

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

SEVEN DOORS

THE thing came down into atmosphere over Lake Michigan at a velocity that should have built shock waves before it; there were none. Radars at the Nike and fighter-interceptor sites along and near the shoreline swept their beams toward the thing in the course of their normal search routine. The hurtling electromagnetic pulses were detoured precisely around the thing, to resume on the other side their straight and echoless flight. The thing was quite unseen.

The descending mass, roughly spherical, hundreds of feet in diameter, slowed its plunge through the early summer night of North America. It hit the lake with hardly a splash, miles from shore.

The man was a stranger, and an alien, and perhaps he was dying. But Kelsey had to choose: He could save the stranger's life—or he could save his own.

By FRED SABERHAGEN ILLUSTRATED BY GAUGHAN

TO EDUCATION

Not for the first time did it find concealment in the waters of Earth. A few people of Earth had been aware of it. Now none of them remembered it.

A JUNE day in Chicago can be uncomfortably hot. This particular day was too miserable, in the opinion of twenty year old Pete Kelsey, for him to spend it all sorting mail inside the Main Post Office. Not if he could find a way out. Besides the heat, it was one of those days when he just didn't feel like working. He didn't quite know why. The job was really all right, though it didn't pay too much. If he stuck with it, he would be able to retire in his early forties.

But today Kelsey's morning, spent running a canceling machine, had been generally unpleasant; and he suspected from the way the mail was running that he would be assigned in the afternoon to a dim acre of the eighth floor, where long neglected bags and piles of low-class mail awaited a slackening of the first-class flow. It would be hot and chokingly dusty there. Kelsey decided to wangle half a day of his accumulated vacation time.

In an hour and a half he was in his rooming house on the North Side. Half an hour after that he was sitting in swimming trunks on one of the massive rocks that guard land from lake along stretches of Chicago's park-and-beach

shoreline, clothing piled beside him, transistor portable blaring something with a beat.

He was almost alone, on the edge of the great city. The rocks rose like stairs for five or six tiers above where he sat near water level, shutting out the sight of green park and distant buildings. To right and left the rock rampart curved out and then away, at about a hundred yards from where he sat, putting him out of sight of the rest of the shoreline. Only two or three other people were in sight, strolling in the cool lake breeze or sunbathing.

If only some nice looking babe would come along now, to stretch out on the rocks for some sun . . . well, he wouldn't hold his breath while waiting for her. The water looked inviting.

The beaches were not officially open yet. He could have gone to one anyway, but he didn't especially care for sand, or for wading a long way out to reach deep water. Here you could dive right in.

He did. The water was cold, making him gasp as he surfaced.

"Better than air conditioning," he told himself aloud, treading water happily. He stroked out a few yards from shore, an easy, confident swimmer.

When he felt the tight sudden grip on his foot his first

unthinking reaction was: A joke. One of the guys from work, somehow . . . There was a sting at his ankle . . .

KELSEY had not had time to get really frightened. When he woke, he was calm, but bewilderment came quickly. He was still in swimming trunks, and wet.

He lay on his back on the floor of a small, square, windowless room, staring at a glowing ceiling that provided comfortable illumination. In the center of the ceiling was a metallic disk that looked like a closed door or hatch, with hinges at one side, and at the other small projections that might be an intricate latch.

He rolled over dazedly. He had been swimming, and now . . . an old man lay stretched beside him, eyes closed, breathing heavily, dressed in rags and thinly bearded. The old man's features were Oriental—Chinese, or maybe Japanese. Kelsey had never learned to tell the difference.

Kelsey stood up.

He felt fine, but where was he? Nothing looked familiar. The little room held no furniture. Floor and walls were some featureless neutral-colored stuff he could not identify. Set into one wall was a niche like a sort of berth, possibly just big enough for someone Kelsey's size to squeeze into. A transparent sliding door, now half open, sepa-

rated berth from room.

