really a second life. *But scattered, fragmentary. Scraps of scent and sound, and memories, and emotional reactions. Admiration and hatred. A burning impotence. A black tornado, smelling of pine, roaring across a map of Europe and Asia. Pine scent stronger now, and horrible humiliation, and remembered pain ... eyes ...* Get out!

Burkhalter put down the dictograph mouthpiece and lay looking up through the darkened eye-shells he had donned. "I got out as soon as you wanted me to," he said. "I'm still out."

Quayle lay there, breathing hard. "Thanks," he said. "Apologies. Why you don't ask a duello—"

"I don't want to duel with you," Burkhalter said. "I've

never put blood on my dagger in my life. Besides, I can see your side of it. Remember, this is my job, Mr. Quayle, and I've learned a lot of things—that I've forgotten again."

"It's intrusion, I suppose. I tell myself that it doesn't matter, but my privacy—is important."

Burkhalter said patiently, "We can keep trying it from different angles until we find one that isn't too private. Suppose, for example, I asked you if you admired Darius."

Admiration ... and pine scent... and Burkhalter said quickly, "I'm out. O.K.?"

"Thanks," Quayle muttered. He turned on his side, away from the other man. After a moment he said, "That's silly— turning over, I mean. You don't have to see my face to know what I'm thinking."

"You have to put out the welcome mat before I walk in," Burkhalter told him.

"I guess I believe that. I've met some Baldies, though, that were... that I didn't like."

"There's a lot on that order, sure. I know the type. The ones who don't wear wigs."

Quayle said, "They'll read your mind and embarrass you just for the fun of it. They ought to be—taught better."

Burkhalter blinked in the sunlight. "Well, Mr. Quayle, it's this way. A Baldy's got his problems, too. He's got to orient himself to a world that isn't telepathic; and I suppose a lot of Baldies rather feel that they're letting their specialization go to waste. There are *jobs a man like me is suited for—"*

"Man!" *He caught the scrap of thought from Quayle. He ignored it, his face as always a mobile mask, and went on.*

"Semantics have always been a problem, even in countries speaking only one tongue. A qualified Baldy is a swell interpreter. And, though there aren't any Baldies on the detective forces, they often work with the police. It's rather like being a machine that can do only a few things."

"A few things more than humans can," Quayle said.

Sure, Burkhalter thought, if we could compete on equal footing with nontelepathic humanity. But would blind men trust one who could see? Would they play poker with him? A sudden, deep bitterness put an unpleasant taste in Burk-halter's mouth. What was the answer? Reservations for Baldies? Isolation? And would a nation of blind men trust those with vision enough for that? Or

would they be dusted

off—the sure cure, the check-and-balance system that made war an impossibility.

He remembered when Red Bank had been dusted off, and maybe that had been justified. The town was getting too big for its boots, and personal dignity was a vital factor; you weren't willing to lose face as long as a dagger swung at your belt. Similarly, the thousands upon thousands of little towns that covered America, each with its pecular specialty —helicopter manufacture for Huron and Michigan, vegetable farming for Conoy and Diego, textiles and education and art and machines—each little town had a wary eye on all the others. The science and research centers were a little larger; nobody objected to that, for technicians never made war except under pressure; but few of the towns held more than a few hundred families. It was check-and-balance in most efficient degree; whenever a town showed signs of wanting to become a city—thence, a capital, thence, an imperialistic empire—it was dusted off. Though that had not- happened for a long while. And Red Bank might have been a mistake.

Geopolitically it was a fine set-up; sociologically it was acceptable, but brought necessary changes. There was subconscious swashbuckling. The rights of the individual had become more highly regarded as decentralization took place. And men learned.

They learned a monetary system based primarily upon barter. They learned to fly; nobody drove surface cars. They learned new things, but they did not forget the Blowup, and in secret places near every town were hidden the bombs that could utterly and fantastically exterminate a town, as such bombs had exterminated the cities during the Blowup.

And everybody knew how to make those bombs. They were beautifully, terribly simple. You could find the ingredients anywhere and prepare them easily. Then you could take your helicopter over a town, drop an egg overside—and perform an erasure.

Outside of the wilderness malcontents, the maladjusted people found in every race, nobody kicked. And the roaming tribes never raided and never banded together in large groups—for fear of an erasure.

The artisans were maladjusted too, to some degree, but they weren't antisocial, so they lived where they wanted and painted, wrote, composed, and retreated into their own private worlds. The scientists, equally maladjusted in other lines, retreated to their slightly larger towns, banding together in

small universes, and turned out remarkable technical achievements.

And the Baldies—found jobs where they could.

No nontelepath would have viewed the world environment quite as Burkhalter did: He was abnormally conscious of the human element, attaching a deeper, more profound significance to those human values, undoubtedly because he saw men in more than the ordinary dimensions. And also, in a way—and inevitably—he looked at humanity from outside.

Yet he was human. The barrier that telepathy had raised made men suspicious of him, more so than if he had had two heads—then they could have pitied. As it was—

As it was, he adjusted the scanner until new pages of the typescript came flickering into view above. "Say when," he told Quayle.

Quayle brushed back his gray hair. "I feel sensitive all over," he objected. "After all, I've been under a considerable strain correlating my material."

"Well, we can always postpone publication." Burkhalter threw out the suggestion casually, and was pleased when Quayle didn't nibble. He didn't like to fail, either.

"No. No, I want to get the thing done now."

"Mental catharsis—" •>•

"Well, by a psychologist, perhaps. But not by—"

"—a Baldy. You know that a lot of psychologists have Baldy helpers. They get good results, too."

Quayle turned on the tobacco smoke, inhaling slowly. "I suppose... I've not had much contact with Baldies. Or too much—without selectivity. I saw some in an asylum once. I'm not being offensive, am I?"

"No," Burbhalter said. "Every mutation can run too close to the line. There were lots of failures. The hard radiations brought about one true mutation: hairless telepaths, but they didn't all hew true to the line. The mind's a queer gadget—you know that. It's a colloid balancing, figuratively, on the point of a pin. If there's any flaw, telepathy's apt to bring it out. So you'll find that the Blowup caused a hell of a lot of insanity. Not only among the Baldies, but among the other mutations that developed then. Except that the Baldies are almost always paranoidal."

"And dementia praecox," Quayle said, finding relief from his own embarrassment in turning the spotlight on Burkhalter.

"And d. p. Yeah. When a confused mind acquires the tele-

pathic instinct—a hereditary bollixed mind—it can't handle it all. There's disorientation. The paranoia group retreat into their own private worlds, and the d. p.'s simply don't realize that this *world exists. There are distinctions, but I think that's a valid basis."*

"In a way," Quayle said, "it's frightening. I can't think of any historical parallel."

"No."

"What do you think the end of it will be?"

"I don't know," Burkhalter said thoughtfully. "I think we'll be assimilated. There hasn't been enough time yet. We're specialized in a certain way, and we're useful in certain jobs."

"If you're satisfied to stay there. The Baldies who won't wear wigs—"

"They're so bad-tempered I expect they'll all be killed off in duels eventually," Burkhalter smiled. "No great loss. The rest of us, we're getting what we want—acceptance. We don't have horns or halos."

Quayle shook his head. "I'm glad, I think, that I'm not a telepath. The mind's mysterious enough anyway, without new doors opening. Thanks for letting me talk. I think I've got part of it talked out, anyway. Shall we try the script again?"

"Sure," Burkhalter said, and again the procession of pages nickered on the screen above them. Quayle did seem less guarded; his thoughts were more lucid, and Burkhalter was able to get at the true meaning of many of the hitherto muddy

statements. They worked easily, the telepath dictating re-phrasings into his dictograph, and only twice did they have tc hurdle emotional tangles. At noon they knocked off, and Burkhalter, with a friendly nod, took the dropper to his office, where he found some calls listed on the visor. He ran off repeats, and a worried look crept into his blue eyes.

He talked with Dr. Moon in a booth at luncheon. The conversation lasted so long that only the induction cups kept the coffee hot, but Burkhalter had more than one problem to discuss. And he'd known Moon for a long time. The fat man was one of the few who were not, he thought, subconsciously repelled by the fact that Burkhalter was a Baldy.

"I've never fought a duel in my life, Doc. I can't afford to."

"You can't afford not to. You can't turn down the challenge, Ed. It isn't done."

"But this fellow Reilly—I don't even know him." "I know of him," Moon said. "He's got a bad temper. Dueled a lot."

Burkhalter slammed his hand down on the table. "Its ridiculous. I won't do it!"

"Well," Moon said practically, "Your wife can't fight him. And if Ethel's been reading Mrs. Reilly's mind arid gossiping, Reilly's got a case."

"Don't you think we know the dangers of that?" Burkhalter asked in a low voice. "Ethel doesn't go around reading minds any more than I do. It'd be fatal—for us. And for any other Baldy."

"Not the hairless ones. The ones who won't wear wigs. They—"

"They're fools. And they're giving all the Baldies a bad name. Point one, Ethel doesn't read minds; she didn't read Mrs. Reilly's. Point two, she doesn't gossip."

"La Reilly is obviously an hysterical type," Moon said. "Word got around about this scandal, whatever it was, and Mrs. Reilly remembered she'd seen Ethel lately. She's the type who needs a scapegoat anyway. I rather imagine she let word drop herself, and had to cover up so her husband wouldn't blame her."

"I'm not going to accept Reilly's challenge," Burkhalter said doggedly.

"You'll have to."

"Listen, Doc, maybe—"

"What?"

"Nothing. An idea. It might work. Forget about that; I think I've got the right answer. It's the only one, anyway. I can't afford a duel and that's flat."

"You're not a coward."

"There's one thing Baldies are afraid of," Burkhalter said, "and that's public opinion. I happen to know I'd kill Reilly. That's the reason why I've never dueled in my life."

Moon drank coffee. "Hm-m-m. I think—"

"Don't. There was something else. I'm wondering if I ought to send Al off to a special school."

"What's wrong with the kid?"

"He's turning out to be a beautiful delinquent. His teacher called me this morning. The playback was something to hear.

He's talking funny and acting funny. Playing nasty little tricks on his friends—if he has any left by now."

"All kids are cruel."

"Kids don't know what cruelty means. That's why they're cruel; they lack empathy. But Al's getting—" Burkhalter gestured helplessly. "He's turning into a young tyrant. He doesn't seem to give a care about anything, according to his teacher."

"That's not too abnormal, so far."

"That's not the worst. He's become very egotistical. Too much so. I don't want him to turn into one of the wigless Baldies you were mentioning." Buckhalter didn't mention the other possibility; paranoia, insanity.

"He must pick things up somewhere. At home? Scarcely, Ed. Where else does he go?"

"The usual places. He's got a normal environment."

"I should think," Moon said, "that a Baldy would have unusual opportunities in training a youngster. The mental rapport—eh?"

"Yeah. But—I don't know. The trouble is," Burkhalter said almost inaudibly, "I wish to God I wasn't different. We didn't ask to be telepaths. Maybe it's all very wonderful in the long run, but I'm one person, and I've got my own microcosm. People who deal in long-term sociology are apt to forget that. They can figure out the answers, but it's every individual man —or Baldy— who's got to fight his own personal battle while he's alive. And it isn't as clear-cut as a battle. It's worse; it's the necessity of watching yourself every second, of fitting yoursejf into a world that doesn't want you."

Moon looked uncomfortable. "Are you being a little sorry for yourself, Ed?"

Burkhalter shook himself. "I am, Doc. But I'll work it out."

"We both will," Moon said, but Burkhalter didn't really expect much help from him. Moon would be willing, but it was horribly difficult for an ordinary man to conceive that a Baldy was—the same. It was the difference that men looked for, and found.

Anyway, he'd have to settle matters before he saw Ethel again. He could easily conceal the knowledge, but she would recognize a mental barrier and wonder. Their marriage had been the more ideal because of the additional rapport, something that compensated for an inevitable, half-sensed estrangement from the rest of the world.

"How's 'Psychohistory' going?" Moon asked after a while.

"Better than I expected. I've got a new angle on Quayle.

If I talk about myself, that seems to draw him out. It gives him enough confidence to let him open his mind to me. We may have those first chapters ready for Oldfield, in spite of everything."

"Good. Just the same, he can't rush us. If we've got to shoot out books that fast, we might as well go back to the days of semantic confusion. Which we won't!"

"Well," Burkhalter said, getting up, "I'll smoosh along. See you."

"About Reilly—"

"Let it lay." Burkhalter went out, heading for the address his visor had listed. He touched the dagger at his belt. Dueling wouldn't do for Baldies, but—

A greeting thought crept into his mind, and, under the arch that led into the campus, he paused to grin at Sam Shane, a New Orleans area Baldy who affected a wig of flaming red. They didn't bother to talk.

Personal question, involving mental, moral and physical well-being.

A satisfied glow. And you, Burkhalter? *For an instant Burkhalter half-saw what the symbol of his name meant to Shane.*

Shadow of trouble.

A warm, willing anxiousness to help. *There was a bond between Baldies.*

Burkhalter thought: But everywhere I'd go there'd be the same suspicion. We're freaks.

More so elsewhere, Shane thought. There are a lot of us in Modoc Town. People are invariably more suspicous where they're not in daily contact with—Us.

The boy—I've trouble too, Shane thought. It's worried me. My two girls—

Delinquency?

Yes.

Common denominators?

Don't know. More than one of Us have had the same trouble with our kids.

Secondary characteristic of the mutation? Second generation emergence?

Doubtful, Shane thought, scowling in his mind, shading his concept with a wavering question. We'll think it over later. Must go.

Burkhalter sighed and went on his way. The houses were strung out around the central industry of Modoc, and he cut through a park toward his destination. It was a sprawling curved building, but it wasn't inhabited, so Burkhalter filed Reilly for future reference, and, with a glance at his timer, angled over a hillside toward the school. As he expected, it was recreation time, and he spotted Al lounging under a tree, some distance from his companions, who were involved in a pleasantly murderous game of Blowup.

He sent his thought ahead.

The Green Man had almost reached the top of the mountain. The hairy gnomes were pelting on his trail, most unfairly shooting sizzling light-streaks at their quarry, but the Green Man was agile enough to dodge. The rocks were leaning—

"Al."

—inward, pushed by the gnomes, ready to—

"Al!" *Burkhalter sent his thought with the word, jolting into the boy's mind, a trick he very seldom employed, since youth was practically defenseless against such invasion.*

"Hello, Dad," Al said, undisturbed. "What's up?"

"A report from your teacher."

"I didn't do anything."

"She told me what it was. Listen, kid. Don't start getting any funny ideas in your head."

"I'm not."

"Do you think a Baldy is better or worse than a non-Baldy?"

Al moved his feet uncomfortably. He didn't answer.

"Well," Burkhalter said, "the answer is both and neither. And here's why. A Baldy can communicate mentally, but he lives in a world where most people can't."

"They're dumb," Al opined.

"Not so dumb, if they're better suited to their world than you are. You might as

well say a frog's better than a fish because he's an amphibian." Burkhalter briefly amplified and explained the terms telepathically.

"Well... oh, I get it, all right."

"Maybe," Burkhalter said slowly, "what you need is a swift kick in the pants. That thought wasn't so hot. What was it again?"

Al tried to hide it, blanking out. Burkhalter began to lift the barrier, an easy matter for him, but stopped. Al regarded his father in a most unfilial way—in fact, as a sort of boneless fish. That had been clear.

"If you're so egotistical," Burkhalter pointed out, "maybe you can see it this way. Do you know why there aren't any Baldies in key positions?"

"Sure I do," Al said unexpectedly. "They're afraid."

"Of what, then?"

"The—" That picture had been very curious, a commingling of something vaguely familiar to Burkhalter. "The non-Baldies."

"Well, if we took positions where we could take advantage of our telepathic function, non-Baldies would be plenty envious—especially if we were successes. If a Baldy even invented a better mousetrap, plenty of people would say he'd stolen the idea from some non-Baldy's mind. You get the point?"

"Yes, Dad." But he hadn't. Burkhalter sighed and looked up. He recognized one of Shane's girls on a nearby hillside, sitting alone against a boulder. There were other isolated figures here and there. Far to the east the snowy rampart of the Rockies made an irregular pattern against blue sky.

"Al," Burkhalter said, "I don't want you to get a chip on your shoulder. This is a pretty swell world, and the people in it are, on the whole, nice people. There's a law of averages. It isn't sensible for us to get too much wealth or power, because that'd militate against us—and we don't need it anyway. Nobody's poor. We find our work, we do it, and we're reasonably happy. We have some advantages non-Baldies don't have; in marriage, for example. Mental intimacy is quite as important as physical. But I don't want you to feel that being a Baldy makes you a god. It doesn't. I can still," he added thoughtfully, "spank it out of you, in case you care to follow out that concept in your mind at the moment."

Al gulped and beat a hasty retreat. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"And keep your hair on, too. Don't take your wig off in class. Use the stickum stuff in the bathroom closet." "Yes, but... Mr. Venner doesn't wear a wig." "Remind me to do some historical research with you on zoot-suiters," Burkhalter said. "Mr. Venner's wiglessness is probably his only virtue, if you consider it one." "He makes money."

"Anybody would, in that general store of his. But people don't buy from him if they can help it, you'll notice. That's what I mean by a chip on your shoulder. He's got one. There

are Baldies like Venner, Al, but you might, sometime, ask the guy if he's happy. For your information, I am. More than Venner, anyway. Catch?"

*"Yes, Dad." Al seemed submissive, but it was merely that. Burkhalter, still troubled, nodded and walked away. As he passed near the Shane girl's boulder he caught a scrap: —*at the summit of the Glass Mountains, rolling rocks back at the gnomes until—

He withdrew; it was an unconscious habit, touching minds that were sensitive, but with children it was definitely unfair. With adult Baldies it was simply the instinctive gesture of tipping your hat; one answered or one didn't. The barrier could be erected; there could be a blank-out; or there could be the direct snub of concentration on a single thought, private and not to be intruded on.

A copter with a string of gliders was coming in from the south: a freighter laden with frozen foods from South America, to judge by the markings. Burkhalter made a note to pick up an Argentine steak. He'd got a new recipe he wanted to try out, a charcoal broil with barbecue sauce, a welcome change from the short-wave cooked meats they'd been having for a week. Tomatoes, chile, mm-m—what else? Oh, yes. The duel with Reilly. Burkhalter absently touched his dagger's hilt and made a small, mocking sound in his throat. Perhaps he was innately a pacifist. It was rather difficult to think of a duel seriously, even though everyone else did, when the details of a barbecue dinner were prosaic in his mind.

So it went. The tides of civilization rolled in century-long waves across the continents, and each particular wave, though conscious of its participation in the tide, nevertheless was more preoccupied with dinner. And, unless you happened to be a thousand feet tall, had the brain of a god and a god's life-span, what was the difference? People missed a lot— people like Venner, who was certainly a crank, not batty enough to qualify for the asylum, but certainly a potential paranoid type. The man's refusal to wear a wig labeled him as an individualist, but as an exhibitionist, too. If he didn't feel ashamed of his hairlessness, why should he bother to flaunt it? Besides, the man had a bad temper, and if people kicked him around, he asked for it by starting the kicking himself.

But as for Al, the kid was heading for something approaching delinquency. It couldn't be the normal development of

childhood, Burkhalter thought. He didn't pretend to be an expert, but he was still young enough to remember his own formative years, and he had had more handicaps than Al had now; in those days, Baldies had been very new and very freakish. There'd been more than one movement to isolate, sterilize, or even exterminate the mutations.

Burkhalter sighed. If he had been born before the Blowup, it might have been different. Impossible to say. One could read history, but one couldn't live it. In the future, perhaps, there might be telepathic libraries in which that would be possible. So many opportunities, in fact—and so few that the world was ready to accept as yet. Eventually Baldies would not be regarded as freaks, and by that time real progress would be possible.

But people don't make history—Burkhalter thought. Peoples do that. Not the individual.

He stopped by Reilly's house, and this time the man answered, a burly, freckled, squint-eyed fellow with immense hands and, Burkhalter noted, fine muscular co-ordination. He rested those hands on the Dutch door and nodded.

"Who're you, mister?"

"My name's Burkhalter."

Comprehension and wariness leaped into Reilly's eyes. "Oh, I see. You got my call?"

"I did," Burkhalter said. "I want to talk to you about it May I come in?"

"O.K." He stepped back, opening the way through a hall and into a spacious living room, where diffused light filtered through glassy mosiac walls. "Want to set the time?"

"I want to tell you you're wrong."

"Now wait a minute," Reilly said, patting the air. "My wife's out now, but she gave me the straight of it. I don't like this business of sneaking into a man's mind; it's crooked. You should have told your *wife to mind her business—or keep her tongue quiet."*

Burkhalter said patiently, "I give you my word, Reilly, that Ethel didn't read your wife's mind."

"Does she say so?"

"I... well, I haven't asked her."

"Yeah," Reilly said with an air of triumph.

"I don't need to. I know her well enough. And... well, I'm a Baldy myself."

"I know you are," Reilly said. "For all I know, you may be reading my mind now." He hesitated. "Get out of my

house. I like my privacy. We'll meet at dawn tomorrow, if that's satisfactory with you. Now get out." He seemed to have something on his mind, some ancient memory, perhaps, that he didn't wish exposed.

Burkhalter nobly resisted the temptation. "No Baldy would read—"

"Go on, get out!"

"Listen! You wouldn't have a chance in a duel with me!"

"Do you know how many notches I've got?" Reilly asked.

"Ever dueled a Baldy?"

"I'll cut the notch deeper tomorrow. Get out, d'you hear?"

Burkhalter, biting his lips, said, "Man, don't you realize that in a duel I could read your mind?"

"I don't care ... what?"

"I'd be half a jump ahead of you. No matter how instinctive your actions would be, you'd know them a split second ahead of time in your mind. And I'd know all your tricks and weaknesses, too. Your technique would be an open book to me. Whatever you thought of—"

"No." Reilly shook his head. "Oh, no. You're smart, but it's a phony set-up."

Burkhalter hesitated, decided, and swung about, pushing a chair out of the way. "Take out your dagger," he said. "Leave the sheath snapped on; I'll show you what I mean."

Reilly's eyes widened. "If you want it now—"

"I don't." Burkhalter shoved another chair away. He un-clipped his dagger, sheath and all, from his belt, and made sure the little safety clip was in place. "We've room enough here. Come on."

Scowling, Reilly took out his own dagger, held it awkwardly, baffled by the sheath, and then suddenly feinted forward. But Burkhalter wasn't there; he had anticipated, and his own leather sheath slid up Reilly's belly.

"That," Burkhalter said, "would have ended the fight."

For answer Reilly smashed a hard dagger-blow down, curving at the last

moment into a throat-cutting slash. Burkhalter's free hand was already at his throat; his other hand, with the sheathed dagger, tapped Reilly twice over the heart. The freckles stood out boldly against the pallor of the larger man's face. But he was not yet ready to concede. He tried a few more passes, clever, well-trained cuts, and they failed, because Burkhalter had anticipated them. His left hand invariably covered the spot where Reilly had aimed, and which he never struck.

Slowly Reilly let his arm fall. He moistened his lips and swallowed. Burkhalter busied himself reclipping his dagger in place.

"Burkhalter," Reilly said, "you're a devil."

"Far from it. I'm just afraid to take a chance. Do you really think being a Baldy is a snap?"

"But, if you can read minds—"

"How long do you think I'd last if I did any dueling? It would be too much of a set-up. Nobody would stand for it, and I'd end up dead. I can't duel, because it'd be murder, and people would know it was murder. I've taken a lot of cracks, swallowed a lot of insults, for just that reason. Now, if you like, I'll swallow another and apologize. I'll admit anything you say. But I can't duel with you, Reilly."

"No, I can see that. And—I'm glad you came over." Reilly was still white. "I'd have walked right into a set-up."

"Not my set-up," Burkhalter said. "I wouldn't have dueled. Baldies aren't so lucky, you know. They've got handicaps— like this. That's why they can't afford to take chances and antagonize people, and why we never read minds, unless we're asked to do so."

"It makes sense. More or less." Reilly hesitated. "Look, I withdraw that challenge. O.K.?"

"Thanks," Burkhalter, said, putting out his hand. It was taken rather reluctantly. "We'll leave it at that, eh?"

"Right." But Reilly was still anxious to get his guest out of the house.

Burkhalter walked back to the Publishing Center and whistled tunelessly. He could tell Ethel now; in fact, he had to, for secrets between them would have broken up the completeness of their telepathic intimacy. It was not that their minds lay bare to each other, it was, rather, that any barrier could be sensed by the other, and the perfect rapport *wouldn't have been so perfect. Curiously, despite this utter intimacy, husband and wife managed to respect one another's privacy.*

Ethel might be somewhat distressed, but the trouble had blown over, and, besides, she was a Baldy too. Not that she looked it, with her wig of fluffy chestnut hair and those long, curving lashes. But her parents had lived east of Seattle during , the Blowup, and afterward, too, before the hard radiation's effects had been thoroughly studied.

The snow-wind blew down over Modoc and fled southward

along the Utah Valley. Burkhalter wished he was in his copter, alone in the blue emptiness of the sky. There was a quiet, strange peace up there that no Baldy ever quite achieved on the earth's surface, except in the depths of a wilderness. Stray fragments of thoughts were always flying about, subsensory, but like the almost-unheard whisper of a needle on a phonograph record, never ceasing.

That, certainly, was why almost all Baldies loved to fly and were expert pilots. The high waste deserts of the air were their blue hermitages.

Still, he was in Modoc now, and overdue for his interview with Quayle. Burkhalter hastened his steps. In the main hall he met Moon, said briefly and cryptically that he'd taken care of the duel, and passed on, leaving the fat man to stare a question after him. The only visor call was from Ethel; the playback said she was worried about Al, and would Burkhalter check with the school. Well, he had already done so—unless the boy had managed to get into more trouble since then. Burkhalter put in a call and reassured himself. Al was as yet unchanged.

He found Quayle in the same private solarium, and thirsty. Burkhalter ordered a couple of dramzowies sent up, since he had no objection to loosening Quayle's inhibitions. The gray-haired author was immersed in a sectional historical globe-map, illuminating each epochal layer in turn as he searched back through time.

"Watch this," he said, running his hand along the row of buttons. "See how the German border fluctuates? And Portugal. Notice its zone of influence? Now—" The zone shrank steadily from 1600 on, while other countries shot out radiating lines and assumed sea power.

Burkhalter sipped his dramzowie. "Not much of that now."

"No, since... what's the matter?"

"How do you mean?"

"You look shot."

"I didn't know I showed it," Burkhalter said wryly. "I just finagled my way out of a duel."

"That's one custom I never saw much sense to," Quayle said. "What happened? Since when can you finagle out?"

Burkhalter explained, and the writer took a drink and snorted. "What a spot for you. Being a Baldy isn't such an advantage after all, I guess."

"It has distinct disadvantages at times." On impulse Burkhalter mentioned his son. "You see my point, eh? I don't

know, *really, what standards to apply to a young Baldy. He is a mutation, after all. And the telepathic mutation hasn't had time to work out yet. We can't rig up controls, because guinea pigs and rabbits won't breed telepaths. That's been tried, you know. And—well, the child of a Baldy needs very special training so he can cope with his ultimate maturity."*

"You seem to have adjusted well enough."

