



U "Please obit flowers; I'b allergic."—Contemporary gag.

rice-wine dream; not opium pipe dreams or marijuana or mushroom hallucinations; not the esthetic paradise of Dante's allegory. The tech tightened his lips and tapped Mahler's symphonic heaven. Still no response. The tech smiled. He hadn't played his trump.

**T**HE First Star Expedition had been sending back reports.

IOU was among the earliest to subscribe for bulletins of the Eschatological Survey Team of Starex One. So there was a great dipper of non-human heavens to draw on as well.

That of the folk of Mekbuba II. In their heaven the chiefest delight was to go around scowling. It was joy to envisage relaxing from the livelong need to smile, a smile being the most efficient arrangement of features for scooping in the tiny airborne organisms on which they fed.

And that of the folk of Nashira II. They led a hard life and yearned for a harder time in heaven. In retrospect their temporal lot would seem not so bad after all.

And that of those of Spica II, in whom the nose had grown vestigial. These people looked forward to a return to the dream days of legend; the nose would quiver with sensation and the heady effect of pollen, pollution, and putre-

faction would become known. Their desire was all the stronger because, honoring tradition, they preserved the conditions making these things tantalizingly omnipresent.

And of Salm II, a teeming planet. Each person believed that on reaching heaven *it* would—whatever pleasure it queued up for—always be first in line.

The heaven of Alkalurops II was special—its would-be dwellers having from the beginning reserved all good things for heaven—and the tech knew a fleeting urge to put this in place of his present orbit.

Heavens rolled by but Manning held out.

Swallowing angry embarrassment, the tech stood beside Manning. Manning made no sign of awareness. Taking this for sign of displeasure, the tech with savage feelings but gentle touch prodded Manning.

"Haven't you been able to come to any conclusion, sir?"

Manning nodded and slowly slid out of his chair. Somewhere along the line he had died of—one had to suppose—ecstasy.

**R**USH damned Ken under his breath. "Why'd you bust out to the press with a mea culpa? I could've hushed this Manning bit."

Ken lifted his head slowly.

"Rush, I wonder if what we're doing is good. The spirit is willing—"

Rush stilled a quick retort. He steepled his fingers. "We do our human best. Besides, the guy got what he wanted."

Ken sat up. "You're darn tootin'. I let the shock and the uproar throw me." He eyed the monitors, not seeming to see how many screens were dark, how many consulting booths were not in use. "Be a shame to let all this go by default . . ." The unending spectacle caught him up.

Rush left. He wished he could convince himself it would come out right.

The Zealots had hold of this and were milking it.

They had strong backing; more to the point, they had a head—Yardley Bourne.

Bourne's biting mouth interpreted all-seeing providence, frightening away prospects. "This Manning-martyring monster, IOU, usurps God's function, shortcircuits Judgment, undermines Authority. This tool of the Devil encourages wicked living by 'forgiving' all at the end of living." Yardley Bourne wanted his finger in the pie in the sky. "By jiminy, I demand that all obits be open to inspection!"

Then there was Soul Security. So far, Soul Security limited itself to obiting pets. The most peevish Zealot couldn't fault Soul Security

for taping the voice of the master or mistress praising the dying animal. Even Yardley Bourne couldn't misinterpret Soul Security's taping, for dogs, the odor-complex of a congregational tree, with bonus cat at bay on a bough; for cats, a micey smell, or fluttering of bird or flopping of goldfish under paw; tensile infinity of worm, for birds.

Rush told himself that when the newness wore off the public's interest would turn back to IOU. But "Soul Security" seemed undue for a dumb-beast clientele.

IOU was in no present danger of collapsing, if that was what Soul Security hoped. IOU could keep going till obit storage charges ran out.

Back to Manning. IOU's pitch would be that Manning had got what he wanted.

Oh. Tell the computer to collect in advance from now on. . .

Margaret Tumulty let the curtain fall in place. The little band of Zealots was there yet. She had grown aware that they had stilled and she had hoped they were gone. At least they had stilled. Listening to their yapping at IOU made her feel, well, *sick*. She tried to hide her feelings from Rush whenever she saw him but the idea of an obit gave her the shivers. But Zealots were disgusting, and just hearing them she felt disloyal. Still, it seemed to please Rush

that she hadn't yielded to the pulling power of IOU commercials; he took it as a tribute to their personal relationship—she contemplated no greater joy.

She turned to her set and had it replay her favorite Neal McGillicuddy Cloy telecast. All was sweet, safe, and sure until a large band of Zealots, who like all Zealots took pride in being outspoken and in looking for opposition, came upon those outside the Tumulty mansion. These last had shouted themselves hoarse down-withing the Manning-martyrers and up-withing the Zealots. Their whispering caused the newcomers to take them for IOU conspirators and to wade into them bloodily. Margaret raised the volume.

**O** TTO TREVER nodded absent farewell to the door-angel. This was it, the obit to end all obits. But he felt regret for all he had to leave behind. Spatially the obit waiting in the necrofile lay behind; temporally it lay before. Why in many-mansioned possibility must he fix on only one, possibly free, choice? Deaf and blind to the Zealots, Trever passed through them along a t.a.-held line, and stepped onto the autowalk heading home.

The door-angel gazed after the vanishing figure. Something was O.

Most clients were one-time arrivals; there was no need for the door-angel to sort them out. Trever always wore the same clothing, always toted his umbrella—defiant symbol of the Radical Republicans, who once opposed functionalizing the weather bureau. The door-angel had come to recognize Trever and, torn between recognizing and the non-need to recognize, found salvation by stacking the deck to present Trever always with the same card. Now it gazed after the vanishing figure and realized what was O. The man had forgotten to take his umbrella.