He looked down at the old man, found him scrawny and ugly and generally unhealthy looking. Maybe when the old man woke up he could tell what this was all about.

This was an odd, silent place. Kelsey paced around, somehow expecting every moment to get an explanation from somewhere. In one wall, just below the low ceiling, air circulated gently through a grill with darkness behind it. In one corner of the floor, a six-inch hole showed the inside of a pipe, leading down into more darkness.

Kelsey investigated the berth-like niche; its door slid in grooves cut into a material that looked like rubber, but felt smooth as melting ice. In the top of the berth was another closed hatch, exactly like the one in the room's ceiling.

He sat on the edge of the berth, scratching his damp head and regarding his unconscious companion.

The utter craziness of the whole business began to soak in on him. He had been swimming . . . He remembered the grab and sting at his ankle. There was no mark, no soreness.

He looked up at the hatch in the ceiling. Was he in a submarine? He had never been aboard any kind of ship. He searched his memory for data from movie and televi-

sion scenes; what he could remember didn't help any. He formed a vague picture of kidnapping Russian frogmen. He wished he could wake up and find this was all a dream.

THE hatch in the ceiling was easy to reach, but getting it open was another matter. After trying for about a minute, Kelsey quit in annoyance and attempted to wake the old man.

The old guy didn't respond to gentle shaking. Was he drunk? Didn't some Chinese still use opium or something? Kelsey shook harder.

"Hey," he called, self-consciously, his own voice sounding strange in the silence around him. "Wake up!" he said, louder. The old man's head wobbled on his thin neck with the shaking. He breathed. He stayed out.

Kelsey sat on the floor. Maybe the old guy was in bad shape. He would wait a while and try to think this out.

Without warning water began to fountain up from the pipe-opening in the floor, in a jet that carried to ceiling height and filled the room ankle deep in seconds.

After one paralyzed moment Kelsey jumped up and pounded on the ceiling hatch, yelling for help. The only answer was the continued splashing roar in the room.

Remembering the old man, Kelsey spun around. Rising

water framed the wrinkled face. Kelsey jumped to him and lifted him, surprised at the weight he felt. He would have to keep the old man afloat with one hand while he tried to get the hatch open . . . only now did he notice with horror the heavy metal chains that bound the old man's limbs, nearly concealed by the ragged garments. There would be no keeping him afloat!

Water lapped around Kelsey's knees. Was it going to fill the room? The old man . . . Kelsey thought of the berth. He dragged the thin weighted body there, lifted and crammed it in, slid the transparent door shut. It looked like it might be waterproof.

There was no possibility of getting in himself, unless he left the old man out to drown—the thought flitted across his mind, found itself in alien territory, and fled.

Kelsey went back to the ceiling hatch, wading through water that was waist deep and still rising rapidly. He tried to work at the latch methodically, but panic grabbed at his fingers and made them fumble. The water reached his chest. Would it drain out through the ventilator when it got high enough? Would it leave him any air space? He could drown in this room. He was going to drown in this room.

He looked around wildly. The old man lay peacefully behind his transparent door, dry, like an exhibit in some reversed aquarium. There was another hatch in the berth, another way out . . . but no, the hatch in the berth was no different from this one, no use risking two lives.

"Help!" Kelsey shouted. The water had reached the ventilator and kept right on rising. Soon the room would be full; Kelsey was swimming now. "Help!" He twisted at the latch.

The latch stung his hand.

KELSEY woke up again. He lay with his eyes shut for a little while; there was something frightening he might see when he opened them. He could not remember at first what it was . . .

He sat up with a jerk. But he was not drowning now, although still wet and in swimming trunks.

The room was not the same one, but similar. Same glowing ceiling, same ventilator, but no berth. Again a closed hatch, or door, this time in one wall instead of the ceiling.

Another hatch, in the floor, stood open. Kelsey crawled to it and looked down into the room where he had nearly drowned. It was empty of water now, but the floor still gleamed wetly. The sliding door to the berth was open;

the old man was nowhere in sight.