"I've—learned. As most sensible Baldies have. That's why I'm not a wealthy man, or in politics. We're really buying safety for our species by foregoing certain individual advantages. Hostages to destiny—and destiny spares us. But we get paid too, in a way. In the coinage of future benefits— negative benefits, really, for we ask only to be spared and accepted—and so we have to deny ourselves a lot of present, positive benefits. An appeasement to fate."

"Paying the pipery" Quayle nodded.

"We are the pipers. The Baldies as a group, I mean. And our children. So it balances; we're really paying ourselves. If I wanted to take unfair advantage of my telepathic power

—my son wouldn't live very long. The Baldies would be wiped out. Al's got to learn that, and he's getting pretty antisocial."

"All children are antisocial," Quayle pointed out. "They're utter individualists. I should think the only reason for worrying would be if the boy's deviation from the norm were connected with his telepathic sense."

"There's something in that." Burkhalter reached out left-handedly and probed delicately at Quayle's mind, noting that the antagonism was considerably lessened. He grinned to'himself and went on talking about his own troubles. "Just the same, the boy's father to the man. And an adult Baldy has got to be pretty well adjusted, or he's sunk."

"Environment is as important as heredity. One complements the other. If a child's reared correctly, he won't have much trouble—unless heredity is involved."

"As it may be. There's so little known about the telepathic mutation. If baldness is one secondary characteristic, maybe

—something else—emerges in the third or fourth generations. I'm wondering if telepathy is really good for the mind."

Quayle said, "Humph. Speaking personally, it makes me nervous—" "Like Reilly."

"Yes," Quayle said, but he didn't care much for the comparison. "Well—anyhow, if a mutation's a failure, it'll die out. It won't breed true."

"What about hemophilia?"

"How many people have hemophilia?" Quayle asked. "I'm trying to .look at it from the angle of psychohistorian. If there'd been telepaths in the past, things might have been different."

"How do you know there weren't?" Burkhalter asked.

Quayle blinked. "Oh. Well. That's true, too. In medieval times they'd have been called wizards—or saints. The Duke-Rhine experiments—but such accidents would have been abortive. Nature fools around trying to hit the ... ah... the jackpot, and she doesn't always do it on the first try."

"She may not have done it now." That was habit speaking, the ingrained caution of modesty. "Telepathy may be merely a semisuccessful try at something pretty unimaginable. A sort of four-dimensional sensory concept, maybe."

"That's too abstract for me." Quayle was interested, and his own hesitancies had almost vanished; by accepting Burkhalter as a telepath, he had tacitly wiped away his objections to telepathy per se. *"The old-time Germans always had an idea they were different; so did the Japanese. They knew, very definitely, that they were a superior race because they were directly descended from gods. They were short in stature; heredity made them self-conscious when dealing with larger races. But the Chinese aren't tall, the Southern Chinese, and they weren't handicapped in that way."*

"Environment, then?"

"Environment, which caused propaganda. The Japanese took Buddhism, and altered it completely into Shinto, to suit then- own needs. The samurai, warrior-knights, were the ideals, the code of honor was fascinatingly cockeyed. The principle of Shinto was to worship your superiors and subjugate your inferiors. Ever seen the Japanese jewel-trees?"

"I don't remember them. What are they?"

"Miniature replicas of espaliered trees, made of jewels, with trinkets hanging on the branches. Including a mirror— always. The first jewel-tree was made to lure the Moon-goddess out of a cave where she was sulking. It seemed the lady was so intrigued by the trinkets and by her face reflected in the mirror that she came out of her hideout. All the Japanese morals were dressed up in pretty clothes; that was the bait. The old-time Germans did much the same thing.

The last German dictator, Hitler, revived the old Siegfried legend. It was racial paranoia. The Germans worshiped the house-tyrant, not the mother, and they had extremely strong family ties. That extended to the state. They symbolized Hitler as their All-Father, and so eventually we got the Blowup. And, finally, mutations."

"After the deluge, me," Burkhalter murmured, finishing his dramzowie. Quayle was staring at nothing.

"Funny," he said after a while. "This All-Father business—"

"Yes?"

"I wonder if you know how powerfully it can affect a man?"

Burkhalter didn't say anything. Quayle gave him a sharp glance.

"Yes," the writer said quietly. "You're a man, after all. I owe you an apology, you know."

Burkhalter smiled. "You can forget that."

"I'd rather not," Quayle said. "I've just realized, pretty suddenly, that the telepathic sense isn't so important. I mean —it doesn't make you different. *I've been talking to you—"*

"Sometimes it takes people years before they realize what you're finding out," Burkhalter remarked. "Years of living and working with something they think of as a Baldy."

"Do you know what I've been concealing in my mind?" Quayle asked.

"No. I don't."

"You lie like a gentleman. Thanks. Well, here it is, and I'm telling you by choice, because I want to. I don't care if you got the information out of my mind already; I just want to tell you of my own free will. My father ... I imagine I hated him ... was a tyrant, and I remember one time, when I was just a kid and we were in the mountains, he beat me and a lot of people were looking on. I've tried to forget that for a long time. Now"—Quayle shrugged—"it doesn't seem quite so important."

"I'm not a psychologist," Burkhalter said. "If you want my personal reaction, I'll just say that it doesn't matter. You're not a little boy any more, and the guy I'm talking to and working with is the adult Quayle."

"Hm-m-m. Ye-es. I suppose I knew that all along—how unimportant it was, really. It was simply having my privacy violated.... I think I know you better now, Burkhalter. You can—walk in."

"We'll work better," Burkhalter said, grinning. "Especially with Darius."

Quayle said, "I'll try not to keep any reservation in my mind. Frankly, I won't mind telling you—the answers. Even when they're personal."

"Check on that. D'you want to tackle Darius now?"

"O.K." Quayle said, and his eyes no longer held suspicious wariness. "Darius I identify with my father—"

It was smooth and successful. That afternoon they accomplished more than they had during the entire previous fortnight. Warm with satisfaction on more than one point, Burkhalter stopped off to tell Dr. Moon that matters were looking up, and then set out toward home, exchanging thoughts with a couple of Baldies, his co-workers, who were knocking off for the day. The Rockies were bloody with the western light, and the coolness of the wind was pleasant on Burkhalter's cheeks, as he hiked homeward.

It was fine 'to be accepted. It proved that it could be done. And a Baldy often needed reassurance, in a world peopled by suspicious strangers. Quayle had been a hard nut to crack, but—Burkhalter smiled.

Ethel would be pleased. In a way, she'd had a harder time than he'd ever had. A woman would, naturally. Men were desperately anxious to keep their privacy unviolated by a woman, and as for non-Baldy women—well, it spoke highly for Ethel's glowing personal charm that she had finally been accepted by the clubs and feminine groups of Modoc. Only Burkhalter knew Ethel's desperate hurt at being bald, and not even her husband had ever seen her unwigged.

His thought reached out before him into the low, double-winged house on the hillside, and interlocked with hers in a warm intimacy. It was something more than a kiss. And, as always, there was the exciting sense of expectancy, mounting and mounting till the last door swung open and they touched physically. This, *he thought,* is why I was born a Baldy; this is worth losing worlds for.

At dinner that rapport spread out to embrace Al, an intangible, deeply-rooted something that made the food taste better and the water like wine. The word home, *to telepaths, had a meaning that non-Baldies could not entirely comprehend, for it embraced a bond they could not know. There were small, intangible caresses.*

Green Man going down the Great Red Slide; the Shaggy Dwarfs trying to harpoon him as he goes.

"Al," Ethel said, "are you still working on your Green Man?"

Then something utterly hateful and cold and deadly quivered silently in the air, like an icicle jaggedly smashing through golden, fragile glass. Burkhalter dropped his napkin and looked up, profoundly shocked. He felt Ethel's thought shrink back, and swiftly reached out to touch and reassure her with mental contact. But across the table the little boy, his cheeks still round with the fat of babyhood, sat silent and wary, realizing he had blundered, and seeking safety in complete immobility. His mind was too weak to resist probing, he knew, and he remained perfectly still, waiting, while the echoes of a thought hung poisonously in silence.

Burkhalter said, "Come on, Al." He stood up. Ethel started to speak.

"Wait, darling. Put up a barrier. Don't listen in." He touched her mind gently and tenderly, and then he took Al's hand and drew the boy after him out into the yard. Al watched his father out of wide, alert eyes.

Burkhalter sat on a bench and put Al beside him. He talked audibly at first, for clarity's sake, and for another reason. It was distinctly unpleasant to trick the boy's feeble guards down, but k was necessary.

"That's a very queer way to think of your mother," he said. "It's a queer way to think of me." Obscenity is more obscene, profanity more profane, to a telepathic

mind, but this had been neither one. It had been—cold and malignant.

And this is flesh of my flesh, *Burkhalter thought, looking at the boy and remembering the eight years of his growth.* Is the mutation to turn into something devilish?

Al was silent.

Burkhalter reached into the young mind. Al tried to twist free and escape, but his father's strong hands gripped him. Instinct, not reasoning, on the boy's part, for minds can touch over long distances.

He did not like to do this, for increased sensibility had gone with sensitivity, and violations are always violations. But ruthlessness was required. Burkhalter searched. Sometimes he threw key words violently at Al, and surges of memory pulsed up in response.

In the end, sick and nauseated, Burkhalter let Al go and

sat alone on the bench, watching the red light die on the snowy peaks. The whiteness was red-stained. But it was not too late. The man was a fool, had been a fool from the beginning, or he would have known the impossibility of attempting such a thing as this.

The conditioning had only begun. Al could be reconditioned. Burkhalter's eyes hardened. And would be. And would be. *But not yet, not until the immediate furious anger had given place to sympathy and understanding.*

Not yet.

He went into the house, spoke briefly to Ethel, and televised the dozen Baldies who worked with him in the Publishing Center. Not all of them had families, but none was missing when, half an hour later, they met in the back room of the Pagan Tavern downtown. Sam Shane had caught a fragment of Burkhalter's knowledge, and all of them read his emotions. Welded into a sympathetic unit by their telepathic sense, they waited till Burkhalter was ready.

Then he told them. It didn't take long, via thought. He told them about the Japanese jewel-tree with its glittering gadgets, a shining lure. He told them of racial paranoia and propaganda. And that the most effective propaganda was sugar-coated, disguised so that the motive was hidden.

A Green Man, hairless, heroic—symbolic of a Baldy.

And wild, exciting adventures, the lure to catch the young fish whose plastic minds were impressionable enough to be led along the roads of dangerous madness. Adult Baldies could listen, but they did not; young telepaths had a higher threshold of mental receptivity, and adults do not read the books of their children except to reassure themselves that there is nothing harmful in the pages. And no adult would bother to listen to the Green Man mindcast. Most of them had accepted it as the original daydream of their own children.

"I did," Shane put in. "My girls—"

"Trace it back," Burkhalter said. "I did."

The dozen minds reached out on the higher frequency, the children's wavelength, and something jerked away from them, startled and apprehensive.

"He's the one," Shane nodded.

They did not need to speak. They went out of the Pagan Tavern in a compact, ominous group, and crossed the street to the general store. The door was locked.

Two of the men burst it open with their shoulders.

They went through the dark store and into a back room where a man was standing-beside an overturned chair. His bald skull gleamed in an overhead light. His mouth worked impotently.

His thought pleaded with them—was driven back by an implacable deadly wall.

Burkhalter took out his dagger. Other slivers of steel glittered for a little while—

And were quenched.

Venner's scream had long since stopped, but his dying thought of agony lingered within Burkhalter's mind as he walked homeward. The wigless Baldy had not been insane, no. But he had been paranoidal.

*What he had tried to conceal, at the last, was quite shocking. A tremendous, tyrannical egotism, and a furious hatred of nontelepaths. A feeling of self-justification that was, perhaps, insane. And—*we are the Future! The Baldies! God made us to rule lesser men!

Burkhalter sucked in his breath, shivering. The mutation had not been entirely successful. One group had adjusted, the Baldies who wore wigs and had become fitted to their environment. One group had been insane, and could be discounted; they were in asylums.

But the middle group were merely paranoid. They were not insane, and they were not sane. They wore no wigs.

Like Venner.

And Venner had sought disciples. His attempt had been foredoomed to failure, but he had been one man.

One Baldy—paranoid.

There were others, many others.

Ahead, nestled into the dark hillside, was the pale blotch that marked Burkhalter's home. He sent his thought ahead, and it touched Ethel's and paused very briefly to reassure her.

Then it thrust on, and went into the sleeping mind of a little boy who, confused and miserable, had finally cried himself to sleep. There were only dreams in that mind now, a little discolored, a little stained, but they could be cleansed. And would be.

ABSALOM

At dusk Joel Locke came home from the university where he held the chair of psychonamics. He came quietly into the house, by a side door, and stood listening, a tall, tight-lipped man of forty with a faintly sardonic mouth and cool gray eyes. He could hear the precipitron hum-ming. That meant that Abigail Schuler, the housekeeper, was busy with her duties. Locke smiled slightly and turned toward a panel in the wall that opened at his approach.

The small elevator took him noiselessly upstairs.

There, he moved with curious stealth. He went directly to a door at the end of the

hall and paused before it, his head bent, his eyes unfocused. He heard nothing. Presently he opened the door and stepped into the room.

Instantly the feeling of unsureness jolted back, freezing him where he stood. He made no sign, though his mouth tightened. He forced him-self to remain quiet as he glanced around.

It could have been the room of a normal twenty-year-old, not a boy of eight. Tennis racquets were heaped in a disorderly fashion against a pile of book records. The thiaminizer was turned on, and Locke auto-matically clicked the switch over. Abruptly he turned. The televisor screen was blank, yet he could have sworn that eyes had been watching him from it.

This wasn't the first time it had happened.

After a while Locke turned again and squatted to examine the book reels. He picked out one labeled BRIAFF ON ENTROPIC LOGIC and turned the cylinder over in his hands, scowling. Then he replaced it and went out of the room, with a last, considering look at the tele-visor.

Downstairs Abigail Schuler was fingering the Mastermaid switchboard. Her prim mouth was as tight as the severe bun of gray-shot hair at the back of her neck.

"Good evening," Locke said. "Where's Absalom?"

"Out playing, Brother Locke," the housekeeper said formally. "You're home early. I haven't finished the living room yet."

'Well, turn on the ions and let 'em play," Locke said. "It won't take long. I've got some papers to correct, anyway."

He started out, but Abigail coughed significantly.

"Well?"

"He's looking peaked."

"Then outdoor exercise is what he needs," Locke said shortly. "I'm going to send him to a summer camp."

"Brother Locke," Abigail said, "I don't see why you don't let him go to Baja California. He's set his heart on it. You let him study all the hard subjects he wanted before. Now you put your foot down. It's none of my affair, but I can tell he's pining."

"He'd pine worse if I said yes. I've my reasons for not wanting him to study entropic logic. Do you know what it involves?"

"I don't—you know I don't. I'm not an educated woman Brother Locke. But Absalom is bright as a button."

Locke made an impatient gesture.

"You have a genius for understatement," he said. "Bright as a button!" Then he shrugged and moved to the window, looking down at the play court below where his eight-year-old son played handball. Absalom did not look up. He seemed engrossed in his game. But Locke, watch-ing. felt a cool, stealthy terror steal through his mind, and behind his back his hands clenched together.

A boy who looked ten, whose maturity level was twenty, and yet who was still a child of eight. Not easy to handle. There were many parents just now with the same problem—something was happening to the graph curve that charts the percentage of child geniuses born in recent times. Something had begun to stir lazily far back in the brains of the coming generations and a new species, of a sort, was coming slowly

into being. Locke knew that well. In his own time he, too, had been a child genius.

Other parents might meet the problem in other ways, he thought stubbornly. Not himself. He *knew* what was best for Absalom. Other parents might send their genius children to one of the crèches where they could develop among their own kind. Not Locke.

"Absalom's place is here," he said aloud. 'With me, where I can—" He caught the housekeeper's eye and shrugged again, irritably, going back to the conversation that had broken off. "Of course he's bright. But not bright enough yet to go to Baja California and study entropic logic. Entropic logic! It's too advanced for the boy. Even you ought to realize that. It isn't like a lollypop you can hand the kid—first making sure there's castor oil in the bathroom closet. Absalom's immature. It would actually be dangerous to send him to the Baja California University now to study with men three times his age. It would involve mental strain he isn't fit for yet. I don't want him turned into a psychopath." Abigail's prim mouth pursed up sourly.

"You let him take calculus."

"Oh, leave me alone." Locke glanced down again at the small boy on the play court. "I think," he said slowly, "that it's time for another rapport with Absalom."

The housekeeper looked at him sharply, opened her thin lips to speak, and then closed them with an almost audible snap of disapproval. She didn't understand entirely, of course, how a rapport worked or what it accomplished. She only knew that in these days there were ways in which it was possible to enforce hypnosis, to pry open a mind willy-nilly and search it for contraband thoughts. She shook her head, lips pressed tight.

"Don't try to interfere in things you don't understand," Locke said. "I tell you, I know what's best for Absalom. He's in the same place I was thirty-odd years ago. Who could know better? Call him in, will you? I'll be in my study."

Abigail watched his retreating back, a pucker between her brows. It was hard to know what was best. The mores of the day demanded rigid good conduct, but sometimes a person had trouble deciding in her own mind what was the right thing to do. In the old days, now, after the atomic wars, when license ran riot and anybody could do anything he pleased, life must have been easier. Nowadays, in the violent back-swing to a Puritan culture, you were expected to think twice and search your soul before you did a doubtful thing.

Well, Abigail had no choice this time. She clicked over the wall microphone and spoke into it. "Absalom?"

"Yes, Sister Schuler?"

"Come in. Your father wants you."

In his study Locke stood quiet for a moment, considering. Then he reached for the house microphone.

"Sister Schuler, I'm using the televisor. Ask Absalom to wait."

He sat down before his private visor. His hands moved deftly.

"Get me Dr. Ryan, the Wyoming Quizkid Crèche. Joel Locke calling."

Idly as he waited he reached out to take an old-fashioned cloth-bound book from a shelf of antique curiosa. He read:

But Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, As soon as ye

hear the sound of the trumpet, then ye shall say, Ab-salom reigneth in Hebron. . .

"Brother Locke?" the televisor asked.

The face of a white-haired, pleasant-featured man showed on the screen. Locke replaced the book and raised his hand in greeting.

"Dr. Ryan. I'm sorry to keep bothering you."

"That's all right," Ryan said. "I've plenty of time. I'm supposed to be supervisor at the Crèche, but the kids are running it to suit them-selves." He chuckled. "How's Absalom?"

"There's a limit," Locke said sourly. "I've given the kid his head, out-lined a broad curriculum, and now he wants to study entropic logic. There are only two universities that handle the subject, and the near-est's in Baja California."

"He could commute by copter, couldn't he?" Ryan asked, but Locke grunted disapproval.

"Take too long. Besides, one of the requirements is inboarding, under a strict regime. The discipline, mental and physical, is supposed to be necessary in order to master entropic logic. Which is spinach. I got the rudiments at home, though I had to use the tri-disney to visualize it."

Ryan laughed.

"The kids here are taking it up. Uh—are you sure you understood it?"

"Enough, yeah. Enough to realize it's nothing for a kid to study until his horizons have expanded."

"We're having no trouble with it," the doctor said. "Don't forget that Absalom's a genius, not an ordinary youngster."

"I know. I know my responsibility, too. A normal home environment has to be maintained to give Absalom some sense of security—which is one reason I don't want the boy to live in Baja California just now. I want to be able to protect him."

"We've disagreed on that point before. All the quizkids are pretty self-sufficient, Locke."

"Absalom's a genius, and a child. Therefore he's lacking in a sense of proportion. There are more dangers for him to avoid. I think it's a grave mistake to give the quizkids their heads and let them do what they like. I refused to send Absalom to a Crèche for an excellent reason. Putting all the boy geniuses in a batch and letting them fight it out. Completely artificial environment."

"I'm not arguing," Ryan said. "It's your business. Apparently you'll never admit that there's a sine curve of geniuses these days. A steady increase. In another generation—"

"I was a child genius myself, but I got over it," Locke said irritably. "I had enough trouble with my father. He was a tyrant, and if I hadn't been lucky, he'd have managed to warp me psychologically way out of line. I adjusted, but I had trouble. I don't want Absalom to have that trouble. That's why I'm using psychonamics."

"Narcosynthesis? Enforced hypnotism?"

"It's not enforced," Locke snapped. "It's a valuable mental catharsis. Under hypnosis, he tells me everything that's on his mind, and I can help him."

"I didn't know you were doing that," Ryan said slowly. "I'm not at all sure it's a good idea."

"I don't tell you how to run your Crèche."

“No. But the kids do. A lot of them are smarter than I am.”

“Immature intelligence is dangerous. A kid will skate on thin ice without making a test first. Don’t think I’m holding Absalom back. I’m just running tests for him first. I make sure the ice will hold him. Entropic logic 1 can understand, but he can’t, yet. So he’ll have to wait on that.”

“Well?”

Locke hesitated. “Uh—do you know if your boys have been commu-nicating with Absalom?”

“I don’t know,” Ryan said. “I don’t interfere with their lives.”

“All right, I don’t want them interfering with mine, or with Absa-lom’s. I wish you’d find out if they’re getting in touch with him.”

There was a long pause. Then Ryan said slowly:

“I’ll try. But if I were you, Brother Locke, I’d let Absalam go to Baja California if he wants to.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Locke said, and broke the beam. His gaze went toward the Bible again.

Entropic logic!

Once the boy reached maturity, his somatic and physiological symp-toms would settle toward the norm, but meanwhile the pendulum still swung wildly. Absalom needed strict control, for his own good.

And, for some reason, the boy had been trying to evade the hypnotic rapports lately. There was something going on.

Thoughts moved chaotically through Locke’s mind. He forgot that Absalom was waiting for him, and remembered only when Abigail’s voice, on the wall transmitter, announced the evening meal.

At dinner Abigail Schuler sat like Atropos between father and son, ready to clip the conversation whenever it did not suit her. Locke felt the beginnings of a long-standing irritation at Abigail’s attitude that she had to protect Absalom against his father. Perhaps conscious of that, Locke himself finally brought up the subject of Baja California.

“You’ve apparently been studying the entropic logic thesis.” Absalom did not seem startled. “Are you convinced yet that it’s too advanced for you?”

“No, Dad,” Absalom said. “I’m not convinced of that.”

“The rudiments of calculus might seem easy to a youngster. But when he got far enough into it . . . I went over that entropic logic, son, through the entire book, and it was difficult enough for me. And I’ve a mature mind.”

“I know you have. And I know I haven’t, yet. But I still don’t think it would be beyond me.”

“Here’s the thing,” Locke said. “You might develop psychotic symp-toms if you studied that thing, and you might not be able to recognize them in time. If we could have a rapport every night, or every other night, while you were studying—”

“But it’s in Baja California!”

“That’s the trouble. If you want to wait for my Sabbatical, I can go there with you. Or one of the nearer universities may start the course. I don’t want to be unreasonable. Logic should show you my motive.”

“It does,” Absalom said. “That part’s all right. The only difficulty’s an intangible, isn’t it? I mean, you think my mind couldn’t assimilate entropic logic safely, and I’m convinced that it could.”

“Exactly,” Locke said. “You’ve the advantage of knowing yourself bet-ter than I could know you. You’re handicapped by immaturity, lack of a sense of proportion. And I’ve had the advantage of more experience.”

“Your own, though, Dad. How much would such values apply to me?”

“You must let me be the judge of that, son.”

“Maybe,” Absalom said. “I wish I’d gone to a quizkid crèche, though.”

“Aren’t you happy here?” Abigail asked, hurt, and the boy gave her a quick, warm look of affection.

“Sure I am, Abbie. You know that.”

“You’d be a lot less happy with dementia praecox,” Locke said sar-donically. “Entropic logic, for instance, presupposes a grasp of temporal variations being assumed for problems involving relativity.”

“Oh, that gives me a headache,” Abigail said. “And if you’re so wor-ried about Absalom’s overtraining his mind, you shouldn’t talk to him like that.” She pressed buttons and slid the cloisonné metal dishes into the compartment. “Coffee Brother Locke. . . milk, Absalom. . . and I’ll take tea.”

Locke winked at his son, who merely looked solemn. Abigail rose with her teacup and headed toward the fireplace. Seizing the little hearth broom, she whisked away a few ashes, relaxed amid cushions,

and warmed her skinny ankles by the wood fire. Locke patted back a yawn.

“Until we settle this argument, son, matters must stand. Don’t tackle that book on entropic logic again. Or anything else on the subject. Right?”

There was no answer.

“Right?” Locke insisted.

“I’m not sure,” Absalom said after a pause. “As a matter of fact, the book’s already given me a few ideas.”

Looking across the table, Locke was struck by the incongruity of that incredibly developed mind in the childish body.

“You’re still young,” he said. “A few days won’t matter. Don’t forget that legally I exercise control over you, though I’ll never do that without your agreement that I’m acting justly.”

“Justice for you may not be justice for me,” Absalom said, drawing designs on the tablecloth with his fingernail.

Locke stood up and laid his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“We’ll discuss it again, until we’ve thrashed it out right. Now I’ve some papers to correct.”

He went out.

“He’s acting for the best, Absalom,” Abigail said.

“Of course he is, Abbie,” the boy agreed. But he remained thought-ful.

The next day Locke went through his classes in an absent-minded fashion and, at noon, he televised Dr. Ryan at the Wyoming Quizkid Crèche. Ryan seemed entirely too casual and noncommittal. He said he had asked the quizkids if they had been communicating with Absa-lom, and they had said no.

“But they’ll lie at the drop of a hat, of course, if they think it ad-visable,” Ryan added, with inexplicable amusement.

“What’s so funny?” Locke inquired.

“I don’t know,” Ryan said. “The way the kids tolerate me. I’m useful to them at times, but—originally I was supposed to be supervisor here. Now the boys supervise me.”

“Are you serious?”

Ryan sobered.

“I’ve a tremendous respect for the quizldds. And I think you’re mak-ing a very grave mistake in the way you’re handling your son. I was in your house once, a year ago. It’s *your* house. Only one room belongs to Absalom. He can’t leave any of his possessions around anywhere else. You’re dominating him tremendously.”

“I’m trying to help him.”

“Are you sure you know the right way?”

“Certainly,” Locke snapped. “Even if I’m wrong, does that mean committing fil—filio—”

“That’s an interesting point,” Ryan said casually. “You could have thought of the right words for matricide, parricide, or fratricide easily enough. But it’s seldom one kills his son. The word doesn’t come to the tongue quite as instantly.”

Locke glared at the screen. “What the devil do you mean?”

“Just be careful,” Ryan said. “I believe in the mutant theory, after running this Crèche for fifteen years.”

“I was a child genius myself,” Locke repeated.

“Uh-huh,” Ryan said, his eyes intent. “I wonder if you know that the mutation’s supposed to be cumulative? Three generations ago, two percent of the population were child geniuses. Two generations ago, five percent. One generation—a sine curve, Brother Locke. And the I.Q. mounts proportionately. Wasn’t your father a genius too?”

“He was,” Locke admitted. “But a maladjusted one.”

“I thought so. Mutations take time. The theory is that the transition is taking place right now, from homo sapiens to homo superior.”