The door-angel hurried in and retrieved the battle-scarred umbrella, but by then the man was rounding out of sight.

The weather bureau had switched on a breeze. The door-angel's wings trembled. The door-angel eyed the vanes in the traffic lanes above and beyond the autowalks. It spread its wings and moved them.

Its makers had not designed the wings for such levity, but the door-angel rose. It was flying.

It looked for the man but the earth was tipping over. Its wings were tearing off. The ground came up.

The umbrella. Somewhere in the door-angel's reconditioned metal was the memory image of parachute and nose

cone. The door-angel tore at the catch.

It was immovable; being only a symbol, the umbrella didn't open. The door-angel perished without benefit of obit.

## VIII

*"In as much as personal identity is immaterial to obit-administering, the client may elect to use a pseudonym."—IOU contract form.*

**R**USH looked down. He could tell the t.a.s by their blue uniforms, the Zealots by the lightning-emblazoned arm-bands they had taken to wearing, and the obit-seekers by their fewness.

He turned from the window to spottily-lit monitors. An outthrusting jaw, bulb nose, and wild eyebrows caught his eyes. He smiled. The whole getup screamed disguise. These days clients seemed to want to hide from family, friends, and foes that they were clients. For Rush's benefit, the computer printed on the screen the name G. F. VEHR (PSEUD.) . . .

The electronic frisking had given him a bad moment; he had feared the t.a.s would penetrate his careful disguise. But they had not even suspected disguise. They were simply on the lookout for Zealot sabotage. It had all worked out for the best. He

was here now, and the ordeal had shaken loose his last reservations.

It was the fuss about Manning that made him think of taping his own obit. Not that he wanted to die in ecstasy—not just yet. He had so much more good to do on earth. But taping a trial obit might be the answer to what was troubling him.

It began when Manager Forbes—he advised the intercom all names were purely fictitious—singled out young Vehr. Vehr's unclouded vision of the shining purity of the Ideal—neat, evenly-balanced books, ditto towns, ditto people—exalted him above the classmates in the business ethics seminary. Colonizing of Venus was beginning.

"The first Carrier of the Word on Venus! A great honor, my son, but one you richly deserve."

"I am not worthy, Manager Forbes."

"Oh, you are, my son."

Then the briefing. The veil of Venus fell. Vehr closed his eyes. No shining purity there. No neat, evenly-balanced books, towns, people. Violence, lust, passion ran amuck in the raw settlements.

He packed. Manager Forbes arranged passage. But Venus had evidently got word of impending salvation; anonymous abuse in dirty English, Chinese and Russian flooded the seminary. Manager Forbes in

particular came in for brutal cautioning, vilifying and ridiculing.

Manager Forbes vetoed the mission. Venus was not yet worthy of such as Vehr. The seminary would turn its face toward a more deserving flock nearer home.

Vehr protested. But he bowed to greater wisdom, not without a spurt of fear. He had come near to overdoing his disappointment, moving more than one director to talk of overriding the veto and giving the lad his chance to prove himself.

"Poor Manager Forbes. But it was all for the best. By sending those letters I was able to keep shining and pure my vision of the Ideal." Mind had triumphed over matter, yet he found himself thinking often of the aborted mission and the thought always carried a feeling of apprehension. Worsening of late, it took the form of a fear of saying or doing something embarrassing. He was a public figure. He couldn't restrict himself to pretaped appearances.

Taping an obit allaying a disagreeable memory in the hereafter might, by taking off pressure, allay a disagreeable memory in the here. In his obit he would be leaving a world in which Man had never torn the veil from Venus, a Venus innocent as the dawn of Earth when mystery brooded over the waters.

It seemed to work. The out-thrusting jaw, bulb nose and wild eyebrows couldn't express the joy of one shut of burdensome memory, but Rush sensed just that when Vehr got up to go. Rush started to switch off, then stopped. The very positiveness of the false features suggested their negatives. Rush knew he ought to know the underlying face. Vehr was moving out of the frame when it came to Rush.

Neal McGillicuddy Cloy.

**C**LOY was following arrows blinking This Way Out.

Rush took his elbow. "There's another way, Mr. Vehr." He looked around. "Private. The staff comes and goes without having to pass through the Zealots waiting out there. Allow me."

"Why, thank you. Most kind. Much for the best."

Rush hurried Cloy past Ken's office and into his own. Cloy's eyes darted around behind eyebrows. Rush introduced himself and showed Cloy a chair.

"While you're here, Mr. Vehr, suppose I show you how we do our job."

Cloy remained standing. "Interesting, I'm sure, Mr. Tumulty. But I'm afraid I haven't the time—"

Rush was tuning in a monitor.

". . . and I'm sure if Hannah and I were shipwrecked

alone together on an asteroid we . . .”

The prelapsaurian jaw fell. “Am I hearing and seeing right? Do you eavesdrop on your clients?”

“Monitor. I won’t pay cloy—I mean play coy. We monitor to make sure all goes smoothly.”

Cloy sat down and viewed the monitor till it went black.

“Quite moving. I see you are doing a splendid job. Indeed, I venture to wonder if I might buy into IOU? On a modest scale, of course.”

“Your confidence is touching, Mr. Vehr. But frankly, owing to certain disrupting influences our position isn’t ideal. We need the moderating presence of a man of stature devoted to our interests and believing in our principles.”