Kelsey sat with his legs dangling through the open hatch, trying to make sense of it all. He couldn't remember climbing up from the lower room, or even getting the hatch open. The latch had stung his hand in a gentle way, leaving no mark or soreness, as something had earlier stung his ankle. Each time he had been knocked out.

Had someone pulled him up here? He looked around nervously. Was he being watched from somewhere?

He couldn't just sit thinking about it. He gripped the edge of the hatch and lowered himself easily back into the first room, noticing as he did so how well he felt physically. He examined the compartment where he had left the old man. Where the hatch had been in the top of it was now a flat metal plate that he could not move with his fingers. He pushed and pounded and yelled some more, with no result.

The ceiling-glow died suddenly in this lower room; the only light now shone down through the open hatch from the room above.

Was someone telling him to move up there?

He climbed up without difficulty. He went to the closed door in the wall and pushed at it uselessly; this one had no latch, but an opening that

looked like an odd keyhole. In a small rack beside the door hung ten or twelve odd-shaped metal sticks.

Half-heartedly, Kelsey tried a few more yells and listened to the waiting silence. Well, he could sit around until something happened. Or he could continue to work on the door. He couldn't think of any other course.

He took some of the metal sticks from the little rack and studied them. They all looked as if they would fit the door's keyhole, but no two were shaped exactly alike. He chose one at random, and tried it in the door.

HIS hand got a nasty, grating shock, unlike electricity, unlike the previous gentle knockout stings. He dropped the key and at the same instant heard water gushing up in the room below. Kelsey slammed the floor hatch down and sat on it. Should he try to stop the flood by putting another key in the door? His hand still tingled; he decided not. Was he being punished in some crazy way for trying to open the door, by someone controlling all this, or was he just caught in a chain of accidents?

Soon the muffled water-sound stopped. Gingerly he eased the hatch open; the bottom face of it turned up dripping wet. The room below was full and brimming over.

He didn't like this at all. Could the room he was now in be flooded too? He closed the hatch and saw with horror that a little water came seeping up through it, as if the hatch were made of blotting paper. Yet it looked and felt like hard metal.

He decided to try the door again, shock or no shock. It was better than just waiting here, to maybe drown if the water rose again.

He took another key. He decided to peel off his trunks and try using them for insulation when he held the key and tried it in the door . . . but maybe he could do better than that.

Wasn't one key enough to open a door? Why have so many in the rack? Starting to think, he really saw another detail for the first time: marked above the door was a small number 7.

He had noticed it before without thinking about it; you saw numbers all the time, on doors and lots of other places. But maybe a key would be numbered 7.

There were small numbers engraved on each of the ten keys, but each key bore a number of two or three digits; there was no number 7.

Kelsey looked more closely at the door. Near the keyhole ran a series of numbers in the same neat engraving borne by the keys: 2 6 14 30. None of the numbers matched a

key's number. Yet he thought there must be some connection. 2 6 14 30 . . . he sat comparing numbers for what seemed about five minutes before something clicked in his memory, taking him back to the intelligence tests he had experienced in high school. A series of numbers . . . complete the logical sequence, the instructions had said. It was one of those things that teachers thought up to make the smart kids feel good, he had told himself at the time, knowing that he himself wasn't a smart kid. He hadn't tried very hard at the test, feeling there was no point in it. But when they showed him the results, he hadn't done badly at all, in fact a little better than average all along the line.

That had surprised him, because he had never done very well in school. He had never wanted to, because most of the kids he knew sort of sneered at guys who were brains, and the uncle he lived with was always talking down book learning and college guys who thought they knew a lot. His aunt had never said much about it one way or the other.

The numbers: 2 6 14 30. Complete the logical sequence. Well, it was worth a try. 6 was 3 times 2. 14 was—no.