“I know. It’s logical enough. Each generation of mutations—this domi-nant mutation at least—taking another step forward till homo superior is reached. What that will be—”

“I don’t think we’ll ever know,” Ryan said quietly. “I don’t think we’d understand. How long will it take, I wonder? The next generation? I don’t think so. Five more generations, or ten or twenty? And each one taking another step, realizing another buried potentiality of homo, until the summit is reached. Superman, Joel.”

“Absalom isn’t a superman,” Locke said practically. “Or a superchild, for that matter.”

“Are you sure?”

“Good Lord! Don’t you suppose I know my own son?”

“I won’t answer that,” Ryan said. “I’m certain that I don’t know all there is to know about the quizkids in my Crèche. Beltram, the Denver Crèche supervisor, tells me the same thing. These quizkids are the next step in the mutation. You and I are members of a dying species, Brother Locke.”

Locke's face changed. Without a word he clicked off the televisor.

The bell was ringing for his next class. But Locke stayed motionless, his cheeks and forehead slightly damp.

Presently, his mouth twisted in a curiously unpleasant smile, he nodded and turned from the televisor. .

He got home at five. He came in quietly, by the side entrance, and took the elevator upstairs. Absalom's door was dosed, but voices were coming through it faintly. Locke listened for a time. Then he rapped sharply on the panel.

"Absalom. Come downstairs. I want to talk to you."

In the living room he told Abigail to stay out for a while. With his back to the fireplace, he waited until Absalom came.

The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is. .

The boy entered without obvious embarrassment. He came forward and he faced his father, the boy-face calm and untroubled. He had poise, Locke saw, no doubt of that.

"I overheard some of your conversation, Absalom," Locke said. "It's just as well," Absalom said coolly. "I'd have told you tonight any-way. I've got to go on with that entropic course."

Locke ignored that. "Who were you vising?"

"A boy I know. Malcolm Roberts, in the Denver quizldd Crèche."

"Discussing entropic logic with him, eh? After what I'd told you?"

"You'll remember that I didn't agree."

Locke put his hands behind him and interlaced his fingers. "Then you'll also remember that I mentioned I had legal control over you."

"Legal," Absalom said, "yes. Moral, no."

"This has nothing to do with morals."

"It has, though. And with ethics. Many of the youngsters—younger than I—at the quizkid crèches are studying entropic logic. It hasn't harmed them. I must go to a crèche, or to Baja California. I must."

Locke bent his head thoughtfully.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Sorry, son. I got emotionally tangled for a moment. Let's go back on the plane of pure logic."

"All right," Absalom said, with a quiet, imperceptible withdrawal.

"I'm convinced that that particular study might be dangerous for you. I don't want you to be hurt. I want you to have every possible oppor-tunity, especially the ones I never had."

"No," Absalom said, a curious note of maturity in his high voice. "It wasn't lack of opportunity. It was incapability."

"What?" Locke said.

"You could never allow yourself to be convinced I could safely study entropic logic. I've learned that. I've talked to other quizkids."

"Of private matters?"

"They're of my race," Absalom said. "You're not. And please don't talk about

filial love. You broke that law yourself long ago."

"Keep talking," Locke said quietly, his mouth tight. "But make sure it's logical."

"It is. I didn't think I'd ever have to do this for a long time, but I've got to now. You're holding me back from what I've got to do."

"The step mutation. Cumulative. I see."

The fire was too hot. Locke took a step forward from the hearth. Ab-salom made a slight movement of withdrawal. Locke looked at him intently.

"It *is* a mutation," the boy said. "Not the complete one, but Grand-father was one of the first steps. You, too—further along than he did. And I'm further than you. My children will be closer toward the ulti-mate mutation. The only psychonamic experts worth anything are the child geniuses of your generation."

"Thanks."

"You're afraid of me," Absalom said. "You're afraid of me and jealous of me."

Locke started to laugh. "What about logic now?"

The boy swallowed. "It *is* logic. Once you were convinced that the mutation was cumulative, you couldn't bear to think I'd displace you. It's a basic psychological warp in you. You had the same thing with Grandfather, in a different way. That's why you turned to psycho-namics, where you were a small god, dragging out the secret minds of your students, molding their brains as Adam was molded. You're afraid that I'll outstrip you. And I will."

"That's why I let you study anything you wanted, I suppose?" Locke asked. 'With this exception?"

"Yes, it is. A lot of child geniuses work so hard they burn themselves out and lose their mental capacities entirely. You wouldn't have talked so much about the danger if—under these circumstances—it hadn't been the one thing paramount in your mind. Sure you gave me my head. And, subconsciously, you were hoping I *would* burn myself out, so I wouldn't be a possible rival any more."

"I see."

"You let me study math, plane geometry, calculus, non-Euclidean, but you kept pace with me. If you didn't know the subject already, you were careful to bone up on it, to assure yourself that it was some-thing you *could* grasp. You made sure I couldn't outstrip you, that I wouldn't get any knowledge you couldn't get. And that's why you wouldn't let me take entropic logic."

There was no expression on Locke's face.

"Why?" he asked coldly.

"You couldn't understand it yourself," Absalom said. "You tried it, and it was beyond you. You're not flexible. Your logic isn't flexible. It's founded on the fact that a second-hand registers sixty seconds. You've lost the sense of wonder. You've translated too much from ab-stract to concrete. I *can* understand entropic logic. I can understand it!"

"You've picked this up in the last week," Locke said.

"No. You mean the rapports. A long time ago I learned to keep part of my mind blanked off under your probing."

"That's impossible!" Locke said, startled.

"It is for you. I'm a further step in the mutation. I have a lot of talents you don't know anything about. And I know this—I'm not far enough advanced for my age.

The boys in the crèches are ahead of me. Their parents followed natural laws—it's the role of any parent to protect its young. Only the immature parents are Out of step—like you."

Locke was still quite impassive.

"I'm immature? And I hate you? I'm jealous of you? You've quite settled on that?"

"Is it true or not?"

Locke didn't answer. "You're still inferior to me mentally," he said, "and you will be for some years to come. Let's say, if you want it that way, that your superiority lies in your—flexibility—and your homo su-perior talents. Whatever they are. Against that, balance the fact that I'm a physically mature adult and you weigh less than half of what I do. I'm legally your guardian. And I'm stronger than you are."

Absalom swallowed again, but said nothing. Locke rose a little higher, looking down at the boy. His hand went to his middle, but found only a lightweight zipper.

He walked to the door. He turned.

"I'm going to prove to you that you're my inferior," he said coldly and quietly. "You're going to admit it to me."

Absalom said nothing.

Locke went upstairs. He touched the switch on his bureau, reached into the drawer, and withdrew an elastic lucite belt. He drew its cool, smooth length through his fingers once. Then he turned to the dropper again.

His lips were white and bloodless by now.

At the door of the living room he stopped, holding the belt. Absalom had not moved, but Abigail Schuler was standing beside the boy.

"Get out, Sister Schuler," Locke said.

"You're not going to whip him," Abigail said, her head held high, her lips purse-string tight.

"Get out."

"I won't. I heard every word. And it's true, all of it."

"Get out, I tell you!" Locke screamed.

He ran forward, the belt uncoiled in his hand. Absalom's nerve broke at last. He gasped with panic and dashed away, blindly seeking escape where there was none.

Locke plunged after him.

Abigail snatched up the little hearth broom and thrust it at Locke's legs. The man yelled something inarticulate as he lost his balance. He came down heavily, trying to brace himself against the fall with stiff arms.

His head struck the edge of a chair seat. He lay motionless.

Over his still body, Abigail and Absalom looked at each other. Sud-denly the woman dropped to her knees and began sobbing.

"I've killed him," she forced out painfully. "I've killed him—but I couldn't let him whip you, Absalom! I couldn't!"

The boy caught his lower lip between his teeth. He came forward slowly to examine his father.

"He's not dead."

Abigail's breath came out in a long, shuddering sigh.

"Go on upstairs, Abbie," Absalom said, frowning a little. "I'll give him first aid. I

know how."

"I can't let you—"

"Please, Abbie," he coaxed. "You'll faint or something. Lie down for a bit. It's all right, really."

At last she took the dropper upstairs. Absalom, with a thoughtful glance at his father, went to the televisor.

He called the Denver Crèche. Briefly he outlined the situation.

"What had I better do, Malcolm?"

"Wait a minute." There was a pause. Another young face showed on the screen. "Do this," an assured, high-pitched voice said, and there followed certain intricate instructions. "Got that straight, Absalom?"

"I have it. It won't hurt him?"

"He'll live. He's psychotically warped already. This will just give it a different twist, one that's safe for you. It's projection. He'll externalize all his wishes, feelings, and so forth. On you. He'll get his pleasure only Out of what *you* do, but he won't be able to control you. You know the psychonamic key of his brain. Work with the frontal lobe chiefly. Be careful of Broca's area. We don't want aphasia. He must be made

harmless to you, that's all. Any killing would be awkward to handle. Besides, I suppose you wouldn't want that."

"No," Absalom said. "H-he's my father."

"All right," the young voice said. "Leave the screen on. I'll watch and help."

Absalom turned toward the unconscious figure on the floor.

For a long time the world had been shadowy now. Locke was used to it. He could still fulfill his ordinary functions, so he was not insane, in any sense of the word.

Nor could he tell the truth to anyone. They had created a psychic block. Day after day he went to the university and taught psychonamics and came home and ate and waited in hopes that Absalom would call him on the televisor.

And when Absalom called, he might condescend to tell something of what he was doing in Baja California. What he had accomplished. What he had achieved. For those things mattered now. They were the only things that mattered. The projection was complete.

Absalom was seldom forgetful. He was a good son. He called daily, though sometimes, when work was pressing, he had to make the call short. But Joel Locke could always work at his immense scrapbooks, filled with clippings and photographs about Absalom. He was writing Absalom's biography, too.

He walked otherwise through a shadow world, existing in flesh and blood, in realized happiness, only when Absalom's face appeared on the televisor screen. But he had not forgotten anything. He hated Absalom, and hated the horrible, unbreakable bond that would forever chain him to his own flesh—the flesh that was not quite his own, but one step further up the ladder of the new mutation.

Sitting there in the twilight of unreality, his scrapbooks spread before him, the televisor set never used except when Absalom called, but stand-ing ready before his chair, Joel Locke nursed his hatred and a quiet, secret satisfaction that had come to him.

Some day Absalom would have a son. Some day. Some day.

HOUSING PROBLEM

Jacqueline said it was a canary, but I contended that there were a couple of lovebirds in the covered cage. One canary could never make that much fuss. Besides, I liked to think of crusty old Mr. Henchard keeping lovebirds; it was so completely inappropriate. But whatever ouz roomer kept in that cage by his window, he shielded it—or them—jeal-ously from prying eyes. All we had to go by were the noises.

And they weren't too simple to figure out. From under the cretonne cloth came shufflings, rustlings, occasional faint and inexplicable pops, and once or twice a tiny thump that made the whole hidden cage shake on its redwood pedestal-stand. Mr. Henchard must have known that we were curious. But all he said when Jackie remarked that birds were nice to have around, was "Claptrap! Leave that cage alone, d'ya hear?"

That made us a little mad. We're not snoopers, and after that brush-off, we coldly refused to even look at the shrouded cretonne shape. We didn't want to lose Mr. Henchard, either. Roomers were surprisingly hard to get. Our little house was on the coast highway; 'the town was a couple of dozen homes, a grocery, a liquor store, the post office and Terry's restaurant. That was about all. Every morning Jackie and I hopped the bus and rode in to the factory, an hour away. By the time we got home, we were pretty tired. We couldn't get any household help

—war jobs paid a lot better—so we both pitched in and cleaned. As for cooking, we were Terry's best customers.

The wages were good, but before the war we'd run up too many debts, so we needed extra dough. And that's why we rented a room to Mr. Hencharci. Off the beaten track with transportation difficult, and with the coast dimout every night, it wasn't too easy to get a roomer. Mr. Henchard looked like a natural. He was, we figured, too old to get into mischief.

One day he wandered in, paid a deposit; presently he showed up with a huge Gladstone and a square canvas grip with leather handles. He was a creaking little old man with a bristling tonsure of stiff hair and a face like Popeye's father, only more human. He wasn't sour; he was just crusty. I had a feeling he'd spent most of his life in furnished rooms, minding his own business and puffing innumerable cigarettes through a long black holder. But he wasn't one of those lonely old men

you could safely feel sorry for—far from it! He wasn't poor and he was completely self-sufficient. We loved him. I called him grandpa once, in an outburst of affection, and my skin blistered at the resultant remarks.

Some people are born under lucky stars. Mr. Henchard was like that. He was always finding money in the street. The few times we shot craps or played poker, he made passes and held straights without even trying. No question of sharp dealing—he was just lucky.

I remember the time we were all going down the long wooden stair-way that leads from the cliff-top to the beach. Mr. Henchard kicked at a pretty big rock that was on one of the steps. The stone bounced down a little way, and then went right through one of the treads. The wood was completely rotten. We felt fairly certain that if Mr. Hen-chard, who was leading, had stepped on that rotten section, the whole thing would have collapsed.

And then there was the time I was riding up with him in the bus. The motor stopped a few minutes after we'd boarded the bus; the driver pulled over. A car was coming toward us along the highway and, as we stopped, one of its front tires blew out. It skidded into the ditch. If we hadn't stopped when we did, there would have been a head-on collision. Not a soul was hurt.

Mr. Henchard wasn't lonely; he went out by day, I think, and at night he sat in his room near the window most of the time. We knocked, of course, before coming in to clean, and sometimes he'd say, "Wait a minute." There'd be a hasty rustling and the sound of that cretonne cover going on his bird cage. We wondered what sort of bird he had, and theorized on the possibility of a phoenix. The creature never sang. It made noises. Soft, odd, not-always-birdlike noises. By the time we got home from work, Mr. Henchard was always in his room. He stayed there while we cleaned. On week-ends, he never went out.

As for the cage .

One night Mr. Henchard came out, stuffing a cigarette into his holder, and looked us over.

"Mph," said Mr. Henchard. "Listen, I've got some property to 'tend to up north, and I'll be away for a week or so. I'll still pay the rent."

"Oh, well," Jackie said. "We can—"

"Claptrap," he growled. "It's my room. I'll keep it if I like. How about that, hey?"

We agreed, and he smoked half his cigarette in one gasp. "Mm-rn. Well, look here, now. Always before I've had my own car. So I've taken my bird cage with me. This time I've got to travel on the bus, so I can't take it. You've been pretty nice—not peepers or pryers. You got

sense. I'm going to leave my bird cage here, but *don't you touch that cover!"*

"The canary—" Jackie gulped. "It'll starve."

"Canary, hmm?" Mr. Henchard said, fixing her with a beady, wicked eye. "Never you mind. I left plenty o' food *and* water. You just keep your hands off. Clean my room when it needs it, if you want, but don't you dare touch the bird cage. What do you say?"

"Okay with us," I said.

'Well, you mind what I say," he snapped.

That next night, when we got home, Mr. Henchard was gone. We went into his room and there was a note pinned to the cretonne cover. It said, "Mind, now!" Inside the cage something went *rustle-whirr.* And then there was a faint pop.

"Hell with it," I said. "Want the shower first?"

"Yes," Jackie said.

Whirr-r went the cage. But it wasn't wings. *Thump!*

The next night I said, "Maybe he left enough food, but I bet the water's getting low."

“Eddie!” Jackie remarked.

“All right, I’m curious. But I don’t like the idea of birds dying of thirst, either.”

“Mr. Henchard said—”

“All right, again. Let’s go down to Terry’s and see ~.vhat the lamb chop situation is.”

The next night—Oh, well. We lifted the cretonne. I still think we were less curious than worried. Jackie said she once knew somebody who used to beat his canary.

“We’ll find the poor beast cowering in chains,” she remarked flicking her dust-cloth at the windowsill, behind the cage. I turned off the vacuum. *Whish—trot-trot-trot* went something under the cretonne.

“Yeah—” I said. “Listen, Jackie. Mr. Henchard’s all right, but he’s a crackpot. That bird or birds may be thirsty now. I’m going to take a look.”

“No. Uh—yes. We both will, Eddie. We’ll split the responsibility.” I reached for the cover, and Jackie ducked under my arm and put her hand over mine.

Then we lifted a corner of the cloth. Something had been rustling around inside, but the instant we touched the cretonne, the sound stopped. I meant to take only one swift glance. My hand continued to lift the cover, though. I could see my arm moving and I couldn’t stop it. I was too busy looking.

Inside the cage was a—well, a little house. It seemed complete in every detail. A tiny house painted white, with green shutters— ornamental, not meant to close—for the cottage was strictly modern. It was the sort of comfortable, well-built house you see all the time in the suburbs. The tiny windows had chintz curtains; they were lighted up, on the ground floor. The moment we lifted the cloth, each window suddenly blacked out. The lights didn’t go off, but shades snapped down with an irritated jerk. It happened fast. Neither of us saw who or what pulled down those shades.

I let go of the cover and stepped back, pulling Jackie with me.

“A d-doll house, Eddie!”

“With dolls in it?”

I stared past her at the hooded cage. “Could you, maybe, do you think, perhaps, train a canary to pull down shades?”

“Oh, my! Eddie, listen.”

Faint sounds were coming from the cage. Rustles, and an almost in-audible pop. Then a scraping.

I went over and took the cretonne cloth clear off. This time I was ready; I watched the windows. But the shades flicked down as I blinked.

Jackie touched my arm and pointed. On the sloping roof was a mini-ature brick chimney; a wisp of pale smoke was rising from it. The smoke kept coming up, but it was so thin I couldn’t smell it.

“The c-canaries are c-cooking,” Jackie gurgled.

We stood there for a while, expecting almost anything. If a little green man had popped out of the front door and offered us three wishes, we shouldn’t have been much surprised. Only nothing happened.

There wasn’t a sound, now, from the wee house in the bird cage.

And the blinds were down. I could see that the whole affair was a masterpiece of

detail. The little front porch had a tiny mat on it. There was a doorbell, too.

Most cages have removable bottoms. This one didn't. Resin stains and dull gray metal showed where soldering had been done. The door was soldered shut, too. I could put my forefinger between the bars, but my thumb was too thick.

"It's a nice little cottage, isn't it?" Jackie said, her voice quavering. "They must be such *little* guys—"

"Guys?"

"Birds. Eddie, who lives in that house?"

'Well," I said. I took out my automatic pencil, gently inserted it be-tween the bars of the cage, and poked at an open window, where the shade snapped up. From within the house something like the needle-

beam of a miniature flashlight shot into my eye, blinding me with its brilliance. As I grunted and jerked back, I heard a window slam and the shade come down again.

"Did you see what happened?"

"No, your head was in the way. But—"

As we looked, the lights went out. Only the thin smoke curling from the chimney indicated that anything was going on.

"Mr. Henchard's a mad scientist," Jackie muttered. "He shrinks people."

"Not without an atom-smasher," I said. "Every mad scientist's got to have an atom-smasher to make artificial lightning."

I put my pencil between the bars again. I aimed carefully, pressed the point against the doorbell, and rang. A thin shrilling was heard.

The shade at one of the windows by the door was twitched 'aside hastily, and something probably looked at me. I don't know. I wasn't quick enough to see it. The shade fell back in place, and there was no more movement. I rang the bell till I got tired of it. Then I stopped.

"I could take the cage apart," I said.

"Oh *no!* Mr. Henchard—"

'Well," I said, "when he comes back, I'm going to ask him what the hell. He can't keep pixies. It isn't in the lease."

"He doesn't have a lease," Jackie countered.

I examined the little house in the bird cage. No sound, no movement. Smoke coming from the chimney.

After all, we had no right to break into the cage. Housebreaking? I had visions of a little green man with wings flourishing a night stick, arresting me for burglary. Did pixies have cops? What sort of crimes.

I put the cover back on the cage. After a while, vague noises emerged. *Scrape. Thump. Rustle, rustle, rustle. Pop.* And an unbirdlike trilling that broke off short.

"Oh, my," Jackie said. "Let's go away quick."

We went right to bed. I dreamed of a horde of little green guys in Mack Sennett cop uniforms, dancing on a bilious rainbow and singing gaily.

The alarm clock woke me. I showered, shaved and dressed, thinking of the same thing Jackie was thinking of. As we put on our coats, I met her eyes and said, "Shall we?"

"Yes. Oh, golly, Eddie! D-do you suppose they'll be leaving for work, too?"

"What sort of work?" I inquired angrily. "Painting buttercups?"

There wasn't a sound from beneath the cretonne when we tiptoed into Mr. Henchard's room. Morning sunlight blazed through the win-dow. I jerked the cover off. There was the house. One of the blinds was up; all the rest were tightly firm. I put my head close to the cage and stared through the bars into the open window, where scraps of chintz curtains were blowing in the breeze.

I saw a great big eye looking back at me.

This time Jackie was certain I'd got my mortal wound. The breath went out of her with a whoosh as I caromed back, yelling about a hor-rible blood-shot eye that wasn't human. We clutched each other for a while and then I looked again.

"Oh," I said, rather faintly. "It's a mirror."

"A *mirror?"* she gasped.

"Yeah, a big one, on the opposite wall. That's all I can see. I can't get close enough to the window."

"Look on the porch," Jackie said.

I looked. There was a milk bottle standing by the door—you can guess the size of it. It was purple. Beside it was a folded postage stamp.

"Purple milk?" I said.

"From a purple cow. Or else the bottle's colored. Eddie, is that a newspaper?"

It was. I strained my eyes to read the headlines. EXTRA was splashed redly across the sheet, in huge letters nearly a sixteenth of an inch high. EXTRA—FOTZPA MOVES ON TUR! That was all we could make out.

I put the cretonne gently back over the cage. We went down to Terry's for breakfast while we waited for the bus.

When we rode home that night, we knew what our first job would be. We let ourselves into the house, discovered that Mr. Henchard hadn't come back yet, switched on the light in his room, and listened to the noise from the bird cage.

"Music," Jackie said.

It was so faint I scarcely heard it, and, in any case, it wasn't real music. I can't begin to describe it. And it died away immediately. *Thump, scrape, pop, buzz.* Then silence, and I pulled off the cover.

The house was dark, the windows were shut, the blinds were down. Paper and milk bottle were gone from the porch. On the front door was a sign that said—after I used a magnifying glass: QUARANTINE! SCOPPY FEVER!

"Why, the little liars," I said. "I bet they haven't got scoppy fever at all."

Jackie giggled wildly. "You only get scoppy fever in April, don't you?"

"April and Christmas. That's when the bread-and-butter flies carry it. Where's my pencil?"

I rang the bell. A shade twitched aside, flipped back; neither of us had seen the—hand?—that moved it. Silence; no smoke coming out of the chimney.

"Scared?" I asked.

"No. It's funny, but I'm not. They're such standoffish little guys. The Cabots speak only to—"

"Where the pixies speak only to goblins, you mean," I said. "They can't snoot us this way. It's our house their house is in, if you follow me."

"What can we do?"

I manipulated the pencil, and, with considerable difficulty, wrote LET US IN on

the white panel of the door. There wasn't room for more than that. Jackie tsked.

"Maybe you shouldn't have written that. We don't want to get *in.* We just want to see them."

"Too late now. Besides, they'll know what we mean."

We stood watching the house in the bird cage, and it watched us, in a sullen and faintly annoyed fashion. SCOPPY FEVER, indeed!

That was all that happened that night.

The next morning we found that the tiny front door had been scrubbed clean of my pencil marks, that the quarantine' sign was still there, and that there was a bottle of green milk and another paper on the porch. This time the headline said.

EXTRA—FOTZPA OVER-SHOOTS TUR!

Smoke was idling from the chimney. I rang the bell again. No an-swer. I noticed a domino of a mailbox by the door, chiefly because I could see through the slot that there were letters inside. But the thing was locked.

"If we could see whom they were addressed to—" Jackie suggested.

"Or whom they're from. That's what interests me."

Finally, we went to work. I was preoccupied all day, and nearly welded my thumb onto a boogie-arm. When I met Jackie that night, I could see that she'd been bothered, too.

"Let's ignore them," she said as we bounced home on the bus. "We know when we're not wanted, don't we?"

"I'm not going to be high-hatted by a—by a critter. Besides, we'll both go quietly nuts if we don't find out what's inside that house. Do you suppose Mr. Herichard's a wizard?"

"He's a louse," Jackie said bitterly. "Going off and leaving ambiguous pixies on our hands!"

When we got home, the little house in the bird cage took alarm, as usual, and by the time we'd yanked off the cover, the distant, soft noises had faded into silence. Lights shone through the drawn blinds. The porch had only the mat on it. In the mailbox we could see the yellow envelope of a telegram.

Jackie turned pale. "It's the last straw," she insisted. "A telegram!"

"It may not be."

"It is, it is, I know it is. Aunt Tinker Bell's dead. Or Iolanthe's coming for a visit."

"The quarantine sign's off the door," I said. "There's a new one. It says 'wet paint.'"

"Well, you will scribble all over their nice clean door."

I put the cretonne back, turned off the light switch, and took Jackie's hand. We stood waiting. After a time something went *bump-bump-bump,* and then there was a singing, like a tea-kettle. I heard a tiny clatter.

Next morning there were twenty-six bottles of yellow milk—bright yellow—on the tiny porch, and the Lilliputian headline announced:

EXTRA—TUR SLIDES TOWARD FOTZPA!

There was mail in the box, too, but the telegram was gone.

That night things continued much as before. When I pulled the cloth off there was a sudden, furious silence. We felt that we were be-ing watched around the corners of the miniature shades. We finally went to bed, but in the middle of the night I got up

and took another look at our mysterious tenants. Not that I saw *them,* of course. But they must have been throwing a party, for bizarre, small music and wild thumps and pops died into silence as I peeked.

In the morning there was a red bottle and a newspaper on the little porch. The headline said: EXTRA—FOTZPA GOES UP!

"My work's going to the dogs," I said. "I can't concentrate for think-ing about this business—and wondering. . ."

"Me, too. We've *got* to find out somehow."

I peeked. A shade came down so sharply that it almost tore free from its roller.

"Do you think they're mad?" I asked.

"Yes," Jackie said, "I do. We must be bothering the very devil out of 'em. Look—I'll bet they're sitting inside by the windows, boiling mad, waiting for us to go away. Maybe we'd better go. It's time for the bus anyway."

I looked at the house, and the house, I felt, looked at me with an air of irritated and resentful fury. Oh, well. We went to work.

We were tired and hungry when we got back that night, but even before removing our coats we went into Mr. Henchard's room. Silence. I switched on the light while Jackie pulled off the cretonne cover from the cage.

I heard her gasp. Instantly I jumped forward, expecting to see a little green guy on that absurd porch—or anything, for that matter. I saw nothing unusual. There was no smoke coming from the chimney.

But Jackie was pointing to the front door. There was a neat, painted sign tacked to the panel. It said, very sedately, simply, and finally: TO

LET.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Jackie said.

I gulped. All the shades were up in the tiny windows and the chintz curtains were gone. We could see into the house for the first time. It was completely and awfully empty.

No furniture, anywhere. Nothing at all but a few scrapes and scratches on the polished hardwood floor. The wallpaper was scrupu-lously clean; the patterns, in the various rooms, were subdued and in good taste. The tenants had left their house in order.

"They moved," I said.

"Yes," Jackie murmured. "They moved out."

All of a sudden I felt lousy. The house—not the tiny one in the cage, but our own—was awfully empty. You know how it i~ when you've been on a visit, and come home into a place that's full of nothing and nobody?