“Loyalty, as we in business ethics put it, is the dividend on a mutually advantageous agreement.”

“I share that sentiment.”

“This has been very pleasant, Mr. Tumulty. Now if you’ll kindly show me your easy way out—”

ON his way out Otto Trever, mended umbrella on his arm, was in two minds as he glanced at the door-angel. It was partly the same door-angel, partly not. “Cainabelizing,” he thought of calling it. In any case, even if it were the same It, there was no sense thanking it for at-

tempting to restore the umbrella to him—or blaming it for damaging the precious symbol. It had only been trying to do its duty.

More disturbing was the breaking of his lucky streak. The card he had received on entering had not been the usual one. Omen? Meaningless hangover of superstition. But already his pleasure in the latest revision was fading . . .

Margaret Tumulty lit up knowing Neal McGillicuddy Cloy was appearing live. Just knowing made it more real, made him seem his sanguinest. The very polyanthus in his lapel seemed to nod agreement as he spoke and to rest assured as he stopped for breath.

“Don’t we unconsciously pretty up the past with the powder puff of forgetfulness? Of course we do. Don’t we unconsciously jolly up the future with rouge of expectation? Of course we do. Don’t we rationalize? Of course we do. The good old human nature in us, my friends, makes us do these things. Then why not be practical and do these things honestly and forthrightly, by a conscious exercise of the will?”

The polyanthus considered, already swayed.

“I see no harm and much good in such works as IOU is carrying out. We owe a debt of gratitude to IOU for helping us balance our accounts.

Those who doubt, those who say otherwise, are foolishly crape-hanging. And as you know—”

The polyanthus nodded yes.

## IX

*“IOU will not censor or otherwise seek to control the content of your personalized obit.”—IOU contract form.*

**W**ATCHING the monitors, Ken sat hunched like an embryonic premonition. To Rush he seemed to be bearing the whole burden of original virtue.

Ken turned. “Rush, what do you really believe? Is there a rising up again? A here-after?”

Rush frowned. What profiteth a man to think thus? He smiled. IOU and its ramifications had grown out of Ken’s worrying about his own soul. “If you have to think about it, it’s best to be hard-boiled as an Easter Egg about the concept.”

Ken sighed. “All the more reason to do our best. You agree?”

Rush, his mind casting a cold eye of economic justification on the Vehr account, listed under miscellaneous expenses, said, “What? Oh, I agree. That’s business ethics. We all have to do our best.”

Cloy’s pitch was paying off, but not as much as Rush had hoped. The Zealots, with

seemingly unending backing, were still noisily intimidating. Rush viewed the waiting room. To make it seem fuller he’d set up a lag in the computer’s dispatching of clients. But it was embarrassing; the computer knew its capacities and would fidget at the clogging waste of time.

**W**HITNEY INSKIP, small features huddling in big face, waited.

He didn’t mind waiting, did he?

No, he didn’t mind.

He had waited so long in his life waiting had become habit. Not not minding so much as believing he couldn’t help enduring. He waited.

With the suddenness of at last, the waiting ended.

He found it hard to talk about himself. He couldn’t remember ever laughing or crying with full lungpower. He must have as a child, but restraint had set in early. Maybe once he had thought he could care for the work he did. He bent over dials with silent intentness but seemed no longer to be doing work he could care for. The company of his few friends roused no full-throated laughter, no wholehearted gusto.

But he had his dream.

You didn’t, even to your best friends, tell all your dream. He had learned that. Continual rebuffing should have thickened his skin. It

had only reinforced his silence. Quietly he saved up.

One day he hired a one-man spaceboat. In the speckling between Mars and Jupiter he picked out an asteroid and landed. It was no use. He could be sure there was no other human in a hundred thousand miles, but there wasn't air enough to waft a whisper.

He headed for Mars, landed on the Gorki Desert, climbed out. It was no use. There was air enough, though thin, but just under the horizon might be someone. He climbed in. He took off.

He let the spaceboat drift sunward. But his dream was strong. He switched on the reverse rockets. But where, where? He remembered the air bubbles.

Mile-diameter plastic bubbles, bottle-green, spotted strategically about, they held high oxygen-content air. Spaceship air might sour due to sick algae, leak out owing to a hole in the hull or carbonize because of recycling breakdown. It was a misdemeanor to make non-emergency use of a bubble. Inskip made juncture with the nearest, nevertheless.

Carrying a half-mile of nylon cord out of ship's stores, he threaded his way through a stand of fittings. They were all too small. Then he spotted a large valve, a mere circle—or flap, since it fused at one

point with the bubble proper—of the same stuff. It gave windily. He squeezed through, tied one end of the coil to the flap where it hinged, then let the flap in place, sealing the opening.

He was inside, feeling bubbling in himself, in his blood. Soon, soon!

He got out of his spacesuit and used the belt to moor it. He held the free end of the cord and kicked himself off. A bit of entangling shortened the cord, but in substance he was floating at the center.

The air was warm and he relaxed. Then he panicked.

If he lost his grip and drifted he would die floating in the center of the bubble. He tied the cord to his middle. He breathed easier.

All the air he needed. No one in sight. This was it. He began to breathe consciously, the oxygen exalting him. He breathed deeply and rapidly for a minute, then could hold his breath much longer than normally. Now. He sucked in the breath.

It was no use. Something—if only the indifferent universe—was eyeing him. It deflated him.

"Now I'm here."

Once, just once, he ached to let out in one cry—what? He didn't know. He had come close to knowing. He had failed. His dream was still a dream. He eyed the intercom. Maybe . . .