Each number was larger than the one before it. Not double; 2 times 2 was 4, you

had to add 2 more to get 6. 2 times 6 was 12, you had to add 2 . . .

"Yeah!" he said aloud. He ran through the whole series in his mind, twice, to be sure. He looked for, and found, a key numbered 62. There was nothing to be gained by waiting. He drew a deep breath and inserted it.

THE door opened easily; there was no sting, and no sound of water from below. Kelsey let out breath with a relieved whoof.

The room beyond the door was quite similar to the one in which he stood. As he stepped through he found himself facing another door, this one with a number 6 above it. He was certain before he tried it that it was locked.

On the wall near door 6, beside a key rack, was a tiny shelf holding a stack of papers. Kelsey riffled through the papers. Pages from some kind of textbook on English. He thought that nothing he found could surprise him any more.

Engraved beside the new door's keyhole was the word: ADVERB. Kelsey suspected there would not be a key marked ADVERB, and he was right. But each key did have a word on it.

Was some crazy school-teacher running this place? He pictured some old maid,

driven batty by years in a classroom, inheriting a fortune and—nuts.

But memories of school returned once more, informing him that an adverb was one of those things called the parts of speech. He supposed that various teachers had tortured him with the parts of speech at least a hundred times during his twelve years of schooling. How could he ever need to know what an adverb was? Well, he did now.

Kelsey reached for the pages of English textbook and searched through them carefully until he found a list of words exemplifying the category ADVERB. None of the words on the keys were in the list. He would have to think about the category ADVERB and decide which key-word fitted it.

He did.

Again the door opened easily for his chosen key. He was not surprised at the sight of another similar room, and the number 5 above another door. Almost jauntily he walked directly across the new room to study door 5 for a small engraved symbol.

He found the letter H, which might stand for a lot of things.

This time the shelf beside the door was large, holding books, wires, and glass in various shapes that reminded him of what he had seen in his occasional glimpses from

the hallway of the high school chemistry lab. A small metal tub held a clear odorless liquid that might be water, from the lack of smell. Careful, now, he warned himself. But he didn't feel thirsty yet.

There was no keyhole in door 5. A simple latch was sealed under a casing of some clear substance that resisted Kelsey's pushing fingers like iron.

He sighed. He would have to play it by the book, and the books on the shelf were thick and formidable-looking volumes. A glance showed him they were physics and chemistry texts. He groaned.

From somewhere in the rooms behind him came a watery gurgle.

WELL, there was no use just sitting here, and nothing else to do but keep trying to figure a way out. This chemistry business here looked far too hard for him to solve, but it would at least give him something to do.

First, the symbol on the door. A book told him that H represented the element hydrogen. He discovered that it was possible to produce hydrogen from water, given electricity and suitable apparatus. These were provided, the electricity from an ordinary-looking wall outlet. On the shelf was a glass tube of peculiar shape that seemed designed to convey the newly

released hydrogen to the seal holding the latch. The little tub was marked H_2O , which he learned meant water.

He went to work with containers and wires and electrodes, following a procedure roughly outlined in the books. After several mistakes and one mild electric shock he had the apparatus working. The seal over the latch melted away like ice in July sunshine. Kelsey wondered idly what the seal was made from; but he didn't much care, as long as he got rid of it.

He had been briefly worried by the realization that the other gas produced, called oxygen, was escaping into the air of the room. He thought the name was familiar, but he wasn't sure until a book assured him he had been breathing the stuff all his life.

Stepping into the next room, and facing door number 4, Kelsey felt almost at home. Before he could do anything else a great sleepiness rose up in him and overcame him. He stretched out on the floor, worried drowsily for a moment about the chance of another flood as he slept, and sank into oblivion.

If he dreamed, he did not remember it when he awoke.

HE sat up alertly, feeling good, remembering instantly all that had happened.

There was another shelf in

this room, it was as big as the last, and he supposed the books and odd-looking junk on it would enable him to open Door 4. But he paused after getting to his feet and stretching, to consider first another puzzle.