I grabbed Jackie and held her tight. She felt pretty bad, too. You wouldn't think that a tiny TO LET sign could make so much differ-ence.

"What'll Mr. 1-lenchard say'?" Jackie asked, watching me with big eyes.

Mr. Henchard came home two nights later. We were sitting by the fire when he walked in, his Gladstone swinging, the black cigarette holder jutting from below his beak. "Mph," he greeted us.

"Hello," I said weakly. "Glad you're back."

"Claptrap!" said Mr. Henchard firmly as he headed for his room. Jackie and I looked at one another.

Mr. Henchard squalled in sheer fury. His twisted face appeared around the door.

"Busybodies!" he snarled. "I *told* you—"

'Wait a minute," I said.

"I'm moving Out!" Mr. Henchard barked. "Now!" His head popped

back out of sight; the door slammed and locked. Jackie and I waited, half expecting to be spanked.

Mr. Henchard bounced out of his room, Gladstone suspended from one hand. He whirled past us toward the door.

I tried to stop him. "Mr. Henchard—"

"Claptrap!"

Jackie pulled at one arm, I got a grip on the other. Between us, we managed to bring him to a stop.

"Wait," I said. "You've forgotten your—uh—bird cage."

"That's what you think," he snarled at me. "You can have it. Med-dlers! It took me months to build that little house just right, and months more to coax 'em to live in it. Now you've spoiled it. They won't be back."

'Who?" Jackie gulped.

His beady eyes were fixed malignantly on us. "My tenants. I'll have to build a new house now—ha! But this time I won't leave it within reach of meddlers."

'Wait," I said. "Are—are you a m-magician?"

Mr. Henchard snorted. "I'm a good craftsman. That's all it takes. You treat them right, and they'll treat you right. Still—" And he gleamed a bit with pride. "—it isn't everybody who knows how to build the right sort of house for *them!"*

He seemed to be softening, but my next question roused him again.

'9AThat were they?" he snapped. "The Little Folk, of course. Call 'em what you like. Nixie, pixie, leprechaun, brownie—they've had lots of names. But they want a quiet, respectable neighborhood to live in, not a lot of peeping and prying. Gives the property a bad name. No wonder they moved out! And—mph!—they paid their rent on time, too. Still, the Little Folk always do," he added.

"Rent?" Jackie said faintly.

"Luck," Mr. Henchard said. "Good luck. What did you expect they'd pay in—money? Now I'll have to build another house to get my special luck back."

He gave us one parting glare, jerked open the door, and stamped out. We stood looking after him. The bus was pulling into the gas station down the slope, and Mr. Henchard broke into a run.

He caught the bus, all right, but only after he'd fallen flat on his face.

I put my arm around Jackie.

"Oh, gosh," she said. "His bad luck's working already."

"Not *bad,"* I pointed out. "Just normal. When you rent a little house to pixies, you get a lot of extra good luck."

We sat in silence, watching each other. Finally without saying a word, we went into Mr. Henchard's vacated room. The bird cage was still there. So was the house. So was the TO LET sign.

"Let's go to Terry's," I said.

We stayed later than usual. Anybody would have thought we didn't want to go home because we lived in a haunted house. Except that in our case the exact

opposite was true. Our house wasn't haunted any more. It was horribly, desolately, coldly vacant.

I didn't say anything till we'd crossed the highway, climbed the slope, and unlocked our front door. We went, I don't know why, for a final look at the empty house. The cover was back on the cage, where I'd replaced it, *but—thump, rustle, pop!* The house was tenanted again!

We backed out and closed the door before we breathed.

"No," Jackie said. "We mustn't look. We mustn't ever, *ever,* look un-der that cover."

"Never," I said. "Who do you suppose . . ."

We caught a very faint murmur of what seemed to be boisterous sing-ing. That was fine. The happier they were, the longer they'd stay. When we went to bed, I dreamed that I was drinking beer with Rip Van Winkle and the dwarfs. I drank 'em all under the table.

It was unimportant that the next morning was rainy. We were con-vinced that bright yellow sunlight was blazing in through the windows. I sang under the shower. Jackie burbled inarticulately and joyously. We didn't open Mr. Henchard's door.

"Maybe they want to sleep late," I said.

It's always noisy in the machine-shop, and a hand-truckload of rough cylinder casings going past doesn't increase the din noticeably. At three o'clock that afternoon, one of the boys was rolling the stuff along to-ward the storeroom, and I didn't hear it or see it until I'd stepped back from my planer, cocking my eye at its adjustment.

Those big planers are minor juggernauts. They have to be bedded in concrete, in heavy thigh-high cradles on which a heavily weighted metal monster—the planer itself—slides back and forth.

I stepped back, saw the hand-truck coming, and made a neat waltz turn to get out of its way. The boy with the hand-truck swerved, the cylinders began to fall out, and I took an unbalanced waltz step that ended with my smacking my thighs against the edge of the cradle and doing a neat, suicidal half-somersault. When I landed, I was jammed into the metal cradle, looking at the planer as it zoomed down on me. I've never in my life seen anything move so fast.

It was all over before I knew it. I was struggling to bounce myself out, men were yelling, the planer was bellowing with bloodthirsty iii-

umph, and the cylinder heads were rolling around underfoot all over the place. Then there was the crackling, tortured crash of gears and cams going to pieces. The planer stopped. My heart started.

After Pd changed my clothes, I waited for Jackie to knock off. Rolling home on the bus, I told her about it. "Pure dumb luck. Or else a mir-acle. One of those cylinders bounced into the planer in just the right place. The planer's a mess, but I'm not. I think we ought to write a note of thanks to our—uh—tenants."

Jackie nodded with profound conviction. "It's the luck they pay their rent in, Eddie. I'm glad they paid in advance, too!"

"Except that I'm off the payroll till the planer's fixed," I said.

We went home through a storm. We could hear a banging in Mr. Henchard's room, louder than any noise that had ever come from the bird cage. We rushed

upstairs and found the casement window had come open. I closed it. The cretonne cover had been half blown off the cage, and I started to pull it back in place. Jackie was beside me. We looked at the tiny house; my hand didn't complete its gesture.

The TO LET sign had been removed from the door. The chimney was smoking greasily. The blinds were tightly down, as usual, but there were other changes.

There was a small smell of cooking—scorned beef and skunk cabbage, I thought wildly. Unmistakably it came from the pixie house. On the formerly immaculate porch was a slopping-over garbage can, and a minuscule orange crate with unwashed, atom-sized tin cans and what were indubitably empty liquor bottles. There was a milk bottle by the door, too, filled with a biliously lavender liquid. It hadn't been taken in yet, nor had the morning paper. It was certainly a different paper. The lurid size of the headlines indicated that it was a yellow tabloid.

A clothesline, without any clothes hanging on it at the moment, had been tacked up from one pillar of the porch to a corner of the house.

I jerked down the cover, and fled after Jackie into the kitchen. "My God!" I said.

'We should have asked for references," she gasped. "Those aren't *our* tenants!"

"Not the tenants we used to have," I agreed. "I mean the ones Mr. Henchard used to have. Did you see that garbage pail on the porch!"

"And the clothesline," Jackie added. "How—how sloppy."

"Jukes, Kallikaks and Jeeter Lesters. This isn't Tobacco Road."

Jackie gulped. "Mr. Henchard said they wouldn't be back, you know."

"Yeah, but, well—"

She nodded slowly, as though beginning to understand. I said, "Give."

"I don't know. Only Mr. Henchard said the Little Folk wanted a quiet, respectable neighborhood. And we drove them out. I'll bet we gave the bird cage—the location—a bad reputation. The better-class pixies won't live there. It's—oh, dear—maybe it's a slum."

"You're very nuts," I said.

"I'm not. It must be that. Mr. Henchard said as much. He told us he'd have to build a new house. Desirable tenants won't move into a bad neighborhood. We've got sloppy pixies, that's all."

My mouth opened. I stared at her.

"Uh-huh. The tenement type. I'll bet they keep a pixilated goat in the kitchen," Jackie babbled.

"Well," I said, "we're not going to stand for it. I'll evict 'em. I—I'll pour water down their chimney. Where's the teakettle'?"

Jackie grabbed me. "No, you don't! We can't evict them, Eddie. We mustn't. They pay their rent," she said.

And then I remembered. "The planer—"

"Just that," Jackie emphasized, digging her fingers into my biceps. "You'd have been killed today if you hadn't had some extra good luck. Those pixies may be sloppy, but they pay their rent."

I got the angle. "Mr. Henchard's luck worked differently, though. Remember when he kicked that rock down the beach steps, and they started to cave in? Me, I do it the hard way. I fall in the planer, sure, and a cylinder bounces after me and stops the machine but I'll be out of a job till the planer's fixed. Nothing like that ever

happened to Mr. Henchard."

"He had a better class of tenant," Jackie explained, with a wild gleam in her eye. "If Mr. Henchard had fallen in the planer, a fuse would have blown, I'll bet. Our tenants are sloppy pixies, so we get sloppy luck."

"They stay," I said. 'We own a slum. Let's get out of here and go down to Terry's for a drink."

We buttoned our raincoats and departed, breathing the fresh, wet air. The storm was slashing down as furiously as ever. I'd forgotten my flashlight, but I didn't want to go back for it. We headed down the slope, toward Terry's faintly visible lights.

It was dark. We couldn't see much through the storm. Probably that was why we didn't notice the bus until it was bearing down on us, headlights almost invisible in the dimout.

I started to pull Jackie aside, out of the way, but my foot slipped

on the wet concrete, and we took a nosedive. I felt Jackie's body hurtle against me, and the next moment we were floundering in the muddy ditch beside the highway while the bus roared past us and was gone.

We crawled out and made for Terry's. The barman stared at us, said, "Whew!" and set up drinks without being asked.

"Unquestionably," I said, "our lives have just been saved."

"Yes," Jackie agreed, scraping mud from her ears. "But it wouldn't have happened this way to Mr. Henchard."

The barman shook his head. "Fall in the ditch, Eddie? And you too? Bad luck!"

"Not bad," Jackie told him feebly. "Good. But sloppy." She lifted her drink and eyed me with muddy misery. I clinked my glass against hers.

"Well," I said. "Here's luck."

A GNOME THERE WAS

Tim Crockett should never have sneaked into the mine on Dornsef Mountain. What is winked at in California may have disastrous results in the coal mines of Pennsylvania. Especially when gnomes are in-volved.

Not that Tim Crockett knew about the gnomes. He was just inves-tigating conditions among the lower classes, to use his own rather ill-chosen words. He was one of a group of southern Californians who had decided that labor needed them. They were wrong. They needed labor—at least eight hours of it a day.

Crockett, like his colleagues, considered the laborer a combination of a gorilla and The Man with the Hoe, probably numbering the Kalli-kaks among his ancestors. He spoke fierily of down-trodden minorities, wrote incendiary articles for the group's organ, *Earth,* and deftly ma-neuvered himself out of entering his father's law office as a clerk. He had, he said, a mission. Unfortunately, he got little sympathy from either the workers or their oppressors.

A psychologist could have analyzed Crockett easily enough. He was a tall, thin, intense-looking young man, with rather beady little eyes, and a nice taste in neckties. All he needed was a vigorous kick in the pants.

But definitely not administered by a gnome!

He was junketing through the country, on his father's money, investigating labor conditions, to the profound annoyance of such labor-ers as he encountered. It was with this idea in mind that he sur-reptitiously got into the Ajax coal mine—or, at least, one shaft of it— after disguising himself as a miner and rubbing his face well with black dust. Going down in the lift, he looked singularly untidy in the midst of a group of well-scrubbed faces. Miners look dirty only after a day's work.

Domsef Mountain is honeycombed, but not with the shafts of the Ajax Company. The gnomes have ways of blocking their tunnels when humans dig too close. The whole place was a complete confusion to Crockett. He let himself drift along with the others, till they began to work. A filled car rumbled past on its tracks. Crockett hesitated, and

then sidled over to a husky specimen who seemed to have the marks of a great sorrow stamped on his face.

"Look," he said, "I want to talk to you."

"Inglis?" asked the other inquiringly. "Viskey. Chin. Vine. Hell." Having thus demonstrated his somewhat incomplete conunand of English, he bellowed hoarsely with laughter and returned to work, ignoring the baffled Crockett, who turned away to find another victim. But this section of the mine seemed deserted. Another loaded car rum-bled past, and Crockett decided to see where it came from. He found out, after banging his head painfully and falling flat at least five times.

It came from a hole in the wall. Crockett entered it, and simul-taneously heard a hoarse cry from behind him. The unknown requested Crockett to come back.

"So I can break your slab-sided neck," he promised, adding a stream of sizzling profanity. "Come outa there!"

Crockett cast one glance back, saw a gorillalike shadow lurching after him, and instantly decided that his stratagem had been discovered. The owners of the Ajax mine had sent a strong-arm man to murder him—or, at least, to beat him to a senseless pulp. Terror lent wings to Crockett's flying feet. He rushed on, frantically searching for a side tunnel in which he might lose himself. The bellowing from behind re-echoed against the walls. Abruptly Crockett caught a significant sentence clearly.

"—before that dynamite goes off!"

It was at that exact moment that the dynamite went off.

Crockett, however, did not know it. He discovered, quite briefly, that he was flying. Then he was halted, with painful suddenness, by the roof. After that he knew nothing at all, till he recovered to find a head regarding him steadfastly.

It was not a comforting sort of head—not one at which you would instinctively clutch for companionship. It was, in fact, a singularly odd, if not actually revolting, head. Crockett was too much engrossed with staring at it to realize that he was actually seeing in the dark.

How long had he been unconscious? For some obscure reason Crock-ett felt that it had been quite a while. The explosion had—what?

Buried him here behind a fallen roof of rock? Crockett would have felt little better had he known that he was in a used-up shaft, valueless now, which had been

abandoned long since. The miners, blasting to open a new shaft, had realized that the old one would be collapsed, but that didn't matter.

Except to Tim Crockett.

He blinked, and when he reopened his eyes, the head had vanished. This was a relief. Crockett immediately decided the unpleasant thing had been a delusion. Indeed, it was difficult to remember what it had looked like. There was only a vague impression of a turnip-shaped outline, large, luminous eyes, and an incredibly broad slit of a mouth.

Crockett sat up, groaning. Where was this curious silvery radiance coming from? It was like daylight on a foggy afternoon, coming from nowhere in particular, and throwing no shadows. "Radium," thought Crockett, who knew very little of mineralogy.

He was in a shaft that stretched ahead into dimness till it made a sharp turn perhaps fifty feet away. Behind him—behind him the roof had fallen. Instantly Crockett began to experience difficulty in breath-ing. He flung himself upon the rubbly mound, tossing rocks frantically here and there, gasping and making hoarse, inarticulate noises.

He became aware, presently, of his hands. His movements slowed till he remained perfectly motionless, in a half-crouching posture, glaring at the large, knobbly, and surprising objects that grew from his wrists. Gould he, during his period of unconsciousness, have acquired mit-tens? Even as the thought came to him, Crockett realized that no mit-tens ever knitted resembled in the slightest degree what he had a right to believe to be his hands. They twitched slightly.

Possibly they were caked with mud—no. It wasn't that. His hands had—altered. They were huge, gnarled, brown objects, like knotted oak roots. Sparse black hairs sprouted on their backs. The nails were definitely in need of a manicure—preferably with a chisel.

Crockett looked down at himself. He made soft cheeping noises, indicative of disbelief. He had squat bow legs, thick and strong, and no more than two feet long—less, if anything. Uncertain with disbe-lief, Crockett explored his body. It had changed—certainly not for the better.

He was slightly more than four feet high, and about three feet wide, with a barrel chest, enormous splay feet, stubby thick legs, and no neck whatsoever. He was wearing red sandals, blue shorts, and a red tunic which left his lean but sinewy arms bare. His head— Turnip-shaped. The mouth—Yipe! Crockett had inadvertently put his fist clear into it. He withdrew the offending hand instantly, stared around in a dazed fashion, and collapsed on the ground. It couldn't be happening. It was quite impossible. Hallucinations. He was dying of asphyxiation, and delusions were preceding his death.

Crockett shut his eyes, again convinced that his lungs were laboring for breath. "I'm dying," he said. "I c-can't breathe."

A contemptuous voice said, "I hope you don't think you're breath-ing *air!*"

"I'm n-not—" Crockett didn't finish the sentence. His eyes popped again. He was hearing things.

He heard it again. "You're a singularly lousy specimen of -gnome," the voice said.

“But under Nid’s law we can’t pick and choose. Still, you won’t be put to digging hard metals, I can see that. Anthracite’s about your speed. What’re you staring at? You’re *very* much uglier than I am.”

Crockett, endeavoring to lick his dry lips, was horrified to discover the end of his moist tongue dragging limply over his eyes. He whipped it back, with a loud smacking noise, and managed to sit up. Then he remained perfectly motionless, staring.

The head had reappeared. This time there was a body under it.

“I’m Gru Magru,” said the head chattily. “You’ll be given a gnomic name, of course, unless your own is guttural enough. What is it?”

“Crockett,” the man responded, in a stunned, automatic manner.

“Hey?”

“Crockett.”

“Stop making noises like a frog and—oh, I see. Crockett. Fair enough. Now get up and follow me or I’ll kick the pants off you.”

But Crockett did not immediately rise. He was watching Gru Magru

—obviously a gnome. Short, squat and stunted, the bei~ng’s figure re-sembled a bulging little barrel, topped by an inverted turnip. The hair grew up thickly to a peak—the root, as it were. In the turnip face was a loose, immense slit of a mouth, a button of a nose, and two very large eyes.

“Get *up!”* Gru Magru said.

This time Crockett obeyed, but the effort exhausted him completely. If he moved again, he thought, he would go mad. It would be just as well. Gnomes— Gru Magru planted a large splay foot where it would do the most good, and Crockett described an arc which ended at a jagged boulder fallen from the roof. “Get up,” the gnome said, with gratuitous bad temper, “or I’ll kick you again. It’s bad enough to have an outlying prospect patrol, where I might run into a man any time, without— *Up!* Or—”

Crockett got up. Gru Magru took his arm and impelled him into the depths of the tunnel.

‘Well, you’re a gnome now,” he said. “It’s the Nid law. Sometimes I wonder if it’s worth the trouble. But I suppose it is—since gnomes

can’t propagate, and the average population has to be kept up some-how.”

“I want to die,” Crockett said wildly.

Gru Magru laughed. “Gnomes *can’t* die. They’re immortal, till the Day. Judgment Day, I mean.”

“You’re not logical,” Crockett pointed out, as though by disproving one factor he could automatically disprove the whole fantastic busi-ness. “You’re either flesh and blood and have to die eventually, or you’re not, and then you’re not real.”

“Oh, we’re flesh and blood, right enough,” Gru Magru said. “But we’re not mortal. There’s a distinction. Not that I’ve anything against some mortals,” he hastened to explain. “Bats, now—and owls—they’re fine. But men!” He shuddered. “No gnome can stand the sight of a man.”

Crockett clutched at a straw. “I’m a man.”

“You were, you mean,” Gru said. “Not a very good specimen, either, for my ore. But you’re a gnome now. It’s the Nid law.”

“You keep talking about the Nid law,” Crockett complained.

“Of course you don’t understand,” said Cru Magru, in a patronizing fashion. “It’s this way. Back in ancient times, it was decreed that if any humans got lost in underearth, a tithe of them would be trans-formed into gnomes. The first gnome emperor, Podrang the Third, ar-ranged that. He saw that fairies could kidnap human children and keep them, and spoke to the authorities about it. Said it was unfair. So when miners and such-like are lost underneath, a tithe of them are transformed into gnomes and join us. That’s what happened to you. See?”

“No,” Crockett said weakly. “Look. You said Podrang was the first gnome emperor. Why was he called Podrang the Third?”

“No time for questions,” Gru Magru snapped. “Hurry!”

He was almost running now, dragging the wretched Crockett after him. The new gnome had not yet mastered his rather unusual limbs, and, due to the extreme wideness of his sandals, he trod heavily on his right hand, but after that learned to keep his arms bent and close to his sides. The walls, illuminated with that queer silvery ra-diance, spun past dizzily.

“W-what’s that light?” Crockett managed to gasp. ‘Where’s it coming from?”

“Light?” Gru Magru inquired. “It isn’t light.”

“V/ell, it isn’t dark—”

“Of course it’s dark,” the gnome snapped. “How could we see if it wasn’t dark?”

There was no possible answer to this, except, Crockett thought wildly, a frantic shriek. And he needed all his breath for running. They were in a labyrinth now, turning and twisting and doubling through in-numerable tunnels, and Crockett knew he could never retrace his steps. He regretted having left the scene of the cave-in. But how could he have helped doing so?

“Hurry!” Gru Magru urged. “Hurry!”

“Why?” Crockett got out breathlessly.

“There’s a fight going on!” the gnome said.

Just then they rounded a corner and almost blundered into the fight. A seething mass of gnomes filled the tunnel, battling with frantic fury. Red and blue pants and tunics moved in swift patchwork frenzy; turnip heads popped up and down vigorously. It was apparently a free-for-all.

“See!” Gm gloated. “A fight! I could smell it six tunnels away. Oh, a beauty!” He ducked as a malicious-looking little gnome sprang out of the huddle to seize a rock and hurl it with vicious accuracy. The missile missed its mark, and Gru, neglecting his captive, immediately hurled himself upon the little gnome, bore him down on the cave floor, and began to beat his head against it. Both parties shrieked at the tops of their voices, which were lost in the deafening din that resounded through the tunnel.

“Oh—my,” Crockett said weakly. He stood staring, s~’hich was a mistake. A very large gnome emerged from the pile, seized Crockett by the feet, and threw him away. The terrified inadvertent projectile sailed through the tunnel to crash heavily into something which said, *“Whoo-doof!”* There was a tangle of malformed arms and legs.

Crockett arose to find that he had downed a vicious-looking gnome with flaming red hair and four large diamond buttons on his tunic. This repulsive creature lay

motionless, out for the count. Crockett took stock of his injuries—there were none. His new body was hardy, anyway.

"You saved me!" said a new voice. It belonged to a—lady gnome. Crockett decided that if there was anything uglier than a gnome, it was the female of the species. The creature stood crouching just behind him, clutching a large rock in one capable hand.

Crockett ducked.

"I won't hurt you," the other howled above the din that filled the passage. "You saved me! Mugza was trying to pull my ears off—oh! He's waking up!"

The red-haired gnome was indeed recovering consciousness. His first

act was to draw up his feet and, without rising, kick Crockett clear across the tunnel. The feminine gnome immediately sat on Mugza's chest and pounded his head with the rock till he subsided.

Then she arose. "You're not hurt? Good! I'm Brockle Buhn. . . Oh, look! He'll have his head off in a minute!"

Crockett turned to see that his erstwhile guide, Cm Magru, was gnomefully tugging at the head of an unidentified opponent, attempt-ing, apparently, to twist it clear off. 'What's it all about?" Crockett howled. "Uh—Bmockle Buhn! *Brockle Buhn!"*

She turned unwillingly. 'What?"

"The fight! What started it?"

"I did," she explained. "I said, 'Let's have a fight."

"Oh, that was all?"

"Then we started." Brockle Buhn nodded. 'What's your name?"

"Crockett."

"You're new here, aren't you? Oh—I know. You were a human be-ing!" Suddenly a new light appeared in her bulging eyes. "Crockett, maybe you can tell me something. What's a kiss?"

"A—kiss?" Crockett repeated, in a baffled manner.

"Yes. I was listening inside a knoll once, and heard two human be-ings talking—male and female, by their voices. I didn't dare look at them, of course, but the man asked the woman for a kiss."

"Oh," Crockett said, rather blankly. "He asked for a kiss, eh?"

"And then there was a smacking noise and the woman said it was wonderful. I've wondered ever since. Because if any gnome asked me for a kiss, I wouldn't know what he meant."

"Gnomes don't kiss?" Crockett asked in a perfunctory way. "Gnomes dig," said Brocide Buhn. "And we eat. 1 like to eat. Is a kiss like mud soup?"

'Well, not exactly." Somehow Crockett managed to explain the mechanics of osculation.

The gnome remained silent, pondering deeply. At last she said, with the air of one bestowing mud soup upon a hungry applicant, "I'll give you a kiss."

Crockett had a nightmare picture of his whole head being engulfed in that enormous maw. He backed away. "N-no," he got out. "I—I'd rather not."

"Then let's fight," said Brocide Buhn, without rancor, and swung a knotted fist which smacked painfully athwart Crockett's ear. "Oh, no," she said regretfully,

turning away. “The fight’s over. It wasn’t very long, was it?”

Crockett, rubbing his mangled ear, saw that in every direction gnomes were picking themselves up and hurrying off about their busi-ness. They seemed to have forgotten all about the recent conflict. The tunnel was once more silent, save for the pad-padding of gnomes’ feet on the rock. Gru Magru came over, grinning happily.

“Hello, Brockle Buhn,” he greeted. “A good fight. Who’s this?” He looked down at the prostrate body of Mugza, the red-haired gnome.

“Mugza,” said Brockle Buhn. “He’s still out. Let’s kick him.”

They proceeded to do it with vast enthusiasm, while Crockett watched and decided never to allow himself to be knocked uncon-scious. It definitely wasn’t safe. At last, however, Gru Magru tired of the sport and took Crockett by the arm again. “Come along,” he said, and they sauntered along the tunnel, leaving Brockle Buhn jumping up and down on the senseless Mugza’s stomach.

“You don’t seem to mind hitting people when they’re knocked out,” Crockett hazarded.

“It’s *much* more fun,” Gru said happily. “That way you can tell just where you want to hit ‘em. Come along. You’ll have to be inducted. Another day, another gnome. Keeps the population stable,” he ex-plained, and fell to humming a little song.

“Look,” Crockett said. “I just thought of something. You say human beings are turned into gnomes to keep the population stable. But if gnomes don’t die, doesn’t that mean that there are more gnomes now than ever? The population keeps rising, doesn’t it?”

“Be still,” Gru Magru commanded. “I’m singing.”

It was a singularly tuneless song. Crockett, his thoughts veering madly, wondered if the gnomes had a national anthem. Probably “Rock Me to Sleep.” Oh, well.

“We’re going to see the Emperor,” Gru said at last. “He always sees the new gnomes. You’d better make a good impression, or he’ll put you to placer-mining lava.”

“tJh—” Crockett glanced down at his grimy tunic. “Hadn’t I better clean up a bit? That fight made me a mess.”

“It wasn’t the fight,” Gru said insultingly. “What’s wrong with you, anyway? I don’t see anything amiss.”

“My clothes—they’re dirty.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said the other. “It’s good filthy dirt, isn’t it? Here!” He halted, and, stooping, seized a handful of dust, which he rubbed into Crockett’s face and hair. “That’ll fix you up.”

“I—pffht! . . Thanks . . . *pff hI”* said the newest gnome. “I hope I’m dreaming. Because if I’m not—” He didn’t finish. Crockett was feeling unwell.

They went through a labyrinth, far under Dornsef Mountain, and emerged at last in a bare, huge chamber with a throne of rock at one end of it. A small gnome was sitting on the throne paring his toenails. “Bottom of the day to you,” Gru said. “Where’s the Emperor?”