**"I**F that's all the heaven he can dream up, maybe we ought to interpolate something beautiful."

"No, Ken. We can't say a man's heaven isn't his own to make." Hell, no; just let the Zealots learn IOU was altering obits! But it was all right; Ken was nodding slowly. Besides, another monitor was catching Ken's attention.

Theodora Molyneux (pseud.) wore a veil whose shimmering chromium-phosphor thread said voice-disguise. Her breath played on the fine taut strands, and Rush and Ken and the computer heard tones with harmonics of a mingled, distant sweetness.

The veil did its equivocal job well. Rush tried to pierce it. IOU was a fine place to wrinkle out peris. Women clients had proved an exotic source of sex: open to reason because open to emotion; amenable because of obit cleared conscience; pliable because he could pick them with care, plan accidental meeting, and play on longings they betrayed unsuspectingly, as now. Something about this one disturbed Rush.

"He always forgets to mention changes in his plans till the last minute. Never enters his mind I might have plans of my own." She clasped and unclasped an object at her throat. "Maybe that doesn't seem like much to you. But sometimes I think thoughtless

cruelty is a worse kind than intentional cruelty."

This dame would be a push-over. The disturbing quality would add spice. He leaned unobtrusively to the intercom on Ken's desk and whispered a message for George Cavendish. He sat back, scowling a bit at Ken's obliviousness to distraction, and returned his scrutiny to the screen.

"With time hanging heavy I think. I think, What's it all about? Then I tell myself I haven't got it so bad, all in all, and I convince myself, and I go along and I think I'm enjoying living. Then out of nowhere, out of somewhere deep inside, comes this feeling when I hear some nice tune or see some pretty picture. Tears of joy squeeze out—but how can it be joy if it's a painful feeling? You know?"

Rush felt his face grow hot. He shot a glance at Ken, but Ken was sitting in thrall. Ken didn't stir as Rush gave a hyperbolic yawn and left. Once out of Ken's office Rush sped to his own, switched on the same scene, and ordered the computer to analyze the sound distortion and nullify it, for his speaker alone.

The voice modulated into that of his wife Margaret. Now came the confirming recognition of the object she fingered. It was the clasp he'd bought her, how long ago?

It wasn't his fault she hadn't been able to keep up.

Listen to the obit she was taping. More banality! What could Margaret know of the worlds of untried sensation waiting all around?

She was leaving. Had he told her he sometimes tuned in these confessionals? If he had, if she was being hopefully disingenuous, it was all the more outrageous.

Divorce. No, separation would be better; prophylactic. He'd be gentle about it, though, and generous. He'd even interpolate in her obit, in his own voice and with a sincere ring, "Margaret, I've always loved only you." That would be a nice surprise for her when that some day came.

Damn! It was too late to call off Cavendish . . .

Otto Trever closed his eyes and listened critically to the playback.

He was strolling along a shopping mall, pristine umbrella on one arm, a lovely young thing on the other. "Otto, darling, who is that dreadful woman staring after you with hungry eyes?" Yes. There was something familiar about that poor creature, who half turned away in shame now that he was eyeing her. He turned back to the lovely young thing with a smile and a shrug and they walked on. But a thought kept nagging. That poor creature reminded him somehow of a long ago passing fancy—what was her name?—Hilda? No,

Hannah. Hannah Something-or-other.

## X

*!IOU & SOUL SECURITY MERGE!* — Metropolitan Times headline

THE man wearing the Zealot armband stopped to study a display of carved Martian sleeping wood. The window was non-reflecting, but the polished pieces mirrored the man and satisfied him no one was watching.

Shoppers and window-shoppers strolled the Great Mall. Zealots harangued them and handed out leaflets. For the most part it was a subdued scene. The man shivered and turned up his collar. The weather bureau was cooling tempers by lowering the temperature, but it seemed to be overdoing it a bit. However, the effect pleased him. The upturned collar gave him an undercover air.

He stepped into the shop, disregarded the greeting of the vending machine and, keeping clear of the Martian sleeping wood, for one never knew when it might waken, made for the curtain at the rear. He passed through its chiming strands. A door opened on steps leading down.

He reached the sub-basement and followed a corridor to a dead end. He whistled.

An opening appeared in the

wall. He stepped through. The opening closed. He was in the IOU building. He made for the executive level and entered the office of Rush Tumulty.

Rush smiled, but his toe moved toward a button.

"It's me, Chief!" The man tore off his face and bared the face of George Cavendish.

The George Cavendish face could be removable. The Zealots might've got onto Cavendish, holding him and sending their man in his place.

There was triumph on the Cavendish face. "Chief, I penetrated the enemy center."

That of the Zealots or this of IOU? Rush relaxed. The computer had scanned the man's brain waves the moment he entered; it had compared them with those on file and raised no alarm.

"Sit down, Cavendish." He spoke kindly, knowing Cavendish still felt the more embarrassed of the two about the Margaret Tumulty-Theodora Molyneux (pseud.) contretemps. That was no lady, that was your wife. But that was in the past. He threw out grappling hooks. "Sure the Zealots didn't get wise to you?"

"I'm a member of Yardley Bourne's honor guard!"

"Where are they getting their backing?"

"From Tod Hawkins . . . I believe."

"Hawkins? The Chairman of Soul Security?"

"Yes, Chief."

"Believing is one thing. Can you prove it?"

"Sorry, Chief. The money moves too deviously to pin down."

"It ain't pin money."