He felt refreshed and alert, as if he had just slept eight hours. He had spent an undeterminable time getting through the other rooms, and lying unconscious in them.

However long he had been in this place, he had had nothing to eat or drink since arriving. He didn't want anything now. And another thing; there had been nothing like plumbing in any of the rooms, unless you counted the flooding pipe in the first. It seemed that he didn't need any plumbing.

He felt physically fine in every way. He didn't even want a cigarette.

He had shaved in the morning (this morning? yesterday?) before going to work. He rubbed his face; it was still smooth.

His comfort was eerie, evoking forgotten ghost stories about people who had died without knowing it. Had he really drowned while swimming in the lake?

He breathed. His pulse beat. He kicked a toe rather incautiously against a wall and was painfully convinced of solidity. Were his bodily needs being taken care of

while he slept? That was hard to believe; he thought any explanation for all this would be hard to believe. Yet one must be true.

Kelsey walked back through the rooms he had already traversed. Water now filled the second room to the lower edge of the open hatch in the wall. He would have to wade and dive if he wanted another look at the first room, but he saw no point in doing so. On impulse he scooped up water in his hand. It tasted all right.

But he wasn't thirsty.

Whoever was behind this, for whatever unimaginable purpose, seemed to be urging him forward with the threat of flood. There was no way out back here. Whether there would be any way out for him ahead—he told himself there must be.

Kelsey faced the locked door numbered 4. It had a keyhole, and engraved beside it was the word: ETRUSCAN.

Kelsey looked at the now familiar rack of keys, and again felt the impulse to try one at random, to rush through doors—he didn't doubt there would be more of them—as quickly as possible, to get to the bottom of the whole situation. But at door 7, a random try had given unpleasant results. He would keep on solving problems as long as he could, and then

guess the rest if he had to.

Now let's see about ETRUSCAN, he thought, whatever it means. Each key was numbered to correspond to one of the bits of junk on this room's shelf. The bits of junk were pottery, clay or stone, painted or carved in decoration, some whole, some only broken pieces.

There were what looked like textbooks on the shelf again, with covers and a lot of pages missing, as before. This time there were also thick notebooks. Kelsey picked up one of these and found it crammed with neat notes and drawings that were plain enough in detail—but what was it all about?

Grimly, he began to study the mass of archeological field notes, determined to find out which one of the bits of junk was an ETRUSCAN. He read for what seemed a long time, standing there. He did not grow tired of standing, didn't even lean on the shelf. He noticed this but put it out of his mind.

It took a long time. But when the sleepiness came again, and he lay down on the floor, it was in front of a door numbered 3.

HE put aside speculation about how much time was passing, or what it was all about. "All right, I'll play your crazy game," he muttered aloud. He would just ac-

cept the absence of any physical need as a blessing, and keep working his way through doors.

He solved a problem in positional astronomy, learning to use mathematics that he had never dreamed existed. Following an instruction book quite unlike any he had ever seen, he programmed a computer that he only vaguely understood, and did not need to understand. The read-out was a tiny orrery, including a ship that Kelsey had to navigate from planet to planet. Not, to be sure, with the complication of changing mass-ratios.

The solar system represented in the model had only six planets, none of them with a sizable moon, which facts suggested nothing to Kelsey. He was satisfied when the scheduled journey was complete, and door 3 clicked open for him.

The test required to open door 2 first appeared somewhat easier. The first half of a musical composition was played repeatedly to Kelsey, through some invisible speaker. Pressing one of a series of numbered buttons brought him the sound of one of four last-halves, all quite similar. There were books on musical theory, and printed copies of each ending. He listened and studied until he felt sick of all music. Finally he made a choice.

He was mistaken.

The door refused the key. No shock bit at his hand, no sound of rushing water came from the rooms behind him. All was quiet, the eternal quiet of this place that might be expected to get on a guv's nerves, but so far hadn't bothered him.