“Taking a bath,” said the other. “I hope he drowns. Mud, mud, mud—morning, noon and night. First it’s too hot. Then it’s too cold. Then it’s too thick. I work my fingers to the bone mixing his mud baths, and all I get is a kick,” the small gnome

continued plaintively. “There’s such a thing as being *too* dirty. Three mud baths a day—that’s carrying it too far. And never a thought for me! Oh, no. I’m a mud puppy, that’s what I am. He called me that today. Said there were lumps in the mud. Well, why not? That damned loam we’ve been getting is enough to turn a worm’s stomach. You’ll find His Majesty in there,” the little gnome finished, jerking his foot toward an archway in the wall.

Crockett was dragged into the next room, where, in a sunken bath filled with steaming, brown mud, a very fat gnome sat, only his eyes discernible through the oozy coating that covered him. He was filling his hands with mud and letting it drip over his head, chuckling in a senile sort of way as he did so.

“Mud,” he remarked pleasantly to Cru Magru, in a voice like a lion’s bellow. “Nothing like it. Good rich mud. *AhI”*

Gru was bumping his head on the floor, his large, capable hand around Crockett’s neck forcing the other to follow suit.

“Oh, get up,” said the Emperor. “What’s this? What’s this gnome been up to? Out with it.”

“He’s new,” Gru explained. “I found him topside. The Nid law, you know.”

“Yes, of course. Let’s have a look at you. Ugh! I’m Podrang the Sec-ond, Emperor of the Gnomes. What have you to say to that?”

All Crockett could think of was: “How—how can you be Podrang the Second? I thought Podrang the Third was the first emperor.”

“A chatterbox,” said Podrang II, disappearing beneath the surface of the mud and spouting as he rose again. “Take care of him, Gru. Easy work at first. Digging anthracite. Mind you don’t eat any while you’re on the job,” he cautioned the dazed Crockett. “After you’ve been here a century, you’re allowed one mud bath a day. Nothing like ‘em,” he added, bringing up a gluey handful to smear over his face.

Abruptly he stiffened. His lion’s bellow rang out.

“Drook! *Drook!”*

The little gnome Crockett had seen in the throne room scurried in, wringing his hands. “Your Majesty! Isn’t the mud warm enough?”

“You crawling blob!” roared Podrang II. “You slobbering, offspring of six thousand individual offensive stenches! You mica-eyed, incom-petent, draggle-eared, writhing blot on the good name of gnomes! You geological mistake! You—you—”

Drook took advantage of his master’s temporary inarticulacy. “It’s the best mud, Your Majesty! I refined it myself. Oh, Your Majesty, what’s wrong?”

“There’s a worm in it!” His Majesty bellowed, and launched into a stream of profanity so horrendous that it practically made the mud boil. Clutching his singed ears, Crockett allowed Gru Magru to drag him away.

“I’d like to get the old boy in a fight,” Gru remarked, when they were safely in the depths of a tunnel, “but he’d use magic, of course. That’s the way he is. Best emperor we’ve ever had. Not a scrap of fair play in his bloated body.”

“Oh,” Crockett said blankly. “Well, what next?”

“You heard Podrang, didn’t you? You dig anthracite. And if you eat any, I’ll kick your teeth in.”

Brooding over the apparent bad tempers of gnomes, Crockett allowed himself to be conducted to a gallery where dozens of gnomes, both male and female, were using picks and mattocks with furious vigor. “This is it,” Gru said. “Now! You dig anthracite. You work twenty hours, and then sleep six.”

“Then what?”

“Then you start digging again,” Gm explained. “You have a brief rest once every ten hours. You mustn’t stop digging in between, un-less it’s for a fight. Now, here’s the way you locate coal. Just think of it.”

“How do you think I found you?” Gru asked impatiently. “Gnomes have—certain senses. There’s a legend that fairy folk can locate water by using a forked stick. Well, we’re attracted to metals. Think of anthracite,” he finished, and Crockett obeyed. Instantly he found him-self turning to the wall of the tunnel nearest him.

“See how it works?” Gru grinned. “It’s a natural evolution, I sup-pose. Functional. We have to know where the underneath deposits are, so the authorities gave us this sense when we were created. Think of ore—or any deposit in the ground—and you’ll be attracted to it. Just as there’s a repulsion in all gnomes against daylight.”

“Eh?” Crockett started slightly. “What was that?”

“Negative and positive. We need ores, so we’re attracted to them.

Daylight is harmful to us, so if we think we’re getting too close to the surface, we think of light, and it repels us. Try it!”

Crockett obeyed. Something seemed to be pressing down the top of his head.

“Straight up,” Cm nodded. “But it’s a long way. I saw daylight once. And—a man, too.” He stared at the other. “I forgot to explain. Gnomes can’t stand the sight of human beings. They—well, there’s a limit to how much ugliness a gnome can look at. Now you’re one of us, you’ll feel the same way. Keep away from daylight, and never look at a man. It’s as much as your sanity is worth.”

There was a thought stirring in Crockett’s mind. He could, then, find his way out of this maze of tunnels, simply by employing his new sense to lead him to daylight. After that—well, at least he would be above ground.

Gru Magru shoved Crockett into a place between two busy gnomes and thrust a pick into his hands. “There. Get to work.”

‘Thanks for—” Crockett began, when Gru suddenly kicked him and then took his departure, humming happily to himself. Another gnome came up, saw Crockett standing motionless, and told him to get busy, accompanying the command with a blow on his already tender ear. Perforce Crockett seized the pick and began to chop anthracite out of the walL

“Crockett!” said a familiar voice. “It’s you! I thought they’d send you here.”

It was Brockle Buhn, the feminine gnome Crockett had already en-countered. She was swinging a pick with the others, but dropped it now to grin at her companion.

“You won’t be here long,” she consoled. “Ten years or so. Unless you run into trouble, and then you’ll be put at really hard work.”

Crockett’s arms were already aching. “*Hard* work! My arms are go-ing to fall off in a minute.”

He leaned on his pick. “Is this your regular job?”

“Yes—but I’m seldom here. Usually I’m being punished. I’m a trouble-maker, I am. I eat anthracite.”

She demonstrated, and Crockett shuddered at the audible crunching sound. Just then the overseer came up. Brocide Buhn swallowed hastily.

“What’s this?” he snarled. “Why aren’t you at work?”

“We were just going to fight,” Brockle Buhn explained.

“Oh—just the two of you? Or can I join in?”

“Free for all,” the unladylike gnome offered, and struck the unsuspect-ing Crockett over the head with her pick. He went out like a light.

Awakening some time later, he investigated bruised ribs and decided Brockle Buhn must have kicked him after he’d lost consciousness. What a gnome! Crockett sat up, finding himself in the same tunnel, dozens of gnomes busily digging anthracite.

The overseer came toward him. “Awake, eh? Get to work!”

Dazedly Crockett obeyed. Broclde Buhn flashed him a delighted grin. “You missed it. I got an ear—see?” She exhibited it. Crockett hastily lifted an exploring hand. It wasn’t his.

Dig . . . dig . . . dig . . . the hours dragged past. Crockett had never worked so hard in his life. But, he noticed, not a gnome com-plained. Twenty hours of toil, with one brief rest period—he’d slept through that. Dig. . . dig. . . dig.

Without ceasing her work, Brockle Buhn said, “I think you’ll make a good gnome, Crockett. You’re toughening up already. Nobody’d ever believe you were once a man.”

“Oh—no?”

“No. What were you, a miner?”

“I was—” Crockett paused suddenly. A curious light came into his eyes.

“I was a labor organizer,” he finished.

“WThat’s that?”

“Ever heard of a union?” Crockett asked, his gaze intent.

“Is it an ore?” Brockle Buhn shook her head. “No, I’ve never heard of it. What’s a union?”

Crockett explained. No genuine labor organizer would have accepted that explanation. It was, to say the least, biased.

Brockle Buhn seemed puzzled. “I don’t see what you mean, exactly, but I suppose it’s all right.”

“Try another tack,” Crockett said. “Don’t you ever get tired of work-ing twenty hours a day?”

“Sure. Who wouldn’t?”

“Then why do it?”

“We always have,” Brocide Buhn said indulgently. “We can’t stop.”

“Suppose you did?”

“I’d be punished—beaten with stalactites, or something.”

“Suppose you all did,” Crockett insisted. “Every damn gnome. Sup-pose you had a sit-down strike.”

“You’re crazy,” Brockle Buhn said. “Such a thing’s never happened. It—it’s

human.”

“Kisses never happened underground, either,” said Crockett. “No, I

don’t want one! And I don’t want to fight, either. Good heavens, let me get the set-up here. Most of the gnomes work to support the privi-leged classes.”

“No. We just work.” “But why?”

‘We always have. And the Emperor wants us to.”

“Has the Emperor ever worked?” Crockett demanded, with an air of triumph. “No! He just takes mud baths! Why shouldn’t every gnome have the same privilege? Why—”

He talked on, at great length, as he worked. Brockle Buhn listened with increasing interest. And eventually she swallowed the bait—hook, line and sinker.

An hour later she was nodding agreeably. “I’ll pass the word along. Tonight. In the Roaring Cave. Right after work.”

‘Wait a minute,” Crockett objected. “How many gnomes can we get?”

‘Well—not very many. Thirty?”

“We’ll have to organize first. We’ll need a definite plan.”

Brockle Buhn went off at a tangent. “Let’s fight.”

“No! Will you listen? We need a—a council. Who’s the worst trouble-maker here?”

“Mugza, I think,” she said. “The red-haired gnome you knocked out when he hit me.”

Crockett frowned slightly. Would Mugza hold a grudge? Probably not, he decided. Or, rather, he’d be no more ill tempered than other gnomes. Mugza might attempt to throttle Crockett on sight, but he’d no doubt do the same to any other gnome. Besides, as Brockle Buhn went on to explain, Mugza was the gnomic equivalent of a duke. His support would be valuable.

“And Gru Magru,” she suggested. “He loves new things, especially if they make trouble.”

“Yeah.” These were not the two Crockett would have chosen, but at least he could think of no other candidates. “If we could get somebody who’s close to the Emperor. . . What about Drook—the guy who gives Podrang his mud baths?”

‘Why not? I’ll fix it.” Brocide Buhn lost interest and surreptitiously began to eat anthracite. Since the overseer was watching, this resulted in a violent quarrel, from which Crockett emerged with a black eye. Whispering profanity under his breath, he went back to digging.

But he had time for a few more words with Brockle Buhn. She’d ar-range it. That night there would be a secret meeting of the con-spirators.

Crockett had been looking forward to exhausted slumber, but this chance was too good to miss. He had no wish to continue his un-pleasant job digging anthracite. His body ached fearfully. Besides, if he could induce the gnomes to strike, he might be able to put the squeeze on Podrang II. Cru Magru had said the Emperor was a magi-cian. Couldn’t he, then, transform Crockett back into a man?

“He’s never done that,” Broclde Buhn said, and Crockett realized he had spoken his thought aloud.

“Couldn’t he, though—if he wanted?”

Brockle Buhn merely shuddered, but Crockett had a little gleam of hope. To be

human again!

Dig . . . dig . . . dig . . . dig . . . with monotonous, deadening regularity. Crockett sank into a stupor. Unless he got the gnom~es to strike, he was faced with an eternity of arduous toil. He was scarcely conscious of knocking off, of feeling Brockle Buhn's gnarled hand un-der his arm, of being led through passages to a tiny cubicle, which was his new home. The gnome left him there, and he crawled into a stony bunk and went to sleep.

Presently a casual kick aroused him. Blinking, Crockett sat up, in-stinctively dodging the blow Gru Magru was aiming at his head. He had four guests—Gm, Brockle Buhn, Drook and the red-haired Mugza.

"Sorry I woke up too soon," Crockett said bitterly. "If I hadn't, you could have got in another kick."

"There's lots of time," Gru said. "Now, what's thi~ all about? I wanted to sleep, but Brockle Buhn here said there was going to be a fight. A *big* one, huh?"

"Eat first," Brockle Buhn said firmly. "I'll fix mud soup for everybody." She bustled away, and presently was busy in a corner, preparing re-freshments. The other gnomes squatted on their haunches, and Crock-ett sat on the edge of his bunk, still dazed with sleep.

But he managed to explain his idea of the union. It was received with interest—chiefly, he felt, because it involved the possibility of a tremendous scrap.

"You mean every Domsef gnome jumps the Emperor?" Cm asked.

"No, no! Peaceful arbitration. We just refuse to work. All of us."

"I can't," Drook said. "Podrang's got to have his mud baths, the bloated old slug. He'd send me to the fumaroles till I was roasted."

"Who'd take you there?" Crockett asked.

"Oh—the guards, I suppose."

"But they'd be on strike, too. *Nobody'* ci obey Podrang, till he gave in."

"Then he'd enchant me," Drook said.

"He can't enchant us all," Crockett countered.

"But he could enchant *me,"* Drook said with great firmness. "Besides, he *could* put a spell on every gnome in Dornsef. Turn us into stalactites or something."

"Then what? He wouldn't have any gnomes at all. Half a loaf is bet-ter than none. We'll just use logic on him. Wouldn't he rather have a little less work done than none at all?"

"Not him," Gru put in. "He'd rather enchant us. Oh, he's a bad one, he is," the gnome finished approvingly.

But Crockett couldn't quite believe this. It was too alien to his un-derstanding of psychology—human psychology, of course. He turned to Mugza, who was glowering furiously.

'What do you think about it?"

"I want to fight," the other said rancorously. "I want to kick some-body."

'Wouldn't you rather have mud baths three times a day?"

Mugza grunted. "Sure. But the Emperor won't let me."

"Why not?"

"Because I want 'em."

“You can’t be contented,” Crockett said desperately. “There’s more to life than—than digging.”

“Sure. There’s fighting. Podrang lets us fight whenever we want.”

Crockett had a sudden inspiration. “But that’s just it. He’s going to stop all fighting! He’s going to pass a new law forbidding fighting ex-cept to himself.”

It was an effective shot in the dark. Every gnome jumped. *“Stop—fighting!”* That was Gm, angry and disbelieving. ‘Why, we’ve always fought.”

“Well, you’ll have to stop,” Crockett insisted.

‘Won’t!”

“Exactly! Why should you? Every gnome’s entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of—of pugilism.”

“Let’s go and beat up Podrang,” Mugza offered, accepting a steam-ing bowl of mud soup from Brockle Buhn.

“No, that’s not the way—no, thanks, Brockle Buhn—not the way at all. A strike’s the thing. We’ll peaceably force Podrang to give us what we want.”

He turned to Drook. “Just what can Podrang do about it if we all sit down and refuse to work?”

The little gnome considered. “He’d swear. And kick me.”

“Yeah—and then what?”

“Then he’d go off and enchant everybody, tunnel by tunnel.”

“Uh-huh.” Crockett nodded. “A good point. Solidarity is what we need. If Podrang finds a few gnomes together, he can scare the hell out of them. But if we’re all together—that’s it! When the strike’s called, we’ll all meet in the biggest cave in the joint.”

“That’s the Council Chamber,” Gm said. “Next to Pocirang’s throne room.”

“O.K. We’ll meet there. How many gnomes will join us?”

“All of ‘em,” Mugza grunted, throwing his soup bowl at Drook’s head. “The Emperor can’t stop us fighting.”

“And what weapons can Podrang use, Drook?”

“He might use the Cockatrice Eggs,” the other said doubtfully.

“What are those?”

“They’re not really eggs,” Gru broke in. “They’re magic jewels for wholesale enchantments. Different spells in each one. The green ones, I think, are for turning people into earthworms. Podrang just breaks one, and the spell spreads out for twenty feet or so. The red ones are— let’s see. Transforming gnomes into human beings—though that’s a bit *too* tough. No. . . yes. The blue ones—”

“Into *human beings!”* Crockett’s eyes widened. ‘Where are the eggs kept?”

“Let’s fight,” Mugza offered, and hurled himself bodily on Drook, who squeaked frantically and beat his attacker over the head with his soup bowl, which broke. Brockle Buhn added to the excitement by kicking both battlers impartially, till felled by Gm Magru. Within a few moments the room resounded with the excited screams of guomic battle. Inevitably Crockett was sucked in.

Of all the perverted, incredible forms of life that had ever existed, gnomes were about the oddest. It was impossible to understand their philosophy. Their minds worked along different paths from human in-telligences. Self-preservation and

survival of the race—these two vital human instincts were lacking in gnomes. They neither died nor propa-gated. They just worked and fought. Bad-tempered little monsters, Crockett thought irritably. Yet they had existed for—ages. Since the beginning, maybe. Their social organism was the result of evolution far older than man's. It might be well suited to gnomes. Crockett might be throwing the unnecessary monkey wrench in the machinery.

So what? He wasn't going to spend eternity digging anthracite, even though, in retrospect, he remembered feeling a curious thrill of obscure pleasure as he worked. Digging might be fun for gnomes. Certainly it was their *raison d'e~tre.* In time Crockett himself might lose his human affiliations, and be metamorphosed completely into a gnome. What

bad happened to other humans who had undergone such an—alteration as he had done? All gnomes look alike. But maybe Cm Magru had once been human—or Drook—or Brockle Buhn.

They were gnomes now, at any rate, thinking and existing com-pletely as gnomes. And in time he himself would be exactly like them. Already he had acquired the strange tropism that attracted him to metals and repelled him from daylight. But he didn't *like* to dig!

He tried to recall the little he knew about gnomes—miners, metal-smiths, living underground. There was something about the Picts— dwarfish men who hid underground when invaders came to England, centuries ago. That seemed to tie in vaguely with the gnomes' dread of human beings. But the gnomes themselves were certainly not descended from Picts. Very likely the two separate races and species had become identified through occupying the same habitat.

Well, that was no help. What about the Emperor? He wasn't, ap-parently, a gnome with a high I.Q., but he *was* a magician. Those jewels—Cockatrice Eggs—were significant. If he could get hold of the ones that transformed gnomes into men .

But obviously he couldn't, at present. Better wait. Till the strike had been called. The strike.

Crockett went to sleep.

He was roused, painfully, by Brockle Buhn, who seemed to have adopted him. Very likely it was her curiosity about the matter of a kiss. From time to time she offered to give Crockett one, but he steadfastly refused. In lieu of it, she supplied him with breakfast. At least, he thought grimly, he'd get plenty of iron in his system, even though the rusty chips rather resembled corn flakes. As a special inducement Brockle Buhn sprinkled coal dust over the mess.

Well, no doubt his digestive system had also altered. Crockett wished he could get an X-ray picture of his insides. Then he decided it would be much too disturbing. Better not to know. But he could not help wondering. Gears in his stomach? Small millstones? What would hap-pen if he inadvertently swallowed some emery dust? Maybe he could sabotage the Emperor that way.

Perceiving that his thoughts were beginning to veer wildly, Crockett gulped the last of his meal and followed Brockle Buhn to the anthra-cite tunnel.

"How about the strike? How's it coming?"

"Fine, Crockett." She smiled, and Crockett winced at the sight. "Tonight all the

gnomes will meet in the Roaring Cave. Just after work."

There was no time for more conversation. The overseer appeared, and the gnomes snatched up their picks. Dig . . . dig . . . dig . .

It kept up at the same pace. Crockett sweated and toiled. It wouldn't be for long. His mind slipped a cog, so that he relapsed into a waking slumber, his muscles responding automatically to the need. Dig, dig, dig. Sometimes a fight. Once a rest period. Then dig again.

Five centuries later the day ended. It was time to sleep.

But there was something much more important. The union meet-ing in the Roaring Cave. Brockle Buhn conducted Crockett there, a huge cavern hung with glittering green stalactites. Gnomes came pouring into it. Gnomes and more gnomes. The turnip heads were everywhere. A dozen fights started. Cru Magru, Mugza and Drook found places near Crockett. During a lull Brockle Buhn urged him to a platform of rock jutting from the floor.

"Now," she whispered. 'They all know about it. Tell them what you want."

Crockett was looking out over the bobbing heads, the red and blue garments, all lit by that eerie silver glow. "Fellow gnomes," he began weakly.

"Fellow gnomes!" The words roared out, magnified by the acoustics of the cavern. That bull bellow gave Crockett courage. He plunged on.

"Why should you work twenty hours a day? Why should you be for-bidden to eat the anthracite you dig, while Podrang squats in his bath and laughs at you? Fellow gnomes, the Emperor is only one; you are many! He can't make you work. How would you like mud soup three times a day? The Emperor can't fight you all. If you refuse to work— all of you—he'll have to give in! He'll have to!"

"Tell 'em about the non-fighting edict," Gru Magru called.

Crockett obeyed. That got 'em. Fighting was dear to every gnomic heart. And Crockett kept on talking.

"Podrang will try to back down, you know. He'll pretend he never intended to forbid fighting. That'll show he's afraid of you! We hold the whip hand! We'll strike—and the Emperor can't do a damn thing about it. When he runs out of mud for his baths, he'll capitulate soon enough."

"He'll enchant us all," Drook muttered sadly.

"He won't dare! What good would that do? He knows which side his—ugh—which side his mud is buttered on. Podrang is unfair to gnomes! That's our watchword!"

It ended, of course, in a brawl. But Crockett was satisfied. The gnomes would not go to work tomorrow. They would, instead, meet in the Council Chamber, adjoining Podrang's throne room—and sit down.

That night he slept well.

In the morning Crockett went, with Brockle Buhn, to the Council Chamber, a cavern gigantic enough to hold the thousands of gnomes who thronged it. In the silver light their red and blue garments had a curiously elfin quality. Or, perhaps, naturally enough, Crockett thought. Were gnomes, strictly speaking, elves?

Drook came up. "I didn't draw Podrang's mud bath," he confided hoarsely. "Oh,

but he'll be furious. Listen to him."

And, indeed, a distant crackling of profanity was coming through an archway in one wall of the cavern.

Mugza and Gru Magru joined them. "He'll be along directly," the latter said. 'What a fight there'll be!"

"Let's fight now," Mugza suggested. "I want to kick somebody. Hard."

"There's a gnome who's asleep," Crockett said. "If you sneak up on him, you can land a good one right in his face."

Mugza, drooling slightly, departed on his errand, and simultaneously Podrang II, Emperor of the Dornsef Gnomes, stumped into the cav-ern. It was the first time Crockett had seen the ruler without a coating of mud, and he could not help gulping at the sight. Podrang was *very* ugly. He combined in himself the most repulsive qualities of every gnome Crockett had previously seen. The result was perfectly inde-scribable.

"Ah," said Podrang, halting and swaying on his short bow legs. "I have guests. Drook! Where in the name of the nine steaming hells is my bath?" But Drook had ducked from sight.

The Emperor nodded. "I see. Well, I won't lose my temper, *I won't lose my temper!* I WON'T—"

He paused as a stalactite was dislodged from the roof and crashed down. In the momentary silence, Crockett stepped forward, cringing slightly.

"W-we're on strike," he announced. "It's a sit-down strike. We won't work till—"

"Yaah!" screamed the infuriated Emperor. "You won't work, eh? Why, you boggle-eyed, flap-tongued, drag-bellied offspring of unmen-tionable algae! You seething little leprous blotch of bat-nibbled fungus! You cringing parasite on the underside of a dwarfish and ignoble worm! *Yaaahl"*

"Fight!" the irrepressible Mugza yelled, and flung himself on Pod-rang, only to be felled by a well-placed foul blow.

Crockett's throat felt dry. He raised his voice, trying to keep it steady.

"Your Majesty! If you'll just wait a minute—"

"You mushroom-nosed spawn of degenerate black bats," the enraged Emperor shrieked at the top of his voice. "I'll enchant you all! I'll turn you into naiads! Strike, will you! Stop me from having my mud bath, will you? By Kronos, Nid, Ymir and Loki, you'll have cause to regret this! *Yahi"* he finished, inarticulate with fury.

"Quick!" Crockett whispered to Cm and Brocide Buhn. "Get be-tween him and the door, so he can't get hold of the Cockatrice Eggs."

"They're not in the throne room," Cm Magru explained unhelpfully. "Podrang just grabs them out of the air."

"Oh!" the harassed Crockett groaned. At that strategic moment Brockle Buhn's worst instincts overcame her. With a loud shriek of de-light she knocked Crockett down, kicked him twice and sprang for the Emperor.

She got in one good blow before Podrang hammered her atop the head with one gnarled fist, and instantly her turnip-shaped skull seemed to prolapse into her torso. The Emperor, bright purple with fury, reached out—and a yellow crystal appeared in his hand.

It was one of the Cockatrice Eggs.

Bellowing like a *musth* elephant, Podrang hurled it. A circle of twenty feet was instantly deared among the massed gnomes. But it wasn't vacant. Dozens of bats rose and fluttered about, adding to the confusion.

Confusion became chaos. With yells of delighted fury, the gnomes rolled forward toward their ruler. "Fight!" the cry thundered out, rever-berating from the roof. *"Fight!"*

Podrang snatched another crystal from nothingness—a green one, this time. Thirty-seven gnomes were instantly transformed into earthworms, and were trampled. The Emperor went down under an avalanche of attackers, who abruptly disappeared, turned into mice by another of the Cockatrice Eggs.

Crockett saw one of the crystals sailing toward him, and ran like hell. He found a hiding place behind a stalagmite, and from there watched the carnage. It was definitely a sight worth seeing, though it could not be recommended to a nervous man.

The Cockatrice Eggs exploded in an incessant stream. Whenever that happened, the spell spread out for twenty feet or more before losing its efficacy. Those caught on the fringes of the circle were only partially transformed. Crockett saw one gnome with a mole's head. Another was a worm from the waist down. Another *was—rclp!* Some of the spell pat-terns were not, apparently, drawn even from known mythology.

The fury of noise that filled the cavern brought stalactites crashing down incessantly from the roof. Every so often Pocirang's battered head would reappear, only to go down again as more gnomes sprang to the attack—to be enchanted. Mice, moles, bats and other things filled the Council Chamber. Crockett shut his eyes and prayed.

He opened them in time to see Podrang snatch a red crystal out of the air, pause and then deposit it gently behind him. A purple Cocka-trice Egg came next. This crashed against the floor, and thirty gnomes turned into tree toads.

Apparently only Podrang was immune to his own magic. The thou-sands who had filled the cavern were rapidly thinning, for the Cocka-trice Eggs seemed to come from an inexhaustible source of supply. How long would it be before Crockett's own turn came? He couldn't hide here forever.

His gaze riveted to the red crystal Podrang had so carefully put down. He was remembering something—the Cockatrice Egg that would trans-form gnomes into human beings. Of course! Podrang wouldn't use *that,* since the very sight of men was so distressing to gnomes. If Crockett could get his hands on that red crystal .

He tried it, sneaking through the confusion, sticking close to the wall of the cavern, till he neared Podrang. The Emperor was swept away by another onrush of gnomes, who abruptly changed into dormice, and Crockett got the red jewel. It felt abnormally cold.

He almost broke it at his feet before a thought stopped and chilled him. He was far under Dornsef Mountain, in a labyrinth of caverns. No human being could find his way out. But a gnome could, with the aid of his strange tropism to daylight.

A bat flew against Crockett's face. He was almost certain it squeaked, 'What a fight!" in a parody of Brockle Buhn's voice, but he couldn't be sure. He cast one

glance over the cavern before turning to flee.

It was a complete and utter chaos. Bats, moles, worms, ducks, eels and a dozen other species crawled, flew, ran, bit, shrieked, snarled, grunted, whooped and croaked all over the place. From all directions the remaining gnomes—only about a thousand now—were converging on a surging mound of gnomes that marked where the Emperor was. As Crockett stared the mound dissolved, and a number of gecko lizards ran to safety.