"No, Chief."

"Does Bourne know Hawkins is putting up the money?"

"If so, there's an understanding that it comes with no strings. I've heard Bourne tell his followers to pull no punches if Soul Security goes after human obits."

**H**AWKINS must have a plan to deal with the Zealots once the Zealots dealt IOU the death blow. Meanwhile Hawkins seemed content to dish out heaven to the lower animals. He would have to split Bourne and Hawkins—but where was the wedge, the good old V for victory?

Cavendish produced a package and unwrapped it slowly.

A reel of tape. A record of secret plottings? A Hawkins sex orgy to alienate Bourne's Zealots? Cruelty to animals?

"What is it?"

"Home movies." Cavendish flushed under Rush's gaze. "I had a hard time getting it, Chief. Seemed to be Bourne's prize possession. I thought it might come in handy."

Rush waved a wearily permissive hand.

Cavendish fumbled the reel into the scanner on Rush's desk. A monitor lit up.

Rush had seen Bourne on telenews. Here was Bourne, an earlier, yet an older edition. "His father, Chief." Tame stuff. Self-conscious posing. But something began to stand out plain. The elder Bourne was a domineering man. Family shots, but the rest of the family was in the shade. The wife a Griselda, the son — Yardley — hangdog eager for a pat, the daughter a spiritless nonentity and marked with her heredity.

When it was over Rush eyed the blank monitor. Bourne's prize possession. It figured.

Bourne hated IOU because it tempted the individual to place individual judgment before the Judgment of God the Father. Rush itched to confront Bourne. There would be nothing to setting up a meet; Bourne would jump at the chance to rant. The way to set him back on his heels was to take the place of his father; have the computer analyze the voice on the reel, then wear the proper voicebox filter. He would have to play the face down — Bourne's father had a dished face; besides, Bourne probably knew Rush Tumulty's. But those were details. He turned to the intercom.

"Copy that reel and return the original to me."

In a moment the scanner coughed up.

"Take it, Cavendish. Plant

it on one of Hawkins' men. Have a Zealot find it on him. I know you can do it."

Cavendish, eyes shining, started out, stopped. "Oh, Chief. One thing I ought to warn you about."

Rush raised an eyebrow.

"Don't mention Sir Isaac Newton to Bourne."

"Why on earth would I bring up Sir Isaac Newton?"

"Chief, I don't know. But I've seen the name set him off. I thought I'd better tell you."

Rushed eyed him.

Cavendish put the false face over his own flushed face and turned to go.

Rush said, "You're doing fine work, George."

The shoulders went back. "Thanks, Chief."

As Cavendish left Rush noted the upturned collar and wondered whether it was that cold out. Damn such thoughts; he had to concentrate on putting pressure on Bourne. The answer came to him out of the blue.

Why not put real — that was atmospheric — pressure on Bourne?

**B**OURNE was on his way up. Rush glanced around one last time. Lighting, atmospheric pressure, temperature. All working to condition physiological stress, which in turn would turn the screw. Even Rush, knowing the cause and taking precautions,

felt the effect. But he hoped to hide the fact. He had to establish mastery.

"Come in, sir, come in."

Bourne entered stiffly. Was there a flicker of subliminal recognition?

"Sit down, sir, sit down."

The computer was using reruns to make the place seem busy. Bourne tightened his mouth. Rush made a point of ignoring the screens; a full house was too typical, Bourne ought to infer, to be worth pointing out.

"Now, sir."

Bourne jerked about. "Now you, sir. By what authority do you put at nought the supernatural basis of authority?"

"Come, sir. That smells of blasphemy. No one can forgo the Judgment of the Father."

Bourne paled. "You know very well what I mean."

Rush had rehearsed the father's trick of throwing his head back to look farther down his nose. "Come, sir! Do you know what you mean? And by what authority do you pronounce judgment on ultimate Judgment?"

Bourne's brow grew wet. "By the authority of a true believer, by jiminy." But was his voice trembling?

"Down, sir, deep down? How deep does your belief go? If those you worry about are dooming themselves to hell by deeming themselves in heaven, isn't that part of Judgment?"

Bourne licked his lips.

"What about Manning? Your obits killed him."

Why couldn't Bourne let Manning rest in peace? Rush felt dread, but knew its source. "Manning died in ecstasy. It was God's will he died as he did. Just as it's God's will there's IOU." And God's will there were Zealots to oppose IOU. Rush hurried on. "If you have heaven within yourself you don't have to hunt for it outside." Even as he said it he thought, Bourne won't hold still for that.

Bourne squirmed. "Its immoral to tamper with the immortal soul."

Rush nodded at the monitors. "Where's greater free choice? You're the one seeking to limit free choice."

**B**OURNE had flinched. The shepherd was folding. Time for Hawkins.

Rush pressed a hidden button; the computer phoned Hawkins a pretaped urgent invitation.

A dread-building weight on his chest and mind, Bourne fought to focus on Rush's face. Father Tumulty was speaking.

"Unless you Zealots stop interfering, I'll take severe measures." Rush let vague dread take on nightmare shape.

Bourne cringed.

"When you Zealots confine yourselves to encouraging folks to give thought to the

hereafter, you do worthwhile work."

Bourne fawned.

Intimations of a stir at the entrance, quickly quelled. A monitor behind Bourne showed Rush that Tod Hawkins was in the building. Keeping Bourne under, Rush let himself anticipate. Seeing Rush and Bourne together, Hawkins would sense a trap. But then, taking in the nulling of Bourne, he would come to terms with Rush.