Evidently his mistake was not to be punished. Kelsey was suddenly angry. That someone could push him around like this, use him for a . . . a . . . guinea pig. The term floated into his mind; he wondered what it was, exactly, that scientists really did with guinea pigs. When he got out of here he would look it up.

If he got out of here.

When! Now to get this damned door open. The temptation to choose one of the three remaining keys at random was strong; but no, he would try what he honestly thought to be the second most likely piece of music.

This time the key worked. Kelsey stepped through and waited for the sleepiness to come.

DOOR 1. He had anticipated it, in the back of his mind, for what now seemed many days. Would there be a final answer behind it? Or a door numbered O? Or a trick? He had thought perhaps door 1 would be the most difficult of all to open. He went to work as soon as he woke up.

Kelsey built a cathedral. At least the structure somewhat resembled a Gothic church when he was through with it. He built it about three feet high, from blocks about a cubic inch in volume, that clung together like mortared masonry when he fitted one to another. He built it using tiny waldo arms, which were another concept utterly new to him. They worked into a glasslike enclosure that prevented him from reaching directly the simple latch of door 1. In this room the latch was not on the door but on the wall a few feet away. A block in the mechanism kept him from quite reaching the latch directly with the arms.

He had a helper, for the first time. When he pressed a button, a small machine ran from one corner of the enclosure as if anxious to assist him, climbed upon the blocks until it reached the highest point of whatever pile or structure they formed, and reached a tiny arm as far as it could toward the latch.

Kelsey had to build something with the blocks for the robot to climb on, so it could reach the latch. He soon learned that it could not climb a tall narrow spire of blocks; he didn't have enough material to build a massive ramp or stairway. Besides the blocks, he had beams to work with, sticks of varied sizes and shapes, up to a few inch-



es long. Each beam had the word **TEMPORARY** lettered on it. Kelsey soon found what **TEMPORARY** meant in this case; if the little robot attempted to climb the structure while any of the beams were in place, the blocks immediately lost their cohesiveness and his whole work collapsed.

A good many of his efforts collapsed from one cause or another, usually while the robot was climbing. The little machine hit the floor hard, but always bounced up and returned to its corner, like an undaunted boxer ready for the next round. Kelsey chuckled at the robot, tried to think of a name for it, and vowed he would have no less patience.

He built and rebuilt, without tiring. There were books on engineering, architecture, and construction; he studied them between attempts. What he needed was a tall structure, with a fairly large top for the robot to stand on while it reached for the latch. Since the amount of blocks was limited, the structure would have to be hollow inside. He used his little beams for temporary support, and discovered the beauty of the arch, and the use of the flying buttress to keep arch-supporting walls from collapsing outward.

There came a time when the robot climbed successfully and stretched itself upward,

until the tip of one small metal arm reached the latch, curved over, and pulled precisely . . .

Click!

He had done it. Seven doors.

KELSEY felt excitement such that his hands should have trembled with it, but they remained steady and obedient as machines.

Door 1 swung ajar for him now. He felt an impulse to take the robot with him, but it was still out of his reach behind the glass. And it now hung inanimate from the latch it had opened. It was only a machine.

Almost without pause Kelsey pushed open door 1 and stepped through. An unnumbered door faced him from the familiar place in the opposite wall, but something else grabbed his attention immediately—a ladder rose through a hole in the glowing ceiling, and down through the hole came a greenish wavery light that might be a water-mottled reflection of the sun.

Kelsey climbed quickly. Above the room the ladder curved off to become a sort of stairway, inside a tube big enough to hold a crawling man. Climbing around a sharp bend in the tube, Kelsey felt an odd sensation, as if he had been turned upside down for a moment, lost his balance and his visual per-

spective. The feeling passed in an instant; he climbed on, into brighter light.