"Strike, will you!" Podrang bellowed. *"I'll show you!"*

Crockett turned and fled. The throne room was deserted, and he ducked into the first tunnel. There, he concentrated on thinking of day-light. His left ear felt compressed. He sped on till he saw a side passage

on the left, slanting up, and turned into it at top speed. The muffled noise of combat died behind him.

He clutched the red Cockatrice Egg tightly. What had gone wrong? Podrang should have stopped to parley. Only—only he hadn't. A singu-larly bad-tempered and short-sighted gnome. He probably wouldn't stop till he'd depopulated his entire kingdom. At the thought Crockett hur-ried along faster.

The tropism guided him. Sometimes he took the wrong tunnel, but always, whenever he thought of daylight, he would *feel* the nearest day-light pressing against him. His short, bowed legs were surprisingly hardy.

Then he heard someone running after him.

He didn't turn. The sizzling blast of profanity that curled his ears told him the identity of the pursuer. Podrang had no doubt cleared the Council Chamber, to the last gnome, and was now intending to tear Crockett apart pinch by pinch. That was only one of the things he promised.

Crockett ran. He shot along the tunnel like a bullet. The tropism guided him, but he was terrified lest he reach a dead end. The clamor from behind grew louder. If Crockett hadn't known better, he would have imagined that an army of gnomes pursued him.

Faster! Faster! But now Podrang was in sight. His roars shook the very walls. Crockett sprinted, rounded a corner, and saw a wall of flam-ing light—a circle of it, in the distance. It was daylight, as it appeared to gnomic eyes.

He could not reach it in time. Podrang was too close. A few more seconds, and those gnarled, terrible hands would close on Crockett's throat.

Then Crockett remembered the Cockatrice Egg. If he transformed himself into a man now, Podrang would not dare touch him. And he was almost at the tunnel's mouth.

He stopped, whirling and lifted the jewel. Simultaneously the Em-peror, seeing his intention, reached out with both hands, and snatched six or seven of the crystals out of the air. He threw them directly at Crockett, a fusillade of rainbow colors.

But Crockett had already slammed the red gem down on the rock at his feet. There was an ear-splitting crash. Jewels seemed to burst all around Crockett—but the red one had been broken first.

The roof fell in.

A short while later, Crockett dragged himself painfully from the de-bris. A glance

showed him that the way to the outer world was still

open. And—thank heaven!—daylight looked normal again, not that flam-ing blaze of eye-searing white.

He looked toward the depths of the tunnel, and froze. Podrang was emerging, with some difficulty, from a mound of rubble. His low curses had lost none of their fire.

Crockett turned to run, stumbled over a rock, and fell flat. As he sprang up, he saw that Podrang had seen him.

The gnome stood transfixed for a moment. Then he yelled, spun on his heel, and fled into the darkness. He was gone. The sound of his rapid footfalls died.

Crockett swallowed with difficulty. *Gnomes are afraid of men—whew!* That had been a close squeak. But now.

He was more relieved than he had thought. Subconsciously he must have been wondering whether the spell would work, since Podrang had flung six or seven Cockatrice Eggs at him. But he had smashed the red one first. Even the strange, silvery gnome-light was gone. The depths of the cave were utterly black—and silent.

Crockett headed for the entrance. He pulled himself out, luxuriating in the warmth of the afternoon sun. He was near the foot of Dornsef Mountain, in a patch of brambles. A hundred feet away a farmer was plowing one terrace of a field.

Crockett stumbled toward him. As he approached, the man turned. He stood transfixed for a moment. Then he yelled, spun on his heel, and fled.

His shrieks drifted back up the mountain as Crockett, remembering the Cockatrice Eggs, forced himself to look down at his own body.

Then he screamed too. But the sound was not one that could ever have emerged from a human throat.

Still, that was natural enough—under the circumstances.

THE BIG NIGHT

Chapter i. Last *of the Hyper Ships*

She came lumbering up out of the ecliptic plane of the planets like a wallowing space beast, her jet tubes scarred and stained, a molten streak across her middle where Venus's turgid atmosphere had scarred her, and every ancient spot weld in her fat body threatened to rip apart the moment she hit stress again.

The skipper was drunk in his cabin, his maudlin voice echoing through the compartments as he bewailed the unsympathetic harshness of the Interplanetary Trade Commission.

There was a mongrel crew from a dozen worlds, half of them shang-haied. Logger Hilton, the mate, was trying to make sense out of the tattered charts, and *La Cucaracha,* her engines quaking at the suicidal thought, was plunging ahead through space into the Big Night.

In the control room a signal light flared. Hilton grabbed a mike.

"Repair crew!" he yelled. "Get out on the skin and check jet A-six. Move!"

He turned back to his charts, chewing his lip and glancing at the pilot, a tiny, inhuman Selenite, with his arachnoid multiple limbs and fragile-seeming body. Ts'ss—that was his name, or approximated it—was wearing the awkward audio-converter mask that could make his sub-sonic voice audible to human ears, but, unlike Hilton, he wasn't wear-ing space armor. No Lunarian ever needed protection against deep space. In their million years on the Moon, they had got used to airless-ness. Nor did the ship's atmosphere bother Ts'ss. He simply didn't trou-ble to breathe it.

"Blast you, take it easy!" Hilton said. 'Want to tear off our hide?"

Through the mask the Selenite's faceted eyes glittered at the mate.

"No, sir. I'm going as slowly as I can on jet fuel. As soon as I know the warp formulae, things'll ease up a bit."

"Ride it! Ride it—without jets!"

'We need the acceleration to switch over to warp, sir."

"Never mind," Hilton said. "I've got it now. Somebody must have been breeding fruit-flies all over these charts. Here's the dope." He dic-tated a few equations that Ts'ss' photographic memory assimilated at once.

A distant howling came from far off.

"That's the skipper, I suppose," Hilton said. "I'll be back in a min-ute. Get into hyper as soon as you can, or we're apt to fold up like an accordion."

"Yes, sir. Ah—Mr. Hilton?"

"Well?"

"You might look at the fire extinguisher in the Cap'n's room."

"What for?" Hilton asked.

Several of the Selenite's multiple limbs pantomimed the action of drinking. Hilton grimaced, rose and fought the acceleration down the companionway. He shot a glance at the visio-screens and saw they were past Jupiter already, which was a relief. Going through the giant plan-et's gravity-pull wouldn't have helped *La Cucaracha's* aching bones. But they were safely past now. Safely! He grinned wryly as he opened the captain's door and went in.

Captain Sam Danvers was standing on his bunk, making a speech to an imaginary Interplanetary Trade Commission. He was a big man, or rather he had been once, but now the flesh had shrunk and he was beginning to stoop a little. The skin of his wrinkled face was nearly black with space-tan. A stubble of gray hair stood up angrily.

Somehow, though, he looked like Logger Hilton. Both were deep-space men. Hilton was thirty years younger, but he, too, had the same dark tan and the same look in his blue eyes. There's an old saying that when you go out into the Big Night, beyond Pluto's orbit, that enor-mous emptiness gets into you and looks out through your eyes. Hilton had that. So did Captain Danvers.

Otherwise—Hilton was huge and heavy where Danvers was a little frail now, and the mate's broad chest bulged his white tunic. He hadn't had time yet to change from dress uniform, though he knew that even this cellulose fabric couldn't take the dirt of a space-run without show-ing it. Not on *La ClAcaracha,* anyway.

But this would be his last trip on the old tub.

Captain Danvers interrupted his speech to ask Hilton what the devil he wanted. The mate saluted.

"Routine inspection, sir," he observed, and took down a fire extin-guisher from the wall. Danvers sprang from the bunk, but Hilton moved too fast. Before the captain reached him, Hilton had emptied the tank down the nearest disposal vent.

"Old juice," he explained. "I'll refill her."

"Listen, Mr. Hilton," Danvers said, swaying slightly and stabbing a long forefinger at the mate's nose. "If you think I had whiskey in there, you're crazy."

"Sure," Hilton said. "I'm crazy as a loon, skipper. How about some caffeine?"

Danvers weaved to the disposal port and peered down it vaguely.

"Caffeine. Huh? Look, if you haven't got sense enough to take *La Cucaracha* into hyper, you ought to resign."

"Sure, sure. But in hyper it won't take long to get to Fria. You'll have to handle the agent there."

"Christie? I_I guess so." Danvers sank down on the bunk and held his head. "I guess I just got mad, Logger. ITC—what do they know about it? Why, we opened that trading post on Sirius Thirty."

"Look, skipper, when you come aboard you were so high you forgot to tell me about it," Hilton said. "You just said we'd changed our course and to head for Fria. How come?"

"Interplanetary Trade Commission," Danvers growled. "They had their crew checking over *La Cucaracha."*

"I know. Routine inspection."

'Well, those fat slobs have the brassbound nerve to tell me my ship's unsafe! That the gravity-drag from Sirius is too strong—and that we couldn't go to Sirius Thirty!"

"Could be they're right," Hilton said thoughtfully. 'We had trouble landing on Venus."

"She's old." Danvers' voice was defensive. "But what of it? I've taken *La Cucaracha* around Betelgeuse and plenty closer to Sirius than Sirius Thirty. The old lady's got what it takes. They built atomic engines in those days."

'They're not building them now," Hilton said, and the skipper turned purple.

"Transmission of matter!" he snarled. "What kind of a crazy set-up is that? You get in a little machine on Earth, pull a switch and there you are on Venus or Bar Canopus or-or Purgatory, if you like! I shipped on a hyper ship when I was thirteen, Logger. I grew up on hyper ships. They're solid. They're dependable. They'll take you where you want to go. Hang it, it isn't safe to space travel without an atmos-phere around you, even if it's only in a suit."

"That reminds me," Hilton said. 'Where's yours?"

"Ah, I was too hot. The refrigerating unit's haywire."

The mate found the lightweight armor in a closet and deftly began to repair the broken switch.

"You don't need to keep the helmet closed, but you'd better wear the suit," he said absently. "I've issued orders to the crew. All but Ts'ss, and he doesn't need any protection."

Danvers looked up. "How's she running?" he asked quickly.

‘Well, she could use an overhaul,” Hilton said. “I want to get into hyperspace fast. This straight running is a strain. I’m afraid of landing, too.”

“Uh. Okay, there’ll be an overhaul when we get back—if we make a profit. You know how much we made this last trip. Tell you what— you supervise the job and take a bigger cut for it.”

Hilton’s fingers slowed on the switch. He didn’t look around.

“I’ll be looking for a new berth,” he said. “Sorry, skipper. But I won’t be aboard after this voyage.”

There was silence behind him. Hilton grimaced and began to work again on the spacesuit. He heard Danvers say:

“You won’t find many hyper ships needing mates these days.”

“I know. But I’ve got engineering training. Maybe they would use me on the matter transmitters. Or as an outposter—a trader.”

“Oh, for the love of Pete! Logger, what are you talking about? A— *trader?* A filthy outposter? You’re a hyper ship man!”

“In twenty years there won’t be a hyper ship running,” Hilton said.

“You’re a liar. There’ll be one.”

“She’ll fall apart in a couple of months!” Hilton said angrily. “I’m not going to argue. What are we after on Fria, the fungus?”

After a pause Danvers answered.

‘What else is there on Fria? Sure, the fungus. It’s pushing the season a little. We’re not due there for three weeks Earth-time, but Christie always keeps a supply on hand. And that big hotel chain will pay us the regular cut. Blamed if I know why people eat that garbage, but they pay twenty bucks a plate for it.”

“It could mean a profit, then,” Hilton said. “Provided we land on Fria without falling apart.” He tossed the repaired suit on the bunk beside Danvers. “There you are, skipper. I’d better get back to controls. We’ll be hitting hyper pretty soon.”

Danvers leaned over and touched a button that opened the deadlight. He stared at the star screen.

“You won’t get this on a matter transmitter,” he said slowly. “Look at it, Logger.”

Hilton leaned forward and looked across the Captain’s shoulder. The void blazed. To one side a great arc of Jupiter’s titan bulk blared coldly bright. Several of the moons were riding in the screen’s field, and an asteroId or two caught Jupiter’s light in their tenuous atmospheres and hung like shining veiled miniature worlds against that blazing back-drop. And through and beyond the shining stars and moons and planets

showed the Big Night, the black emptiness that beats like an ocean on the rim of the Solar System.

“So it’s pretty,” Hilton said. “But it’s cold, too.”

“Maybe. Maybe it is. But I like it. Well, get a job as a trader, you jackass. I’ll stick to La *Cucaracha.* I know I can trust the old lady.”

For answer the old lady jumped violently and gave a wallowing lurch.

Chapter a. Bad News

Hilton instantly exploded out of the cabin. The ship was bucking hard. Behind him the mate heard Danvers shouting something about incompetent pilots, but he knew it probably wasn't the Selenite's fault. He was in the control cabin while *La Cuearacha* was still shuddering on the downswing of the last jump. Ts'ss was a tornado of motion, his multiple legs scrabbling frantically at a dozen instruments.

"I'll call the shot!" Hilton snapped, and Ts'ss instantly concentrated on the incredibly complicated controls that were guiding the ship into hyper.

The mate was at the auxiliary board. He jerked down levers.

"Hyper stations!" he shouted. "Close helmets! Grab the braces, you sun-jumpers! Here we go!"

A needle swung wildly across a gauge, hovering at the mark. Hilton dropped into a seat, sliding his arms under the curved braces and hook-ing his elbows around them. His ankles found similar supports beneath him. The visor screens blurred and shimmered with crawling colors, flicking back and forth, on and off, as *La Cuearacha* fought the see-saw between hyper and normal space.

Hilton tried another mike. "Captain Danvers. Hyper stations. All right?"

"Yeah, I'm in my suit," Danvers' voice said. "Can you take it? Need me? What's wrong with Ts'ss?"

"The vocor at my board blew out, Cap'n," Ts'ss said. "I couldn't reach the auxiliary."

'We must need an overhaul bad," Danvers said, and cut off.

Hilton grinned. "We need a rebuilding job," he muttered, and let his fingers hang over the control buttons, ready in case Ts'ss slipped.

But the Selenite was like a precision machine; he never slipped. The old *Cuearacha* shook in every brace. The atomic engines channeled fan-tastic amounts of energy into the dimensional gap. Then, suddenly, the see-saw balanced for an instant, and in that split second the ship slid

across its powerbrldge and was no longer matter. It no longer existed, in the three-dimensional plane. To an observer, it would have vanished. But to an observer in hyperspace, it would have sprung into existence from white nothingness.

Except that there *were* no hyperspatial observers. In fact, there wasn't anything in hyper—it was, as some scientist had once observed, just stuff, and nobody knew what the stuff was. It was possible to find out some of hyper's properties, but you couldn't go much further than that. It was white, and it must have been energy, of a sort, for it flowed like an inconceivably powerful tide, carrying ships with it at speeds that would have destroyed the crew in normal space. Now, in the grip of the hyper current, *La Cucaracha* was racing toward the Big Night at a velocity that would take it past Pluto's orbit in a matter of seconds.

But you couldn't see Pluto. You had to work blind here, with instru-ments. And if you got on the wrong level, it was just too bad—for you!

Hastily Hilton checked the readings. This was Hyper C-$_{75}$8-R. That was right. On different dimensional levels of hyper, the flow ran in various directions. Coming back, they'd alter their atomic structure to ride Hyper M-$_{75}$-L, which rushed from Fria toward Earth and beyond

it.

“That’s that,” Hilton said, relaxing and reaching for a cigarette. “No meteors, no stress-strain problems—just drift till we get close to Fria. Then we drop out of hyper, and probably fall apart.”

An annunciator clicked. Somebody said:

“Mr. Hilton, there’s some trouble.”

“There is. Okay, Wiggins. What now?”

“One of the new men. He was out skinside making repairs.”

“You had plenty of time to get back inside,” snapped Hilton, who didn’t feel quite as sure of that as he sounded. “I called hyper stations.”

“Yes, sir. But this fella’s new. Looks like he never rode a hyper ship before. Anyhow, his leg’s broken. He’s in sick bay.”

Hilton thought for a moment. *La Cucaracha* was understaffed any-way. Few good men would willingly ship on such an antique.

“I’ll come down,” he said, and nodded at Ts’ss. Then he went along the companionway, glancing in at the skipper, who had gone to sleep. He used the handholds to pull himself along, for there was no accelera-tive gravity in hyper. In sick bay he found the surgeon, who doubled in brass as cook, finishing a traction splint on a pale, sweating youngster who was alternately swearing feebly and groaning.

‘What’s the matter with him?” Hilton asked.

Bruno, the sawbones, gave a casual soft salute. “Simple fracture. I’m

giving him a walker splint, so he’ll be able to get around. And he shot his cookies, so he can’t be used to hyper.”

“Looks like it,” Hilton said, studying the patient. The boy opened his eyes, glared at Hilton.

“I was shanghaied!” he yelped. “I’ll sue you for all you’re worth!”

The first officer was unperturbed.

“I’m not the skipper, I’m mate,” Hilton said. “And I can tell you right now that we’re not worth much. Ever hear about discipline?”

“I was shanghaied!”

“I know it. That’s the only way we can get a full crew to sign articles on *La Cucaracha.* I mentioned discipline. We don’t bother much with it here. Just the same, you’d better call me Mister when people are around. Now shut up and relax. Give him a sedative, Bruno.”

“No! I want to send a spacegram!”

“We’re in hyper. You can’t. What’s your name?”

“Saxon. Luther Saxon. I’m one of the consulting engineers on Trans-mat.”

“The matter-transmission gang? What were you doing around the space docks?”

Saxon gulped. “Well—uh—I go out with the technical crews to super-vise new installations. We’d just finished a Venusian transmission sta-tion. I went out for a few drinks—that was all! A few drinks, and—”

“You went to the wrong place,” Hilton said, amused. “Some crimp gave you a Mickey. Your name’s on the articles, anyhow, so you’re stuck, unless you jump ship. You can send a message from Fria, but it’d take a thousand years to reach Venus or Earth. Better stick around, and you can ride back with us.”

“On this crate? It isn’t safe. She’s so old I’ve got the jitters every time I take a

deep breath."

'Well, stop breathing," Hilton said curtly. *La Cucciracha* was an old tramp, of course, but he had shipped on her for a good many years. It was all right for this Transmat man to talk; the Transmat crews never ran any risks.

"Ever been on a hyper ship before?" he asked.

"Naturally," Saxon said. "As a passenger! We have to get to a planet before we can install a transmission station, don't we?"

"Uh-huh." Hilton studied the scowling face on the pillow. "You're not a passenger now, though."

"My leg's broken."

"You got an engineering degree?"

Saxon hesitated and finally nodded.

"All right, you'll be assistant pilot. You won't have to walk much to do that. The pilot'[11] tell you what to do. You can earn your mess that way."

Saxon spluttered protests.

"One thing," Hilton said. "Better not tell the skipper you're a Trans-mat man. He'd hang you over one of the jets. Send him for'rd when he's fixed up, Bruno."

"Yessir," Bruno said, grinning faintly. An old deep-space man, he didn't like Transmat either.

Hilton pulled himself back to the control room. He sat down and watched the white visoscreens. Most of Ts'ss' many arms were idle. This was routine now.

"You're getting an assistant," Hilton said after a while. "Train him fast. That'll give us all a break. If that fat-headed Callistan pilot hadn't jumped on Venus, we'd be set."

"This is a short voyage," Ts'ss said. "It's a fast hyper flow on this level."

"Yeah. This new guy. Don't tell the skipper, but he's a Transmat man."

Ts'ss laughed a little.

"That will pass, too," he said. "We're an old race, Mr. Hilton. Earth-men are babies compared to the Selenites. Hyper ships are fading out, and eventually Transmat will fade out too, when something else comes."

'We won't fade," Hilton said, rather surprised to find himself defend-ing the skipper's philosophy. *"Your* people haven't—you Selenites."

"Some of us are left, that's true," Ts'ss said softly. "Not many. The great days of the Selenite Empire passed very long ago. But there are still a few Selenites left, like me."

"You keep going, don't you? You can't kill off a—a race."

"Not easily. Not at once. But you can, eventually. And you can kill a tradition, too, though it may take a long time. But you know what the end will be."

"Oh, shut up," Hilton said. "You talk too much."

Ts'ss bent again above the controls. *La Cucaracha* fled on through the white hyper flow, riding as smoothly as the day she had been launched.

But when they reached Fria, it would be rough space and high grav-ity. Hilton grimaced.

He thought: So what? This is just another voyage. The fate of the universe doesn't depend on it. Nothing depends on it, except, maybe,

whether we make enough profit to have the old lady overhauled. And that won't matter to me for it's my last voyage into the Big Night.

He watched the screens. He could not see it, but he knew that it hung beyond the universal whiteness, in a plane invisible to his eyes. The little sparks of worlds and suns glowed in its immensity, but never brightened it. It was too vast, too implacable. And even the giant suns would be quenched in its ocean, in the end. As everything else would be quenched, as everything moved on the tides of time into that huge darkness.

That was progress. A wave was born and gathered itself and grew— and broke. A newer wave was behind it. And the old one slipped back and was lost forever. A few foam-flecks and bubbles remained, like Ts'ss, remnant of the giant wave of the ancient Selenite Empire.

The Empire was gone. It had fought and ruled a hundred worlds, in its day. But, in the end, the Big Night had conquered and swallowed

It.

As it would swallow the last hyper ship eventually .

They hit Fria six days later, Earth time. And *hit* was the word. One of Ts'ss' chitin-covered arms was snapped off by the impact, but he didn't seem to mind. He couldn't feel pain, and he could grow another limb in a few weeks. The crew, strapped to their landing braces, sur-vived with minor bruises.

Luther Saxon, the Transmat man, was in the auxiliary pilot's seat— he had enough specialized engineering training so that he learned the ropes fast—and he acquired a blue bump on his forehead, but that was all. *La Cucaracha* had come out of hyper with a jolt that strained her fat old carcass to the limit, and the atmosphere and gravity of Fria was the penultimate straw. Seams ripped, a jet went out, and new molten streaks appeared on the white-hot hull.

The crew had been expecting liberty. There was no time for that. Hilton told off working gangs to relieve each other at six-hour intervals, and he said, rather casually, that Twilight was out of bounds. He knew the crew would ignore that order. There was no way to keep the men aboard, while Twilight sold liquor and even more effective escape mechanisms. Still, there were few women on Fria, and Hilton hoped that enough working stiffs would keep on the job to get *La Cucaracha* repaired and spaceworthy before the fungus cargo was loaded.

He knew that Wiggins, the second mate, would do his best. For him-self he went with the skipper in search of Christie, the Fria trader. The way led through Twilight, the roofed settlement that was shielded from the hot, diamond-bright glare of the primary. It wasn't big. But then Fria was an outpost, with a floating population of a few hundred. They

came in and out with the ships and the harvest seasons. If necessary, Hilton thought, some of the bums could be shanghaied. Still, it wasn't too likely that any of the crew would desert. None of them would be paid off till they went back in the Solar System.

They found Christie in his plasticoid cabin, a fat, bald, sweating man puffing at a huge meerschaum pipe. He looked up, startled, and then resignedly leaned back in his chair and waved them to seats.

“Hello, Chris,” Danvers said. “What’s new?”

“Hello, Skipper. Hi, Logger. Have a good trip?”

“The landing wasn’t so good,” Hilton said.

“Yeah, I heard about it. Drinks?”

“Afterward,” Danvers said, though his eyes gleamed. “Let’s clean up the business first. Got a good shipment ready?”

Christie smoothed one of his fat, glistening cheeks. ‘Well—you’re a couple of weeks early.”

“You keep a stockpile.”

The trader grunted. “Fact is—look, didn’t you get my message? No, I guess there wasn’t time. I sent a spacemail on the *Blue Sky* last week for you, Skipper.”

Hilton exchanged glances with Danvers.

“You sound like bad news, Chris,” he said. ‘What is it?” Christie said uncomfortably, “I can’t help it. You can’t meet competi-tion like Transmat. You can’t afford to pay their prices. You got running expenses on *La Cw~aracha*. Jet fuel costs dough, and—well, Transmat sets up a transmitting station, pays for it, and the job’s done, except for the power outlay. With atomic, what does that amount to?”

Danvers was growing red.

“Is Transmat setting up a station here?” Hilton said hastily.

“Yeah. I can’t stop ‘em. It’ll be ready in a couple of months.”

“But why? The fungus isn’t worth it. There isn’t enough market. You’re pulling a bluff, Chris. What do you want? A bigger cut?”

Christie regarded his meerschaum. “Nope. Remember the ore tests twelve years ago? There’s valuable ores on Fria, Logger. Only it’s got to be refined plenty. Otherwise it’s too bulky for shipment. And the equipment would cost too much to freight by spaceship. It’s big stuff— I mean big.”

Hilton glanced at Danvers. The skipper was purple now, but his mouth was clamped tightly.

“But—hold on, Chris. How can Transmat get around that? By send-ing the crude ores to Earth in their gadgets?”

“The way I heard it,” Christie said, “is that they’re going to send the

refining machines here and set ‘em up right on Fria. All they need for that is one of their transmitters. The field can be expanded to take al-most anything, you know. Shucks you could move a planet that way if you had the power! They’ll do the refining here and transmit the refined ores back Earthside.”

“So they want ores,” Danvers said softly. “They don’t want the fun-gus, do they?”

Christie nodded. “It looks like they do. I had an offer. A big one. I can’t afford to turn it down, and you can’t afford to meet it, Skipper. You know that as well as I do. Thirteen bucks a pound.”

Danvers snorted. Hilton whistled.

“No, we can’t meet that,” he said. “But how can they afford to pay it?”

“Quantity. They channel everything through their transmitters. They set one up on a world, and there’s a door right to Earth—or any planet they name. One job won’t net them much of a profit, but a million jobs—and they take everything! So what can

I do, Logger?”

Hilton shrugged. The captain stood up abruptly.

Christie stared at his pipe.

“Look, Skipper. Why not try the Orion Secondaries? I heard there was a bumper crop of bluewood gum there.”

“I heard that a month ago,” Danvers said. “So did everybody else. It’s cleaned out by now. Besides, the old lady won’t stai~çl a trip like that. I’ve got to get an overhaul fast, and a good one, back in the System.”

There was a silence. Christie was sweating harder than ever. “‘What about that drink?” he suggested. ‘We can maybe figure a way.”

“I can still pay for my own drinks,” Danvers lashed out. He swung around and was gone.

“Jehoshaphat, Logger!” Christie said. “What could I do?”

“It’s not your fault, Chris,” Hilton said. “I’ll see you later, unless— anyhow, I’d better get after the skipper. Looks like he’s heading for Twilight.”

He followed Danvers, but already he had lost hope.

Chapter ~. Danvers Lays the Course

Two days later the skipper was still drunk.

In the half-dusk of Twilight, Hilton went into a huge, cool barn where immense fans kept the hot air in circulation, and found Danvers,

as usual, at a back table, a glass in his hand. He was talking to a tiny-beaded Canopian, one of that retrovolved race that is only a few degrees above the moron level. The Canopian looked as though he was covered with black plush, and his red eyes glowed startlingly through the fur. He, too, had a glass.

Hilton walked over to the two. “Skipper,” he said.