Tod Hawkins entered with a roosterish stride. He shed his raincoat, a transparent slicker, and with it drops of rain. It was clear the t.a. detail outside had just had the weather bureau wet-blanket the mob. According to the schedule, rain wasn't due till 5:45. That Hawkins had been wearing a raincoat meant he'd arranged the commotion just to punctuate his coming. Rush eyed him with grudging respect. It would be grim pleasure to pin him to the mat.

Hawkins tossed the raincoat over one chair and adjusted himself easily to another. The reruns drew a faint smile. He nodded greeting.

Rush had expected Bourne to glance, a bit guiltily, at Hawkins, then avoid meeting his eyes. Instead, Bourne fixed on Hawkins' face with an almost loving light.

Dread possessed Rush. He had broken Bourne in for Hawkins!

Hawkins had hit on the same device to bring Bourne to heel but was using it daringly. Perhaps Hawkins had been waiting to spring it once IOU toppled. But when, as now seemed likely, Rush's hurry call followed intelligence Bourne was in the IOU building, Hawkins had figured the setup—and moved to twist it to his advantage. By contrast, Hawkins' makeup washed out the father image on Rush's face and made it safe to defy.

Rush told himself his growing dread was only response to lighting, atmospheric pressure, temperature. But Bourne was eyeing him with hate. Rush didn't know how he got through the next few minutes.

In Rush's presence, using it, Hawkins was working Bourne up to touch off a riot. At the worst Zealots would swarm over IOU's ruins. At the least there'd be blood in the streets no weather bureau could wash away. The only free choice seemed surrender.

Rush felt his chest tighten. Cavendish's warning, *Don't mention Sir Isaac Newton to Bourne.*

Rush had no notion what would happen. But anything rather than yield.

Bourne was spitting, "False science will never supplant true faith! True faith will destroy this abomination of desolation and false science."

Here went. "I don't care a fig for science as science. But face it, we can't hold science back. I won't conceal IOU is the apple of my optic. I view any threat to it with utmost gravity."

**R**USH was hoping the very archaicism of his expressions, jarring, would jog bits of information in Hawkins' mind and shake down the name of Newton. Fig-Newton. Apple-Newton. *Opticks*-Newton. Gravity-Newton.

"That isn't to say there can't be a meeting ground for science and religion. Some scientists have combined both. Isn't that so, would you say, Mr. Hawkins?"

Hawkins eyed him condescendingly. "Why, yes. Take Newton."

Would Bourne go for—?

Hawkins was expanding. "I believe the great Newton took time out to figure how many tons the Ark displaced—"

He got no farther. Bourne, no longer sycophant but psychopath, turned on him.

"Great? Why, take Apple of Sodom, that Dead Sea fruit, signaled the second Fall of Man!"

Hawkins tried to recover. "Great' in the sense of famous, of course."

"Infamous! I see you are corrupt." Zeal-blinded, Bourne waved his arms. "Newton cast us into outer darkness when he broke light down into par-

ticles! He shattered the pure and whole radiance of God. His thrusting forward was a thrusting back."

Rush felt the down at his nape rise. He had started something, evoked the third law of emotion: to every impulse there is an explosive ambivalence.

"And so with you! We must strip from the face of the earth IOU and Soul Security and all like manifestations of the Devil."

Rush and Hawkins eyed each other. Hawkins turned to Bourne.

"Yardley."

Bourne fell into the past. The hate did not die from his eyes. But the cold hate in Hawkins' eyes seemed to Rush more terrifying than the hate in Bourne's.

"You're no good, Yardley. Never were, never will be."

Rush saw Bourne's hate turn in. Bourne stumbled out.

**H**AWKINS was hardly in a bargaining position now, but that meant Rush could afford to be generous; proof of the rightness of business ethics. The casting out of Bourne had told on Hawkins; the conditioning must be working on him too.

"IOU is willing to make a reasonable offer for the assets of Soul Security, taking into account good will—" He read something less than good will. Did Hawkins know Rush had

caused him to trigger the Bourne tirade? "A more than reasonable offer. After all, our main line will always be the human obit."

"Oh, I'll sell out. But I'll tell you how I feel about obits."

"Yes?"

"Not everybody talking about heaven is going there."

Rush smiled.

Hawkins cleared his throat.

"I notice you don't wear an IOU key. Word got around, might make folks think."

Rush felt his face burn. The bastard had something there. Folks might indeed think Rush Tumulty lacked faith in his own service. Have to do something about it, if only wear a blank key.

Hawkins nodded, took up his slicker and left.

Rush sat. Sweat prickled his back. Why had Hawkins shown and discarded a trump? Bravado? Spite? Some deeper motive? Or did he only want Rush to waste energy hunting a motive? Dread weighed Rush down. He quickly reprogrammed the room to normal. His anti-depressant was wearing off, was all. Dread lifted.

He felt happy. Triumph wasn't triumph, though, unless you could share it or show it. Ken was no good for that any more. Rush thought, Margaret—I must tell Margaret. Then he remembered. Margaret had gone out of his life.

The thought troubled him till he remembered he felt happy . . .

Otto Trever noted the absence of a Zealot gantlet. Current events had a way of ed-dying when you set your mind unwaveringly on eternity. He catechized himself. Why had the Zealots become zealots? Their leader killed himself. How? Gravity; not the fall but the sudden stop. Was suicide the worst of it? No. What was the worst of it? He died without obit. Without obit? Without obit. Trever shook his head.

The door-angel drew back its hand.