Some force held clear water up like a lid inside the upper end of the tube; it looked as if the upper end was just under the normal surface of a body of water, with bright light above, as if from a clear sunny sky.

Kelsey was quite practical about wonders by now. He poked a finger into the water-lid above his head, and withdrew it wet but undamaged. He crawled up through the water, and stopped with head and shoulders in the open air and sun, his weight still supported by the tube.

He had emerged into the familiarity of the Chicago shoreline, to very nearly the exact spot where he had felt the grasp and sting at his ankle, a few yards offshore from the rocks. The sun was nearly overhead on a bright warm day. Piled as he had left it he saw his clothing. Above the gentle lapping of wave against rock he heard his transistor portable blaring something with a beat.

The same day!

Mechanically he pushed himself free of the tube and dog-paddled to the rocks. A couple of people were in sight, strolling or sunbathing. The same people. He remembered them now. It was the same hour. Maybe the same minute.

His mind felt blank. He pulled himself up onto the rock and sat staring stupidly. The grab at his ankle, the strange place, the old man, the flood, the tests and the doors, one after another, all had no ties to his reality right now. He felt that in a little while he would convince himself that the whole thing had been a dream—but never quite convince himself entirely. To the end of his life he would carry the doubt, and the wonder . . .

Kelsey entered the water again. He swam out and groped down with his feet. The tube entrance was still where he had left it. Was it always here? Ridiculous. Swimmers and boaters and fishermen would run into it all the time. He ducked under water and opened his eyes and tried to see the—place down there, from the outside, but there was nothing visible except the mouth of the tube, and a few yards of the tube itself in the green murkiness. He gripped the lip of the tube opening, a few feet underwater, and stared downward inside. He could see quite a way.

He came up for air. The thing, the system, whatever it was, whoever controlled it, had released him, hadn't it? He had studied and struggled his way out. What more did he want? Revenge? Maybe. He wanted something. He somehow believed that if he

reported this to someone it would all be gone when they came to look for it.

He remembered the final, numberless, unnecessary door he had seen down there. He looked around with longing at his familiar world, drew a deep breath, and went under water.

GOING down, Kelsey got the same queer sensation at the bend in the tube—as if he was being pulled in a hurry from one place to another. He ignored it and went on.

The room at the foot of the ladder was just as he remembered it. He faced one way and sighted through a line of open doors, through which he had worked his way to freedom. He faced the other way, toward the final door, unnumbered and unlatched.

Kelsey stood quietly for a moment with his hand on the door; then pushed gently. The door swung open. Nothing else happened. Light was dim on the other side. He stepped through and found himself facing a thick-looking translucent wall. He could dimly discern an unfamiliar shape moving in the vagueness beyond it.

"And so the final test is passed," said a man's voice from a speaker over Kelsey's head, making him jump. "The will to open the unnecessary door is yours."

Kelsey backed warily away,

and stood holding the door open.

"All right—what's it all about?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

"I am an alien here. My shape is not yours. To see me now might disturb you."

It was quiet except for Kelsey's breathing. He found he believed what he had just been told. Outer space. Jokes about little green men. Not funny now.

"What do you want?" he finally asked. "Why did you put me through all that?"

"I want to go home," said the voice simply and eagerly. "I can do things that seem to you very wonderful, but one thing I cannot do without the willing help of another intelligent mind. That is to drive my ship through the great distances, to make timelike the great intervals, to get home—neither to die of age myself on the way, or to find my world old and my people gone when I arrive . . . can you understand? I must pass many stars to get home."

"You want help, why don't you just ask?"

YOUR societies must be left to themselves now, for a long time to come, not bothered from outside. This is very important. I must deal only with an individual.

"You have the ability to help me, proven by my tests. I have violated your rights

and subjected you to strange pressures, but I assure you you were never in real danger here. I ask your forgiveness; my need for help is great."

Something suggested to Kelsey that he turn around and scramble up the ladder as fast as he could. Somehow he didn't. "How come you need help?"