“Blow,” Danvers said. “I’m talking to this guy.”

Hilton looked hard at the Canopian and jerked his thumb. The red-eyed shadow picked up his glass and moved away quickly. Hilton sat down.

‘We’re ready to jet off,” he said.

Danvers blinked at him blearily. “You interrupted me, mister. I’m busy.”

“Buy a case and finish your binge aboard,” Hilton said. “If we don’t jet soon, the crew will jump.”

“Let ‘em.”

“Okay. Then who’ll work *La Cucaracha* back to Earth?”

“If we go back to Earth, the old lady will land on the junkpile,” Dan-vers said furiously. “The ITC won’t authorize another voyage without a rebuilding job.”

“You can borrow dough.”

“Ha!”

Hilton let out his breath with a sharp, angry sound. “Are you sober enough to understand me? Then listen. I’ve talked Saxon around.”

‘Who’s Saxon?”

“He was shanghaied on Venus. Well—he’s a Transmat engineer.” Hilton went on

quickly before the skipper could speak. “That was a mistake. The crimp’s mistake and ours. Transmat stands behind its men. Saxon looked up the Transmat crew on Fria, and their superintendent paid me a visit. We’re in for trouble. A damage suit. But there’s one way out. No hyper ship’s due to hit Fria for months and the matter transmitter won’t be finished within two months. And it seems Trans-mat has a shortage of engineers. If we can get Saxon back to Venus or Earth fast, he’ll cover. There’ll be no suit.”

“Maybe he’ll cover. But what about Transmat?”

“If Saxon won’t sign a complaint, what can they do?” Hilton shrugged. “It’s our only out now.”

Danvers’ brown-splotched fingers played with his glass.

“A Transmat man,” he muttered. “Ah-h. So we go back Earthside. What then? We’re stuck.” He looked under his drooping lids at Hilton. “I mean *I’m* stuck. I forgot you’re jumping after this voyage.”

“Pm not jumping. I sign for one voyage at a time. What do you want me to do, anyhow?”

“Do what you like. Run out on the old lady. You’re no deep-space man.” Danvers spat.

“I know when I’m licked,” Hilton said; “The smart thing then is to fight in your own weight, when you’re outclassed on points, not wait for the knockout. You’ve had engineering training. You could get on with Transmat, too.”

For a second Hilton thought the skipper was going to throw the glass at him. Then Danvers dropped back in his chair, trying to force a smile.

“I shouldn’t blow my top over that,” he said, with effort. “It’s the truth.”

“Yeah. Well—are you coming?”

“The old lady’s ready to jet off?” Danvers said. “I’ll come, then. Have a drink with me first.”

‘We haven’t time.”

With drunken dignity Danvers stood up. “Don’t get too big for your boots, mister. The voyage isn’t over yet. I said have a drink! That’s an order.”

“Okay, okay!” Hilton said. “One drink. Then we go?”

“Sure.”

Hilton gulped the liquor without tasting it. Rather too late, he felt the stinging ache on his tongue. But before he could spriI~g to his feet, the great dim room folded down upon him like a collapsing umbrella, and he lost consciousness with the bitter realization that he had been Mickeyed like the rawest greenhorn. But the skipper had poured that drink.

The dreams were confusing. He was fighting something, but he didn’t know what. Sometimes it changed its shape, and sometimes it wasn’t there at all, but it was always enormous and terribly powerful.

He wasn’t always the same, either. Sometimes he was the wide-eyed kid who had shipped on *Starhopper,* twenty-five years ago, to take his first jump into the Big Night. Then he was a little older, in a bos’n’s berth, his eye on a master’s ticket, studying, through the white, un-changeable days and nights of hyperspace, the intricate logarithms a skilled pilot must know.

He seemed to walk on a treadmill toward a goal that slid away, never quite within reach. But he didn't know what that goal was. It shone like success. Maybe it was success. But the treadmill had started moving before he'd really got started. In the Big Night a disembodied voice was crying thinly:

"You're in the wrong game, Logger. Thirty years ago you'd have a future in hyper ships. Not any more. There's a new wave coming up. Get out, or drown."

A red-eyed shadow leaned over him. Hilton fought out of his dream. Awkwardly he jerked up his arm and knocked away the glass at his lips. The Canopian let out a shrill, harsh cry. The liquid that had been in the glass was coalescing in midair into a shining sphere.

The glass floated—and the Canopian floated too. They were in hyper. A few lightweight straps held Hilton to his bunk, but this was his own cabin, he saw. Dizzy, drugged weakness swept into his brain.

The Canopian struck a wall, pushed strongly, and the recoil shot him toward Hilton. The mate ripped free from the restraining straps. He reached out and gathered in a handful of furry black plush. The Canopian clawed at his eyes.

"Captain!" he screamed. "Captain Danvers!"

Pain gouged Hilton's cheek as his opponent's talons drew blood. Hil-ton roared with fury. He shot a blow at the Canopian's jaw, but now they were floating free, and the punch did no harm. In midair they grappled, the Canopian incessantly screaming in that thin, insane shrilling.

The door handle clicked twice. There was a voice outside—Wiggins, the second. A deep thudding came. Hilton, still weak, tried to keep the Canopian away with jolting blows. Then the door crashed open, and Wiggins pulled himself in.

"Dzann!" he said. "Stop it!" He drew a jet-pistol and leveled it at the Canopian.

On the threshold was a little group. Hilton saw Saxon, the Transmat man, gaping there, and other crew members, hesitating, unsure. Then, suddenly, Captain Danvers' face appeared behind the others, twisted, strained with tension.

The Canopian had retreated to a corner and was making mewing, frightened noises.

"What happened, Mr. Hilton?" Wiggins said. "Did this tomcat jump you?"

Hilton was so used to wearing deep-space armor that till now he had scarcely realized its presence. His helmet was hooded back, like that of Wiggins and the rest. He pulled a weight from his belt and threw it aside; the reaction pushed him toward a wall where he gripped a brace.

"Does he go in the brig?" Wiggins asked.

"All right, men," Danvers said quietly. "Let me through." He pro-pelled himself into Hilton's cabin. Glances of discomfort and vague distrust were leveled at him. The skipper ignored them.

"Dzann!" he said. "Why aren't you wearing your armor? Put it on. The rest of you—get to your stations. You too, Mr. Wiggins. I'll handle this."

Still Wiggins hesitated. He started to say something.

"What are you waiting for?" Hilton said. "Tell Bruno to bring some coffee. Now beat it." He maneuvered himself into a sitting position on his bunk. From the tail of his eye he saw Wiggins and the others go out. Dzann, the Canopian, had picked up a suit from the corner and was awkwardly getting into it.

Danvers carefully closed the door, testing the broken lock.

"Got to have that fixed," he murmured. "It isn't shipshape this way." He found a brace and stood opposite the mate, his eyes cool and watch-ful, the strain still showing on his tired face. Hilton reached for a ~cig-arette.

"Next time your tomcat jumps me, I'll burn a hole through him," he promised.

"I stationed him here to guard you, in case there was trouble," Dan-vers said. "To take care of you if we cracked up or ran into danger. I showed him how to close your helmet and start the oxygen."

"Expect a haif-witted Canopian to remember that?" Hilton said. "You also told him to keep drugging me." He reached toward the shining liquid sphere floating near by and pushed a forefinger into it. He tasted the stuff. "Sure. *Vakheesh.* That's what you slipped in ~y drink on Fria. Suppose you start talking, skipper. What's this Canopian doing aboard?"

"I signed him," Danvers said.

"For what? Supercargo?"

Danvers answered that emotionlessly, watching Hilton.

"Cabin boy."

"Yeah. What did you tell Wiggins? About me, I mean?"

"I said you'd got doped up," Danvers said, grinning. "You were doped, too."

"I'm not now." Hilton's tone rang hard. "Suppose you tell me where we are? I can find out. I can get the equations from Ts'ss and run chart-lines. Are we on M-75 -L?"

"No, we're not. We're riding another level."

'Where to?"

The Canopian shrilled, "I don't know name. Has no name. Double sun it has."

"You crazy!" Hilton glared at the skipper. "Are you heading us for a double primary?"

Danvers still grinned. "Yeah. Not only that, but we're going to land on a planet thirty thousand miles from the suns—roughly."

Hilton fficked on his deadlight and looked at white emptiness. "Closer than Mercury is to Sol. You can't do it. How big are the primaries?"

Danvers told him.

"All right. It's suicide. You know that. *La Cucaracha* won't take it."

"The old lady will take anything the Big Night can hand out."

"Not this. Don't kid yourself. She might have made it back to Earth —with a Lunar landing—but you're riding into a meat grinder."

"I haven't forgotten my astrogation," Danvers said. "We're coming out of hyper with the planet between us and the primaries. The pull will land us."

"In small pieces," Hilton agreed. "Too bad you didn't keep me doped. If you keep your mouth shut, we'll replot our course to Earth and no-body'll get hurt. If you want to start something, it'll be mutiny, and I'll take my chances at Admiralty."

The captain made a noise that sounded like laughter.

"All right," he said. "Suit yourself. Co look at the equations. I'll be in my cabin when you want me. Come on, Dzann."

He pulled himself into the companionway, the Canopian gliding behind him as silently as a shadow.

Hilton met Bruno with coffee as he followed Danvers. The mate grunted, seized the covered cup, and sucked in the liquid with the deft-ness of long practice under antigravity conditions. Bruno watched him.

"All right, sir?" the cook-surgeon said.

"Yeah. Why not?"

'Well—the men are wondering."

"What about?"

"I dunno, sir. You've never—you've always commanded the launch-in~s, sir. And that Canopian—the men don't like him. They think some-thing's wrong."

"Oh, they do, do they?" Hilton said grimly. "I'll come and hold their hands when they turn in for night watch. They talk too much."

He scowled at Bruno and went on toward the control room. Though he had mentioned mutiny to the skipper, he was too old a hand to con-done it, except in extremity. And discipline had to be maintained, even though Danvers had apparently gone crazy.

Ts'ss and Saxon were at the panels. The Selenite slanted a glittering stare at him, but the impassive mask under the audio filter showed no expression. Saxon, however, swung around and began talking excitedly.

'What's happened, Mr. Hilton? Something's haywire. We should be

ready for an Earth landing by now. But we're not. I don't know enough about these equations to chart back, and Ts'ss won't tell me a blamed thing."

"There's nothing to tell," Ts'ss said. Hilton reached past the Selenite and picked up a folder of ciphered figures. He said absently to Saxon:

"Pipe down. I want to concentrate on this."

He studied the equations.

He read death in them.

Chapter ~. Gamble With Death

Logger Hilton went into the skipper's cabin, put his back against the wall, and started cursing fluently and softly. When he had finished, Danvers grinned at him.

"Through?" he asked.

Hilton switched his stare to the Canopian, who was crouched in a corner, furtively loosening the locks of his spacesuit.

"That applies to you, too, tomcat," he said.

"Dzann won't mind that," Danvers said. "He isn't bright enough to resent cussing. And I don't care, as long as I get what we want. Still going to mutiny and head for Earth?"

"No, I'm not," Hilton said. With angry patience he ticked off his points on his fingers. "You can't switch from one hyperplane to another without dropping into ordinary space first, for the springboard. If we went back into normal space, the impact might tear *La Cucaracha* into tiny pieces. We'd be in suits, floating free, a hundred million miles from the nearest planet. Right now we're in a fast hyper flow heading for the edge of the universe, apparently."

“There’s one planet within reach,” Danvers said.

“Sure. The one that’s thirty thousand miles from a double primary. And nothing else.”

“Well? Suppose we do crack up? We can make repairs once we land on a planet. We can get the materials we need. You can’t do that in deep space. I know landing on this world will be a job. But it’s that or nothing—now.”

‘What are you after?”

Danvers began to explain:

“This Canopian—Dzann—he made a voyage once, six years ago. A tramp hyper ship. The controls froze, and the tub was heading for out-side. They made an emergency landing just in time—picked out a planet

that had been detected and charted, but never visited. They repaired there, and came back into the trade routes. But there was a guy aboard, an Earthman who was chummy with Dzann. This guy was smart, and he’d been in the drug racket, I think. Not many people know what raw, growing *paraine* looks like, but this fellow knew. He didn’t tell any-body. He took samples, intending to raise money, charter a ship and pick up a cargo later. But he was knifed in some dive on Callisto. He didn’t die right away, though, and he liked Dzann. So he gave Dzann the information.”

“That halfwit?” Hilton said. “How could he remember a course?”

“That’s one thing the Canopians can remember. They may be morons, but they’re fine mathematicians. It’s their one talent.”

“It was a good way for him to bum a drink and get a free berth,” Hil-ton said.

“No. He showed me the samples. I can talk his lingo, a little, and that’s why he was willing to let me in on his secret, back on Fria. Okay. Now. We land on this planet—it hasn’t been named—and load a cargo of *paraine.* We repair the old lady, if she needs it—”

“She will!”

“And then head back.”

“To Earth?”

“I think Silenus. It’s an easier landing.”

“Now you’re worrying about landings,” Hilton said bitterly. “Well, there’s nothing I can do about it, I suppose. I’m stepping out after this voyage. What’s the current market quotation on *paraine?”*

“Fifty a pound. At Medical Center, if that’s what you mean.”

“Big money,” the mate said. “You can buy a new ship with the profits and still have a pile left for happy days.”

“You’ll get your cut.”

“I’m still quitting.”

“Not till this voyage is over,” Danvers said. “You’re mate on *La* Cw-*caracha.”* He chuckled. “A deep-space man has plenty of tricks up his sleeve—and I’ve been at it longer than you.”

“Sure,” Hilton said. “You’re smart. But you forgot Saxon. He’ll throw that damage suit against you now, with Transmat behind him.”

Danvers merely shrugged. “I’ll think of something. It’s your watch. We have about two hundred hours before we come out of hyper. Take it, mister.”

He was laughing as Hilton went out. .

In two hundred hours a good deal can happen. It was Hilton's job to see that it didn't. Luckily, his reappearance had reassured the crew, for when masters fight, the crew will hunt for trouble. But with Hilton

moving about *La Cucaracha,* apparently as casual and assured as ever, even the second mate, Wiggins, felt better. Still, it was evident that they weren't heading for Earth. It was taking too long.

The only real trouble came from Saxon, and Hilton was able to han-dle that. Not easily, however. It had almost come to a showdown, but Hilton was used to commanding men, and finally managed to bluff the Transmat engineer. Dissatisfied but somewhat cowed, Saxon grum-blingly subsided.

Hilton called him back.

"I'll do my best for you, Saxon. But we're in the Big Night now. You're not in civilized space. Don't forget that the skipper knows you're a Transmat man, and he hates your insides. On a hyper ship, the'Old Man's word is law. So—for your own sake—watch your step!"

Saxon caught the implication. He paled slightly, and after that man-aged to avoid the captain.

Hilton kept busy checking and rechecking *La Cucaracha.* No out-side repairs could be done in hyper, for there was no gravity, and or-dinary physical laws were inoperative—magnetic shoes, for example, wouldn't work. Only in the ship itself was there safety. And that safety was illusory for the racking jars of the spatial see-saw might disintegrate La *Cucaracha* in seconds.

Hilton called on Saxon. Not only did he want technidal aid, but he wanted to keep the man busy. So the pair worked frantically over jury-rigged systems that would provide the strongest possible auxiliary brac-ing for the ship. Torsion, stress and strain were studied, the design of the craft analyzed, and structural alloys X-ray tested.

Some flaws were found—La *Cucaracha* was a very old lady—but fewer than Hilton expected. In the end, it became chiefly a matter of ripping out partitions and bulkheads and using the material for extra bracing.

But Hilton knew, and Saxon agreed with him, that it would not be enough to cushion the ship's inevitable crash.

There was one possible answer. They sacrificed the after section of the craft. It could be done, though they were racing against time. The working crews mercilessly cut away beams from aft and carried them forward and welded them into position, so that, eventually, the forward half of the ship was tremendously strong and cut off, by tough air-tight partitions, from a skeleton after half. And that half Hilton flooded with manufactured water, to aid in the cushioning effect.

Danvers, of course, didn't like it. But he had to give in. After all, Hil-ton was keeping the ship on the skipper's course, insanely reckless as

that was. If *La Cucaracha* survived, it would be because of Hilton. But Captain Danvers shut himself in his cabin and was sullenly silent.

Toward the end, Hilton and Ts'ss were alone in the control room, while Saxon, who had got interested in the work for its own sake, su-perintended the last-minute jobs of spot bracing. Hilton, trying to find the right hyper space level that would take

them back to Earth after they had loaded the *paraine* cargo, misplaced a decimal point and began to curse in a [1]ow, furious undertone.

He heard Ts'ss laugh softly and whirled on the Selenite.

'What's so funny?" he demanded.

"It's not really funny, sir," Ts'ss said. "There have to be people like Captain Danvers, in any big thing."

"What are you babbling about now?" he asked curiously.

Ts'ss shrugged. "The reason *I* keep shipping on *La Cucaracha* is be-cause I can be busy and efficient aboard, and planets aren't for Selenites any more. We've lost our own world. It died long ago. But I still remem-ber the old traditions of our Empire. If a tradition ever becomes great, it's because of the men who dedicate themselves to it. That's why any-thing ever became great. And it's why hyper ships came to mean something, Mr. Hilton. There were men who lived and breathed hyper ships. Men who worshipped hyper ships, as a man worships a god. Gods fall, but a few men will still worship at the old altars. They can't change. If they were capable of changing, they wouldn't have been the type of men to make their gods great."

"Been burning *paraine?"* Hilton demanded unpleasantly. His head ached, and he didn't want to find excuses for the skipper.

"It's no drug dream," Ts'ss said. "What about the chivalric traditions? We had our Chyra Emperor, who fought for—"

"I've read about Chyra," Hilton said. "He was a Selenite King Arthur."

Slowly Ts'ss nodded his head, keeping his great eyes on Hilton.

"Exactly. A tool who was useful in his time, because he served his cause with a single devotion. But when that cause died, there was noth-ing for Chyra—or Arthur—to do except die too. But until he did die, he continued to serve his broken god, not believing that it had fallen. Cap-tain Danvers will never believe the hyper ships are passing. He will be a hyper-ship man until he dies. Such men make causes great—but when they outlive their cause, they are tragic figures."

'Well, I'm not that crazy," Hilton growled. "I'm going into some other game. Transmat or something. You're a technician. Why don't you come with me after this voyage?"

"I like the Big Night," Ts'ss said. "And I have no world of my own— no living world. There is nothing to—to make me want success, Mr. Hilton. On *La Cucaracha* I can do as I want. But away from the ship, I find that people don't like Selenites. We are too few to command re-spect or friendship any more. And I'm quite old, you know."

Startled, Hilton stared at the Selenite. There was no way to detect signs of age on the arachnoid beings. But they always knew, infallibly, how long they had to live, and could predict the exact moment of their death.

Well, *he* wasn't old. And he wasn't a deep-space man as Danvers was. He followed no lost causes. There was nothing to keep him with the hyper ships, after this voyage, if he survived.

A signal rang. Hilton's stomach jumped up and turned int& ice, though he had been anticipating this for hours. He reached for a mike.

"Hyper stations! Close helmets! Saxon, report!"

"All work completed, Mr. Hilton," said Saxon's voice, strained but steady.

“Come up here. May need you. General call: stand by! Grab the braces. We’re coming in.”

Then they hit the see-saw!

Chapter ~. Hilton’s Choice

No doubt about it, she was tough—that old lady. She’d knocked around a thousand worlds and ridden hyper for more miles than a man could count. Something had got into her from the Big Night, something stronger than metal bracing and hard alloys. Call it soul, though there never was a machine that had a soul. But since the first log-craft was launched on steaming seas, men have known that a ship gets a soul— from somewhere.

She hopped like a flea. She bucked like a mad horse. Struts and col-umns snapped and buckled, and the echoing companionways were filled with an erratic crackling and groaning as metal, strained beyond its strength, gave way. Far too much energy rushed through the engines. But the battered old lady took it and staggered on, lurching, grunting, holding together somehow.

The see-saw bridged the gap between two types of space, and La *Cucaracha* yawed wildly down it, an indignity for an old lady who, at her age, should ride sedately through free void—but she was a hyper ship first and a lady second. She leaped into normal space. The skipper

had got his figures right. The double sun wasn’t visible, for it was eclipsed by the single planet, but the pull of that monstrous twin star clamped down like a giant’s titanic fist closing on *La Cucaracha* and yanking her forward irresistibly.

There was no time to do anything except stab a few buttons. The powerful rocket-jets blazed from *La Cucarac ha’s* hull. The impact stunned every man aboard. No watcher saw, but the automatic record-ing charts mapped what happened then.

La Cucaracha struck what was, in effect, a stone wall. Not even that could stop her. But it slowed her enough for the minimum of safety, and she flipped her stern down and crashed on the unnamed planet with all her after jets firing gallantly, the flooded compartments cush-ioning the shock, and a part of her never made of plastic or metal hold-ing her together against even that hammer blow struck at her by a world.

Air hissed out into a thinner atmosphere and dissipated. The hull was half molten. Jet tubes were fused at a dozen spots. The stem was hash.

But she was still—a ship.

The loading of cargo was routine. The men had seen too many alien planets to pay much attention to this one. There was no breathable air, so the crew worked in their suits—except for three who had been in-jured in the crash, and were in sick-bay, in a replenished atmosphere within the sealed compartments of the ship. But only a few compart-ments were so sealed. *La Cucaracha* was a sick old lady, and only first aid could be administered here.

Danvers himself superintended that. *La Cucaracha* was his own, and he kept half

the crew busy opening the heat-sealed jets, doing jury-rig repairs, and making the vessel comparatively spaceworthy. He let Saxon act as straw-boss, using the engineer's technical knowledge, though his eyes chilled whenever he noticed the Transmat man.

As for Hilton, he went out with the other half of the crew to gather the *paraine* crop. They used strong-vacuum harvesters, running long, flexible carrier tubes back to La *Cucaracha's* hold, and it took two weeks of hard, driving effort to load a full cargo. But by then the ship was bulging with *paraine,* the repairs were completed, and Danvers had charted the course to Silenus.

Hilton sat in the control room with Ts'ss and Saxon. He opened a wall compartment, glanced in, and closed it again. Then he nodded at Saxon.

"The skipper won't change his mind," he said. "Silenus is our next port. I've never been there."

"I have," Ts'ss said. "I'll tell you about it later."

Saxon drew an irritated breath. "You know what the gravity pull is, then, Ts'ss. I've never been there either, but I've looked it up in the books. Giant planets, mostly, and you can't come from hyper into nor-mal space after you've reached the radius. There's no plane of the eclip-tic in that system. It's crazy. You have to chart an erratic course toward Silenus, fighting varying gravities from a dozen planets all the way, and then you've still got the primary's pull to consider. You know *La Cuca-racha* won't do it, Mr. Hilton."

"I know she won't," Hilton said. "We pushed our luck this far, but any more would be suicide. She simply won't hold together for another run. We're stranded here. But the skipper won't believe that."

"He's insane," Saxon said. "I know the endurance limits of a ma-chine—that can be found mathematically—and this ship's only a ma-chine. Or do you agree with Captain Danvers? Maybe you think she's alive!"

Saxon was forgetting discipline, but Hilton knew what strain they were all under.

"No, she's a machine all right," he merely said. "And we both know she's been pushed too far. If we go to Silenus, it's—" He made a gesture of finality.

"Captain Danvers says—Silenus," Ts'ss murmured. 'We can't mutiny, Mr. Hilton."

"Here's the best we can do," Hilton said. "Get into hyper somehow, ride the flow, and get out again somehow. But then we're stuck. Any planet or sun with a gravity pull would smash us. The trouble is, the only worlds with facilities to overhaul La *Cucaracha* are the big ones. And if we don't get an overhaul fast we're through. Saxon, there's one answer, though. Land on an asteroid."

"But why?"

'We could manage that. No gravity to fight, worth mentioning. We certainly can't radio for help, as the signals would take years to reach anybody. Only hyper will take us fast enough. Now—has Transmat set up any stations on asteroids?"

Saxon opened his mouth and closed it again.

"Yes. There's one that would do, in the Rigel system. Far out from the primary. But I don't get it. Captain Danvers wouldn't stand for that."

Hilton opened the wall compartment. Gray smoke seeped out.

"This is *paraine,"* he said. "The fumes are being blown into the skip-

per’s cabin through his ventilator. Captain Danvers will be para-happy till we land on that Rigel asteroid, Saxon.”

There was a little silence. Hilton suddenly slammed the panel shut.

“Let’s do some charting,” he said. “The sooner we reach the Rigel port, the sooner we can get back to Earth—via Transmat.”

Curiously, it was Saxon who hesitated.

“Mr. Hilton. Wait a minute. Transmat—I know I work for the outfit, but they—they’re sharp. Business men. You have to pay plenty to use their matter transmitters.”

“They can transmit a hyper ship, can’t they? Or is it too big a job?”

“No, they can expand the field enormously. I don’t mean that. I mean they’ll want payment, and they’ll put on the squeeze. You’ll have to give up at least half of the cargo.”

“There’ll still be enough left to pay for an overhaul job.”

“Except they’ll want to know where the *paraine* came from. You’ll be over a barrel. You’ll *have* to tell them, eventually. And that’ll mean a Transmat station will be set up right here, on this world.”

“I suppose so,” Hilton said quietly. “But the old lady will be space-worthy again. When the skipper sees her after the overhaul, he’ll know it was the only thing to do. So let’s get busy.”

“Remind me to tell you about Silenus,” Ts’ss said.

The Lunar Refitting Station is enormous. A crater has been roofed with a transparent dome, and under it the hyper ships rest in their cradles. They come in battered and broken, and leave clean and sleek and strong, ready for the Big Night again. *La Cucaracha* was down there, no longer the groaning wreck that had settled on the Rigel as-teroid, but a lovely lady, shining and beautiful.

Far above, Danvers and Hilton leaned on the railing and watched.

“She’s ready to jet,” Hilton said idly. “And she looks good.”

“No thanks to you, mister.”

“Tush for that!” Hilton said. “If I hadn’t doped you, we’d be dead and *La Cucaracha* floating around in space in pieces. Now look at her.”

“Yeah. Well, she does look good. But she won’t carry another *paraine* cargo. That strike was mine. If you hadn’t told Transmat the location, we’d be set.” Danvers grimaced. “Now they’re setting up a Transmat station there; a hyper ship can’t compete with a matter transmitter.”

“There’s more than one world in the Galaxy.”

“Sure. Sure.” But Danvers’ eyes brightened as he looked down.

“Where are you heading, Skipper?” Hilton said.

‘What’s it to you? You’re taking that Transmat job, aren’t you?”

“You bet. I’m meeting Saxon in five minutes. In fact, we’re going

down to sign the contracts. I’m through with deep space. But—where are you heading?”

“I don’t know,” Danvers said. “I thought I might run up around Arc-turus and see what’s stirring.”

Hilton did not move for a long time. Then he spoke without looking at the captain.

"You wouldn't be thinking of a stopover at Canis after that, would you?"

"You're a liar."

"Go keep your appointment," Danvers said.

Hilton eyed the great hyper ship below. "The old lady's always been a nice, clean craft. She's never got out of line. She's always charted a straight course. It'd be too bad if she had to carry slaves from Arcturus to the Canis market. It's illegal, of course, but that isn't the point. It's a rotten, crooked racket."