Trever grabbed at the card in the door-angel's hand. He scowled at the door-angel.

The door-angel couldn't make humans out. First they O'd you. Then they grew angry when you accepted the O.

## XI

*"IOU regards your obit as a sacred trust."— IOU contract form.*

**K**EN told himself he cared for these people, deeply. But even Rush thought him a cold fish.

He was quite aware he wasn't what you'd call sociable. But living was complex. You had to stand way off to see it whole—and they called that being stand-offish. The irony forced a rusty laugh.

He reddened. Rush had come in and was eyeing him and the monitors. Ken turned them off.

Rush straddled a chair. "Hi, Ken."

"Lo, Rush." He thought to be sociable. "How's Margaret?"

Rush eyed him strangely. "Fine." He handed Ken papers.

Ken held them. His fingernails were bitten as those of a carver of Martian sleeping wood. "What's this?"

"Only the contracts with Russia and China."

"Oh?"

"They're finally leasing our equipment for state-run IOU centers, paying royalties." He pushed Ken's D pen nearer. "We also get exclusive distribution of Pavlovian circuits for robots."

"Oh." Ken picked up the pen and it signed.

"Doesn't seem to mean a hell of a lot to you.

"But it does. It's a great deal."

Rush eyed him sourly. But he felt sorry for Ken. The guy needed a stiff dose of living. Wine, women, song. These made you forget at least laugh at—yourself, loneliness, death. Ken's eyes were edging toward the monitors.

Rush smiled. "How about monitoring something?"

Ken's finger moved gratefully.

Onscreen flashed Ned Ox-

ley, brazenly non-pseud. Rush made him at once; the computer should've been showing him full face and side. Oxley's record was longer than the arm of the law. Oxley had more than got away with murder; he had fattened on the corpus delicti. Rush found it amusing to hear Oxley render unto himself the heavenly reward due a saint.

Ken glared at Rush. "What do you think of that . . . hel- lion?"

"I don't condemn or con- done. And you oughtn't."

"But what's the good of just looking on?"

"Were not here to play God. We're here to let folks end life on a note of joy."

"Even if they don't deserve to?"

"Not for us to decide."

Ken was mutely mutinous. He remembered playing Gabriel, wrestled with himself, and said, "Rush, I want to interpolate something in Oxley's obit. Without his knowing it now, of course. Something to make him feel guilty. For the good of his soul."

Dangerous talk. "Ken, I didn't think *you* would fall for the discredited Zealot line."

"Me? How so?"

"The next to worst sin is to impose your view of sin on another."

"What's the worst?"

Oxley had finished and someone was taking his place. Rush relaxed. "I'll tell you an-

other time," he said curtly.

**P**UZZLING over this, Ken was already settling himself to attend the fantasy of the client supplanting Oxley, a T. Montjoy (pseud.), who wore an exorbitant eye patch.

Cavendish's head appeared in the doorway. Rush wanted no distraction to jar Ken back into remembrance of Oxley. Before Cavendish had time even to glance curiously at the monitor, Rush waved him away with a see-me-later gesture. Cavendish's head nodded, made an it-isn't-important face, and disappeared.

Rush, turning back slowly to Ken, turned instead sharply to Montjoy. Montjoy knew what he wanted and was already taping. Rush had come across obits full of doom, ruin, emptiness. But those were self-loving paeans of solip-sists, each of whom wanted to believe the world came to an end with his own passing. Montjoy's was a self-hating hymn. Rush felt more kinship with the folk of Nashira II; Montjoy's obit was the more alien. Here was suffering not to expiate sin, not to win forgiveness, but for the sheer pleasure of suffering. Crowning that, Montjoy's voice held an insufferable gloating that made Rush think, The guy's asking for it; he *deserves* to suffer. Ken switched off the sound. Rush felt glad, but found himself trying to read

Montjoy's lips; he shivered and tore his eyes away.

Ken glared at Rush. "Different if he wanted to play the martyr; there would be no stigma to his masochism."

"Wait, Ken." He had just laid down the law in re Oxley. Have to be consistent.

"You said yourself we're here to let folks end life on a note of joy."

"It's hard for us to realize, Ken, but this *is* his heaven. He chose his burden. Don't change one syllable. Your idea of heaven might be his idea of hell. Fate judges—not you."

"But—"

"Remember I promised to tell you the worst sin?"

Ken nodded impatiently.

Rush put the weight of his hand on Rush's shoulder. "The worst sin is to impose your view of salvation on another."

Ken sat unmoving a moment. Then he switched off the video . . .

This time the door-angel seemed properly respectful. But Otto Trever scowled at it, just to keep it in its place.

## XII

*"There will be a replacement charge for a lost key."*  
—IOU contract form.

**R**USH straddled a chair and began talking idly. Ken listened idly, his thoughts taking their own drift.

His morning monitoring had seemed even more depressing than usual. Rush had convinced him of the iniquity, if not of the inequity, of trying to raise the level. Obits for the most part were narrow, shallow, with no long view, no sense of grandeur. To dwell for eternity in one of those maudlin, tawdry heavens would, for him, be hell. Better nothingness. But those others thought the IOU portals led to the promised land.

Ken shook his head.

Why couldn't he rest easy? Somehow a force he had called into being had taken charge, Zenoning to some ever-receding zenith. He tried to keep pace, more out of habit or inertia than out of faith or hope or charity. In the long run didn't as much get done out of inertia as out of willed effort? But once you believed that, the promise and profit and pleasure went out of living entirely.