"I didn't ask your advice, mister!" Danvers flared. "Nobody's talking about slave-running!"

"I suppose you weren't figuring on unloading the *pc~raine* at Silenus? You can get a good price for *paraine* from Medical Center, but you can get six times the price from the drug ring on Silenus. Yeah, Ts'ss told me. He's been on Silenus."

"Oh, shut up," Danvers said.

Hilton tilted back his head to stare through the dome at the vast dark-ness above. "Even if you're losing a fight, it's better to fight clean," he said. "Know where it'd end?"

Danvers looked up, too, and apparently saw something in the void that he didn't like.

"How can you buck Transmat?" he demanded. "You've got to make a profit somehow."

"There's an easy, dirty way, and there's a clean, hard way. The old lady had a fine record."

"You're not a deep-space man. You never were. Beat it! I've got to get a crew together!"

"Listen—" Hilton said. He paused. "Ah, the devil with you. I'm through."

He turned and walked away through the long steel corridor.

Ts'ss and Saxon were drinking highballs at the Quarter Moon. Through the windows they could see the covered way that led to the Refitting Station, and beyond it the crags of a crater-edge, with the star-shot darkness hanging like a backdrop. Saxon looked at his watch.

"He isn't coming," Ts'ss said.

The Transmat man moved his shoulders impatiently. "No. You're wrong. Of course, I can understand your wanting to stay with *La Cu-caracha."*

"Yes, I'm old. That's one reason."

"But Hilton's young, and he's smart. He's got a big future ahead of him. That guff about sticking to an ideal—well, maybe Captain Danvers is that sort of man, but Hilton isn't. He isn't in love with hyper ships."

Ts'ss turned his goblet slowly in his curious fingers. "You are wrong about one thing, Saxon. I'm not shipping on La *Cucaracha."*

Saxon stared. "But I thought—why not?"

"I will die within a thousand Earth hours," Ts'ss said softly. "When that time comes, I shall go down into the Selenite caverns. Not many know they exist, and only a few of us know the secret caves, the holy places of our race. But I know. I

shall go there to die, Saxon. Every man has one thing that is strongest—and so it is with me. I must die on my own world. As for Captain Danvers, he follows his cause, as our Chyra Emperor did, and as your King Arthur did. Men like Danvers made hyper ships great. Now the cause is dead, but the type of men who made it great once can't change their allegiance. If they could, they would never have spanned the Galaxy with their ships. So Danvers will stay with *La Cucaracha*. And Hilton—"

"He's not a fanatic! He won't stay. Why should he?"

"In our legends Chyra Emperor was ruined, and his Empire broken," Ts'ss said. "But he fought on. There was one who fought on with him, though he did not believe in Chyra's cause. A Selenite named Jailyra. Wasn't there—in your legends—a Sir Lancelot? He didn't believe in Arthur's cause either, but he was Arthur's friend. So he stayed. Yes, Saxon, there are the fanatics who fight for what they believe—but there are also the others, who do not believe, and who fight in the name of a lesser cause. Something called friendship."

Saxon laughed and pointed out the window. "You're wrong, Ts'ss," he said triumphantly. "Hilton's no fool. For here he comes."

Hilton's tall form was visible moving quickly along the way. He passed the window and vanished. Saxon turned to the door.

There was a pause.

"Or, perhaps, it isn't a lesser cause," Ts'ss said. "For the Selenite Em-pire passed, and Arthur's court passed, and the hyper ships are passing. Always the Big Night takes them, in the end. But this has gone on since the beginning—"

"SAThat?"

This time Ts'ss pointed.

Saxon leaned forward to look. Through the angle of the window he could see Hilton, standing motionless on the ramp. Passersby streamed about him unnoticed. He was jostled, and he did not know it, Hilton was thinking.

They saw the look of deep uncertainty on his face. They saw his face suddenly clear. Hilton grinned wryly to himself. He had made up his mind. He turned and went rapidly back the way he had come.

Saxon stared after the broad, retreating back, going the way it had come, toward the Refitting Station where Danvers and La *Cucaracha* waited. Hilton—going back where he had come from, back to what he had never really left.

"The crazy fool!" Saxon said. "He can't be doing this! Nobody turns down jobs with Transmat!"

Ts'ss gave him a wise, impassive glance. "You believe that," he said.

"Transmat means much to you. Transmat needs men like you, to make it great—to keep it growing. You're a lucky man, Saxon. You're riding with the tide. A hundred years from now—two hundred—and you might be standing in Hilton's shoes. Then you'd understand."

Saxon blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Transmat is growing now," Ts'ss said gently. "It will be very great— thanks to men like you. But for Transmat too, there will come an end."

He shrugged, looking out beyond the crater's rim with his inhuman, faceted eyes, at the glittering points of light which, for a little while, seemed to keep the Big Night at bay.

DON'T LOOK NOW

The man in the brown suit was looking at himself in the mirror behind the bar. The reflection seemed to interest him even more deeply than the drink between his hands. He was paying only perfunctory attention to Lyman's attempts at conversation. This had been going on for perhaps fifteen minutes before he finally lifted his glass and took a deep swallow.

"Don't look now," Lyman said.

The brown man slid his eyes sidewise toward Lyman, tilted his glass higher, and took another swig. Ice cubes sjipped down toward his mouth. He put the glass back on the red-brown wood and signaled for a refill. Finally he took a deep breath and looked at Lyman.

"Don't look at what?" he asked.

"There was one sitting right beside you," Lyman said, blinking rather glazed eyes. "He just went out. You mean you couldn't see him?"

The brown man finished paying for his fresh drink before he answered. "See who?" he asked, with a fine mixture of boredom, distaste and reluctant interest. "Who went out?"

"What have I been telling you for the last ten minutes? Weren't you listening?"

"Certainly I was listening. That is—certainly. You were talking about—bathtubs. Radios. Orson—"

"Not Orson. H. G. Herbert George. With Orson it was just a gag. H. G. *knew*—or suspected. I wonder if it was simply intuition with him? He couldn't have had any proof—but he did

stop writing science fiction rather suddenly, didn't he? I'll bet he knew once, though."

"Knew what?"

"About the Martians. All this won't do us a bit of good if you don't listen. It may not anyway. The trick is to jump the gun— with proof. Convincing evidence. Nobody's ever been allowed to produce the evidence before. You *are* a reporter, aren't you?"

Holding his glass, the man in the brown suit nodded reluctantly.

"Then you ought to be taking it all down on a piece of folded paper. I want everybody to know. The whole world. It's important. Terribly important. It explains everything. My life won't be safe unless I can pass along the information and make people believe it."

"Why won't your life be safe?"

"Because of the Martians, you fool. They own the world."

The brown man sighed. "Then they own my newspaper, too,*' he objected, "so I can't print anything they don't like."

"I never thought of that," Lyman said, considering the bottom of his glass, where two ice cubes had fused into a cold, immutable union. "They're not omnipotent, though. I'm sure they're vulnerable, or why have they always kept under cover?

They're afraid of being found out. If the world had convincing evidence—look, people always believe what they read in the newspapers. Couldn't you—"

"Ha," said the brown man with deep significance.

Lyman drummed sadly on the bar and murmured, "There must be some way. Perhaps if I had another drink. . . ."

The brown-suited man tasted his collins, which seemed to stimulate him. "Just what is all this about Martians?" he asked Lyman. "Suppose you start at the beginning and tell me again. Or can't you remember?"

"Of course I can remember. I've got practically total recall. It's something new. Very new. I never could do it before. I can even remember my last conversation with the Martians." Lyman favored the brown man with a glance of triumph.

"When was that?"

"This morning."

"I can even remember conversations I had last week," the brown man said mildly. "So what?"

"You don't understand. They make us forget, you see. They tell us what to do and we forget about the conversation—it's post-hypnotic suggestion, I expect—but we follow their orders just the same. There's the compulsion, though we think we're making our own decisions. Oh, they own the world, all right, but nobody knows it except me."

"And how did you find Out?"

"Well, I got my brain scrambled, in a way. I've been fooling around with supersonic detergents, trying to work out something marketable, you know. The gadget went wrong—from some standpoints. High-frequency waves, it was. They went through and through me. Should have been inaudible, but I could hear them, or rather—well, actually 1 could *see* them. That's what (mean about my brain being scrambled. And after that, I could see and hear the Martians. They've geared themselves so they work efficiently on ordinary brains, and mine isn't ordinary anymore. They can't hypnotize me, either. They can command me, but I needn't obey—now. I hope they don't suspect. Maybe they do. Yes, I guess they do."

"How can you tell?"

"The way they look at me."

"How do they look at you?" asked the brown man, as he began to reach for a pencil and then changed his mind. He took a drink instead. "Well? What are they like?"

"I'm not sure. I can see them, all right, but only when they're dressed up."

"Okay, okay," the brown man said patiently. "How do they look, dressed up?"

"Just like anybody, almost. They dress up in—in human skins. Oh, not real ones, imitations. Like the Katzenjammer Kids zipped into crocodile suits. Undressed—I don't know. I've never seen one. Maybe they're invisible even to me, then, or maybe they're just camouflaged. Ants or owls or rats or bats or—"

"Or anything," the brown man said hastily.

"Thanks. Or anything, of course. But when they're-dressed up like humans—like that one who was sitting next to you awhile ago, when I told you not to look—"

"That one was invisible, I gather?"

"Most of the time they are, to everybody. But once in a while, for some reason,

they—"

"Wait," the brown man objected. "Make sense, will you? They dress up in human skins and then sit around invisible?"

"Only now and then. The human skins are perfectly good imitations. Nobody can tell the difference. It's that third eye that gives them away. When they keep it closed, you'd never guess it was there. When they want to open it, they go invisible—like *that.* Fast. When I see somebody with a third eye, right in the middle of his forehead, I know he's a Martian and invisible, and I pretend not to notice him."

"Uh-huh," the brown man said. "Then for all you know, I'm one of your visible Martians."

"Oh, I hope not!" Lyman regarded him anxiously. "Drunk as I am, I don't think so. I've been trailing you all day, making sure. It's a risk I have to take, of course. They'll go to any length—any length at all—to make a man give himself away. I realize that. I can't really trust anybody. But I had to find *someone* to talk to, and I—" He paused. There was a brief silence. "I could be wrong," Lyman said presently. "When the third eye's closed, I can't tell if it's there. Would you mind opening your third eye for me?" He fixed a dim gaze on the brown man's forehead.

"Sorry," the reporter said. "Some other time. Besides, I don't know you. So you want me to splash this across the front page, I gather? Why didn't you go to see the managing editor? My stories have to get past the desk and rewrite."

"I want to give my secret to the world," Lyman said stubbornly. "The question is, how far will I get? You'd expect they'd have killed me the minute I opened my mouth to you—except that I didn't say anything while they were here. I don't believe they take us very seriously, you know. This must have been going on since the dawn of history, and by now they've had time to get careless. They let Fort go pretty far before they cracked down on him. But you notice they were careful never to let Ford get hold of genuine proof that would convince people."

The brown man said something under his breath about a human interest story in a box. He asked, "What do the Martians do, besides hang around bars all dressed up?"

"I'm still working on that," Lyman said. "It isn't easy to understand. They run the world, of course, but why?" He wrinkled his brow and stared appealingly at the brown man. "Why?"

"If they do run it, they've got a lot to explain."

"That's what I mean. From our viewpoint, there's no sense to it. We do things illogically, but only because they tell us to. Everything we do, almost, is pure illogic. Poe's *Imp of the Perverse*—you could give it another name beginning with M. Martian, I mean. It's all very well for psychologists to explain why a murderer wants to confess, but it's still an illogical reaction. Unless a Martian commands him to."

"You can't be hypnotized into doing anything that violates your moral sense," the brown man said triumphantly.

Lyman frowned. "Not'-by'another human, but you can by a Martian. I expect they got the upper hand when we didn't have more than ape-brains, and they've kept it ever since. They evolved as we did, and kept a step ahead. Like the sparrow on the eagle's back who hitch-hiked till the eagle reached his ceiling, and then took off and broke the altitude record. They conquered the world, but nobody ever knew it. And

they've been ruling ever since."

"But—"

"Take houses, for example. Uncomfortable things. Ugly, inconvenient, dirty, everything wrong with them. But when men like Frank Lloyd Wright slip out from under the Martians' thumb long enough to suggest something better, look how the people react. They hate the thought. That's their Martians, giving them orders."

. "Look. Why should the Martians care what kind of houses we live in? Tell me that."

Lyman frowned. "I don't like the note of skepticism I detect creeping into this conversation," he announced. "'They care, all right. No doubt about it. They *live* in our houses. We don't build for our convenience, we build, under order, for the .Martians, the way they want it. They're very much concerned with everything we do. And the more senseless, the more concern.

"Take wars. Wars don't make sense from any human viewpoint. Nobody really wants wars. But we go right on having them. From the Martian viewpoint, they're useful. They give us a spurt in technology, and they reduce the excess population. And there are lots of other results, too. Colonization, for one thing. But mainly technology. In peacetime, if a guy invents jet propulsion, it's too expensive to develop commercially. In wartime, though, it's *got to* be developed. Then the Martians can use it whenever they want. They use us the way they'd use tools or—or limbs. And nobody ever really wins a war—except the Martians."

The man in the brown suit chuckled. "That makes sense," he said. "It must be nice to be a Martian."

"Why not? Up till now, no race ever successfully conquered and ruled another. The underdog could revolt or absorb. If you know you're being ruled, then the ruler's vulnerable. But if the world doesn't know—and it doesn't—

"Take radios," Lyman continued, going off at a tangent. "There's no earthly reason why a sane human should listen to a

radio. But the Martians make us do it. They like it. Take bathtubs. Nobody contends bathtubs are comfortable—for us. But they're fine for Martians. All the impractical things we keep on using, even though we know they're impractical—"

"Typewriter ribbons," the brown man said, struck by the thought. "But not even a Martian could enjoy changing a typewriter ribbon."

Lyman seemed to find that flippant. He said that he knew all about the Martians except for one thing—their psychology.

"1 don't know *why* they act as they do. It looks illogical sometimes, but I feel perfectly sure they've got sound motives for every move they make. Until I get that worked out I'm pretty much at a standstill. Until I get evidence—proof—and help. I've got to stay under cover till then. And I've been doing that. I do what they tell me, so they won't suspect, and I pretend to forget what they tell me to forget."

"Then you've got nothing much to worry about."

Lyman paid no attention. He was off again on a list of his grievances.

, "When I hear the water running in the tub and a Martian splashing around, I pretend I don't hear a thing. My bed's too short and I tried last week to order a special length, but the Martian that sleeps there told me not to. He's a runt, like most of them. That is, I think they're runts. I have to deduce, because you never see them

undressed. But it goes on like that constantly. By the way, how's your Martian?"

The man in the brown suit set down his glass rather suddenly.

"My Martian?" •

"Now listen. I may be just a little bit drunk, but my logic remains unimpaired. I can still put two and two together. Either you know about the Martians, or you don't. If you do, there's no point in giving me that, 'What, *my* Martian?' routine. I know you have a Martian. Your Martian knows you have a Martian. My Martian knows. The point is, do *you* know? Think hard," Lyman urged solicitously.

"No, I haven't got a Martian," the reporter said, taking a quick drink. The edge of the glass clicked against his teeth.

"Nervous, I see," Lyman remarked. "Of course you *have* got ~*a* Martian. I suspect you know it."

"What would I be doing with a Martian?" the brown man asked with dogged dogmatism.

"What would you be doing without one? I imagine it's illegal. If they caught you running around without one they'd probably

put you in a pound or something until claimed. Oh, you've got one, all right. So have I. So has he, and he, and he—and the bartender." Lyman enumerated the other barflies with a wavering forefinger.

"Of course they have," the brown man said. "But they'll all go back to Mars tomorrow and then you can see a good doctor. You'd better have another dri—"

He was turning toward the bartender when Lyman, apparently by accident, leaned close to him and whispered urgently, *"Don't look now!"*

The brown man glanced at Lyman's white face reflected in the mirror before them.

"It's all right," he said. "There aren't any Mar-—"

Lyman gave him a fierce, quick kick under the edge of the bar.

"Shut up! One just came in!"

And then he caught the brown man's gaze and with elaborate unconcern said, "—so naturally, there was nothing for me to do but climb out on the roof after it. Took me ten minutes to get it down the ladder, and just as we reached the bottom it gave one bound, climbed up my face, sprang from the top of my head, and there it was again on the roof, screaming for me to get it down."

"What?" the brown man demanded with pardonable curiosity.

"My cat, of course. What did you think? No, never mind, don't answer that." Lyman's face was turned to the brown man's, but from the corners of his eyes he was watching an invisible progress down the length of the bar toward a booth at the very back.

"Now why did he come in?" he murmured. "I don't like this. Is he anyone you know?"

"Is who—?"

"That Martian. Yours, by any chance? No, I suppose not. Yours was probably the one who went out a while ago. I wonder if he went to make a report, and sent this one in? It's possible. It could be. You can talk now, but keep your voice low, and stop squirming. Want him to notice we can see him?"

"/ can't see him. Don't drag me into this. You and your Martians can fight it out together. You're making me nervous. I've got to go, anyway." But he didn't move to

get off the stool. Across Lyman's shoulder he was stealing glances toward the back of the bar, and now and then he looked at Lyman's face.

"Stop watching me," Lyman said. "Stop watching him. Anybody'd think you were a cat."

"Why a cat? Why should anybody—do I look like a cat?"

"We were talking about cats, weren't we? Cats can see them, quite clearly. Even undressed, I believe. They don't like them."

"Who doesn't like who?"

"Whom. Neither likes the other. Cats can see Martians—sh-h! —but they pretend not to, and that makes the Martians mad. I have a theory that cats ruled the world before Martians came. Never mind. Forget about cats. This may be more serious than you think. I happen to know my Martian's taking tonight off, and I'm pretty sure that was your Martian who went out some time ago. And have you noticed that nobody else in here has his Martian with him? Do you suppose—" His voice sank. "Do you suppose they could be *waiting for us outside?"*

"Oh, Lord," the brown man said. "In the alley with the cats, I suppose."

"Why don't you stop this yammer about cats and be serious for a moment?" Lyman demanded, and then paused, paled, and reeled slightly on his stool. He hastily took a drink to cover his confusion.

"What's the matter now?" the brown man asked.

"Nothing." Gulp. "Nothing. It was just that—he *looked* at me. With—you know."

"Let me get this straight. I take it the Martian is dressed in—is dressed like a human?"

"Naturally."

"But he's invisible to all eyes but yours?"

"Yes. He doesn-'t want to be visible, just now. Besides—" Lyman paused cunningly. He gave the brown man a furtive glance and then looked quickly down at his drink. "Besides, you know, I rather think you *can* see him—a little, anyway."

The brown man was perfectly silent for about thirty seconds. He sat quite motionless, not even the ice in the drink he held clinking. One might have thought he did not even breathe. Certainly he did not blink.

"What makes you think that?" he asked in a normal voice, after the thirty seconds had run out.

"I—did I say anything? I wasn't listening." Lyman put down his drink abruptly. "I think I'll go now."

"No, you won't," the brown man said, closing his fingers around Lyman's wrist. "Not yet you won't. Come back here. Sit down. Now. What was the idea? Where were you going?"

Lyman nodded dumbly toward the back of the bar, indicating either a juke-box or a door marked MEN.

"I don't feel so gqpd.<Maybe I've had too much to drink. I guess I'll—"

"You're all right. I don't trust you back there with that—that invisible man of yours. You'll stay right here until he leaves."

"He's going now," Lyman said brightly. His eyes moved with great briskness along the line of an invisible but rapid progress toward the front door. "See, he's gone. Now let me loose, will you?"

The brown man glanced toward the back booth.

"No," he said, "he isn't gone. Sit right where you are."

It was Lyman's turn to remain quite still, in a stricken sort of way, for a perceptible while. The ice in *his* drink, however, clinked audibly. Presently he spoke. His voice was soft and rather soberer than before.

"You're right. He's still there. You can see him, can't you?"

The brown man said, "Has he got his back to us?"

"You *can* see him, then. Better than I can maybe. Maybe there are more of them here than I thought. They could be anywhere. They could be sitting beside you anywhere you go, and you wouldn't even guess, until—" He shook his head a little. "They'd want to be *sure,"* he said, mostly to himself. ,"They can give you orders and make you forget, but there must be limits to what they can force you to do. They can't make a man betray himself. They'd have to lead him on—until they were sure."

He lifted his drink and tipped it steeply above his face. The ice ran down the slope and bumped coldly against his lip, but he held it until the last of the pale, bubbling amber had drained into his mouth. He set the glass on the bar and faced the brown man.

"Well?" he said.

The brown man looked up and down the bar.

"It's getting late," he said. "Not many people left. We'll wait."

"Wait for what?"

The brown man looked toward the back booth and looked away again quickly.

"I have something to show you. I don't want anyone else to see."

Lyman surveyed the narrow, smoky room. As he looked the last customer beside themselves at the bar began groping in his

pocket, tossed some change on the mahogany, and went out slowly.

They sat in silence. The bartender eyed them with stolid disinterest. Presently a couple in the front booth got up and departed, quarreling in-undertones.

"Is there anyone left?" the brown man asked in a voice that did not carry down the bar to the man in the apron.

"Only—" Lyman did not finish, but he nodded gently toward the back of the room. "He isn't looking. Let's get this over with. What do you want to show me?"

The brown man took off his wrist watch and pried up the metal case. Two small, glossy photograph prints slid out. The brown man separated them with a finger.

"I just want to make sure of something," he said. "First— why did you pick me out? Quite a while ago, you said you'd been trailing me all day, making sure. I haven't forgotten that. And you knew I was a reporter. Suppose you tell me the truth, now?"

Squirming on his stool, Lyman scowled. "It was the way you looked at things," he murmured. "On the subway this morning—I'd never seen you before in my life, but I kept noticing the way you looked at things—the wrong things, things that weren't there, the way a cat does—and then you'd always look away—I got the idea you could see the Martians too."

"Go on," the brown man said quietly.

"I followed you. All day. I kept hoping you'd turn out to be—somebody I could talk to. Because if I could *know* that I wasn't the only one who could see them, then

I'd know there was still some hope left. It's been worse than solitary confinement. I've been able to see them for three years now. Three years. And I've managed to keep my power a secret even from them. And, somehow, I've managed to keep from killing myself, too."

"Three years?" the brown man said. He shivered.

"There was always a little hope. I knew nobody would believe— not without proof. And how can you get proof? It was only that I—I kept telling myself that maybe you could see them too, and if you could, maybe there were others—lots of others—enough so we might get together and work out some way of proving to the world—"

The brown man's fingers were moving. In silence he pushed a photograph across the mahogany. Lyman picked it up unsteadily.

"Moonlight?" he asked after a moment. It was a landscape under a deep, dark sky with white clouds in it. Trees stood white

and lacy against the darkness. The grass was white as if with moonlight, and the shadows blurry.

"No, not moonlight,'" the brown man said. "Infrared. I'm strictly an amateur, but lately I've^been experimenting with infrared film. And I got some very odd results."

Lyman stared at the film.

"You see, I live near—" The brown man's finger tapped a certain quite common object that appeared in the photograph. "—and something funny keeps showing up now and then against it. But only with infrared film. Now I know chlorophyll reflects so much infrared light that grass and leaves photograph white. The sky comes out black, like this. There are tricks to using this kind of film. Photograph a tree against a cloud, and you can't tell them apart in the print. But you can photograph through a haze and pick out distant objects the ordinary film wouldn't catch. And sometimes, when you focus on something like this—" He tapped the image of the very common object again. "You get a very odd image on the film. Like that. A man with three eyes."

Lyman held the print up to the light. In silence he took the other one from the bar and studied it. When he laid them down he was smiling.

"You know," Lyman said in a conversational whisper, "a professor of astrophysics at one of the more important universities had a very interesting little item in the *Times* the other Sunday. Name of Spitzer, I think. He said that if there were life on Mars, and if Martians had ever visited earth, there'd be no way to prove it. Nobody would believe the few men who saw them. Not, he said, unless the Martians happened to be photographed. ..."

Lyman looked at the brown man thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, "it's happened. You've photographed them."

The brown man nodded. He took up the prints and returned them to his watch-case. "I thought so, too. Only until tonight I couldn't be sure. I'd never seen one—fully—as you have. It isn't so much a matter of what you call getting your brain scrambled with supersonics as it is of just knowing where to look. But I've been seeing *part* of them all my life, and so has everybody. It's that little suggestion of movement you never catch except just at the edge of your vision, just out of the corner of your eye. Something that's *almost* there—and when you look fully at it,

there's nothing. These photographs showed me the way. It's not easy to learn, but it can be done. We're conditioned to look directly at a thing—the particular thing we want to see clearly,

whatever it is. Perhaps the Martians gave us that conditioning. When we see a movement at the edge of our range of vision, it's almost irresistible not to look directly at it. So it vanishes."

"Then they can be seen—by anybody?"

"I've learned at lot in a few days," the brown man said. "Since I took these photographs. You have to train yourself. It's like seeing a trick picture—one that's really a composite, after you study it. Camouflage. You just have to learn how. Otherwise we can look at them all our lives and never see them."

"The camera does, though."

"Yes, the camera does. I've wondered why nobody ever caught them' this way before. Once you see them on film, they're unmistakable—that third eye."

"Infrared film's comparatively new, isn't it? And then I'll bet you have to catch them against that one particular background— you know—or they won't show on the film. Like trees against clouds. It's tricky. You must have had just the right lighting that day, and exactly the right focus, and the lens stopped down just right. A kind of minor miracle. It might never happen again exactly that way. But . . . don't look now."

They were silent. Furtively, they watched the mirror. Their eyes slid along toward the open door of the tavern.

And then there was a long, breathless silence.

"He looked back at us," Lyman said very quietly. "He looked at us ... that third eye!"

The brown man was motionless again. When he moved, it was to swallow the rest of his drink.

"I don't think that they're suspicious yet," he said. "The trick will be to keep under cover until we can blow this thing wide open. There's got to be some way to do it—some way that will convince people."

"There's proof. The photographs. A competent cameraman ought to be able to figure out just how you caught that Martian on film and duplicate the conditions. It's evidence."

"Evidence can cut both ways," the brown man said. "What I'm hoping is that the Martians don't really like to kill—unless they have to. I'm hoping they won't kill without proof. But—" He tapped his wrist watch.

"There's two of us now, though," Lyman said. "We've got to stick together. Both of us have broken the big rule—*don't look now—"*

The bartender was at the back, disconnecting the juke box. The brown man said, "We'd better not be seen together

unnecessarily. But if we both come to this bar tomorrow night at nine for a drink—that wouldn't look suspicious, even to them."

"Suppose—" Lyman- hesitated. "May I have one of those photographs?"

"Why?"

"If one of us had—an accident—the other one would still have the proof. Enough, maybe, to convince the right people."

The brown man hesitated, nodded shortly, and opened his watch case again. He gave Lyman one of the pictures.

"Hide it," he said. "It's—evidence. I'll see you here tomorrow. Meanwhile, be careful. Remember to play safe."

They shook hands firmly, facing each other in an endless second of final, decisive silence. Then the brown man turned abruptly and walked out of the bar.

Lyman sat there.. Between two wrinkles in his forehead there was a stir and a flicker of lashes unfurling. The third eye opened slowly and looked after the brown man.