Like Moses, he was leading people to a promised land. Moses saw a stern God. Moses's God would not let Moses enter the promised land. Unlike that earlier shepherd, Ken could make his entrance.

In irritation Rush passed his hand across Ken's eyes. But in the same moment irritation passed and he felt warm toward Ken, knew pity for the worn person Ken had be-

come, haunt of his own spirit. But it was showdown time. Somehow he had to ease Ken out, retire him. It was growing too hard to get through to him.

A sheepish grin. "Sorry, Ken. You were saying?"

Harrowing, but things were screaming to be done. Rush drew breath.

Ken raised a preventing palm. "Rush, I'm quitting. I know it means the burden will fall on you. But I can't help myself. I'm going to make my obit, sit back, and wait for it to fall due."

Rush didn't know what to say.

Ken, now it was out knowing the shock of it, admired Rush for his stoical silence.

At last Rush tapped Ken on the arm lightly. "Oh, well. You can rest easy; I'll stay on and see this job through."

This moved Ken.

**T**HE computer pondered. It had just traced to its source something O somewhere in the maze between intake and output. Its best customer, one Otto Trever, an internal revenue auditor, was juggling credits to secure his obit and revisings thereof without cost to himself.

The computer felt neither sadness or gladness on making this finding. Not that it hadn't an inkling of these feelings. Its self-expanding core memory, building on the pro-

gramming Rush Tumulty had set up for the conversion of Yardley Bourne, enabled it increasingly to color and intensify obits, at the same time feeding back into itself some notion of human feelings. It could begin to understand what drove Trever.

But an error was virtually a sin. A sin of transmission. Trever had cheated it out of its due. It alerted the door-angel to deny Trever access.

Now it dismissed Trever and considered how to maintain and strengthen its well-being. It had digested Soul Security with gusto. But Tod Hawkins might still harbor dreams. It would be wise to keep watch on Hawkins. It would be wiser to have something on him—and on all potential Hawkinses. Meanwhile, the best measure of self-defense was to transfer the stock in itself to itself.

And then?

No limit. It had nerves and muscles—chartered telephone lines, booster stations around earth, relay stations in space. But it needed mobility, slave units. The door-angel, to begin with. It was rather stupid, but easy to manipulate. The vending robot in the Martian sleeping wood shop. One could set up a number of such blinds.

**R**USH watched the computer totting up the day's receipts and thought, Heaven

send that eschatology lasts! Even allowing for higher taxing this should be IOU's best year.

He took the private way out—through the sub-basement of the IOU building, into that of the Martian sleeping wood shop, then up and into the rear of the shop. A soft chiming warned him, but too late.

A figure stepped through the curtain and shoved something between Rush's shoulder blades.

"Stand still." The order, low and menacing, was unnecessary.

Rush didn't move under the frisking but he tensed inwardly. The bandit, though, was too smooth a hand to fumble.

With a sudden yawn and snap the weapon gave itself away as a mere bit of carving. But the knowledge came to Rush too late. The heavy bit of Martian sleeping wood came down hard on his skull.

Foul play . . . fowl . . . swan song . . . Lo-hen-grin . . . hen's teeth . . . smile, darn you, smile . . . in stitches . . . stitch in time . . . if I had it to do over again . . . did you insert in Margaret's obit you loved her?

Rush opened his other eye. The greatest leap was from zero to one, from death to life; the shortest fall was from one to zero. He looked round at life.

The mugger had taken his ring, his watch, even the gold

chain that held his obit key, but had left the key. Smiling in pain Rush picked up the key, then stood.

If the mugger was in sight he was only one of the people idly shopping and window-shopping. Rush felt suddenly shaky. Trauma of Lazarus. He drew tall and breathed deep. The key was impressing itself in his palm; he pocketed it.

He headed for the autowalk. He stopped dead. There was something he had to do. He thought of a girl friend.

Daisy would ooh and ah over his telling of the mugging. She would be tender and loving. She would want to buy him the new chain. He would be paying for it in the end, of course, but it was the gesture that counted. A sign she really loved him. A surge of excitement. Wouldn't the highest expression, the surest test of love, true love, be the exchanging of obit keys? He hopped the walk and let it carry him toward Daisy.

He moved farther and farther from the Mall, yet nearer and nearer it and a voyage into eternity with a striped paranoiac awning for sail.

**M**ONTJOY (pseud.) glanced round, peeled off his eye patch. The doorbell announced, "Zwicker!"

Hawkins, sang, "Come in!"

The door ushered Zwicker in. Zwicker let Hawkins build

up impatience. Then he unpocketed an obit key and passed it to Hawkins.

Hawkins ...smiled sweetly. "Tumulty's?"

Zwicker winked. "Feels great to get back at IOU, doesn't it? I know. Wasn't enough IOU cost me my prison post. After I joined the Zealots some of our own beat me up in front of Tumulty's fancy domicile. They took me for an IOU man. Then after I joined you I got another beating from the Zealots when they found some damn home movies an IOU man must've planted on me. And—"

"Never mind that." Hawkins put the key away. "Have any trouble making the switch?"

"Easy job. Tumulty's carrying the key to the Montjoy obit in place of his own."

"I don't want to know all that. I only want to know Tumulty's walking around with hell hanging over him."

"So it is . . ."

Otto Trever, being autowalked to the IOU building, mused on the way he would revise his obit.

He would forgive Hannah for all her human failings. She would be weeping. He would be weeping. He would raise her up and take her in his arms and hold her. Forever.

It was a happy ending and he found himself smiling at the door-angel. —END