"There has been an accident—I am the only one of my kind left alive in this ship. I will explain it in detail if you wish."

"What happened to that old man?" Kelsey demanded suddenly.

"I created his apparent body from a material sensitive to mental forces, using specifications in your own mind. He appeared to you as a being you knew to be intelligent, yet one far from what you think of as your own kind. Still you took what you believed to be a grave risk in order to protect his life. If you elect to go with me, you will gain knowledge that is not well entrusted to one who holds the lives of other beings in contempt. The old man was your first test. He never existed as a person."

"You expect me to believe that—"

"Watch."

An opening dilated in a wall. An amorphous gray lump of stuff flowed out like a huge fat worm onto the floor. It rose, coloring and shaping

itself into rags and chains and a smiling Oriental face. It nodded at Kelsey cheerfully; the rags and chains became the rich robe of a mandarin.

"I can speak through the mouth of this image, if you wish," the figure said.

"Better than TV," said Kelsey, sounding idiotic to himself. "Listen, how do you expect *me* to help you?"

"You can, if you are willing. Your mind is good, do not be afraid to let it reach out for things. The work on the trip will not be hard. There will be much time for fun, and I can promise you will not be bored. In four years you can be back on Earth, if you wish, though there is a planet in my home system with people very much like yours which . . ."

"Four years!" But what's the difference, Kelsey thought, I'm not going anyway.

"I regret so long a time. But I and my people will not be ungrateful; there will be compensations . . ."

"Wait a minute." Kelsey backed toward the ladder, the mandarin following him with cheerful eyes. "If you're from—where you say—how come you know so much about us here on Earth? Don't tell me you got it all out of my mind, all those tests. I didn't know all that stuff to begin with."

The mandarin melted down

to a gray puddle and began to flow away. "You are not the first being I have seized, tested, and interviewed on this planet," said the voice from the speaker. "More than nine hundred others preceded you. By now I know you people well enough to test you for ability to give the help I need. You are not the first to be suitable. But I hope you will be the first to accept. I have been hopping this ship from one large body of water to another for several of your years, keeping it hidden from the mass of your people, whom I do not wish to disturb, trying to find one who can and will help me."

KELSEY put a hand on the ladder. Why hadn't he just stayed on shore once he got away? But now he had to keep asking questions. "What happens to the people who don't pass your tests? Or who don't want to go with you?"

There was a little silence. Then the voice from the speaker said: "I am sorry. I forget now in my eagerness that you do not know us, and in the light of your experience you are right to be suspicious."

"I do not mistreat them further. They are set free—as you are now—to return to their normal lives at very nearly the point where I interrupted them. I try to improve their health as some payment for my violation of

their constitutional rights."

"You mean, if I had just walked away up there—?"

"I would have bothered you no more. In a very few minutes you would have forgotten the entire incident."

"Thanks," said Kelsey. He turned and went two steps up the ladder quickly, then turned again. "How did you give me all those tests in a few minutes?"

"If you come with me, you can learn that—and many other things."

"I see," Kelsey muttered. Four years out of a guy's life . . . but what am I thinking of? I better get out of here before he changes his mind, and locks me in.

He went up the ladder quickly. Tomorrow would be Tuesday. He would go to the post office, and sort mail. He would do more than that, damn it. He would go to some of the colleges and see what kind of evening classes they had going.

But hadn't the alien said he would forget all about this ship a few minutes after he left it? Maybe he would simply slide back into his old life, and never know the difference. Well, he asked himself angrily, would that be so bad? Besides, a lot of people would miss me if I just took off for four years.

Who, really?

He believed the alien, somehow. If the guy had been ly-

ing he would have named a shorter time than four years.

Kelsey reached the top of the tube, and paused with head and shoulders out of water. Miles to the southwest, out of his sight now behind rocks and park and distant skyscrapers, was the Main Post Office, where he might retire in about twenty years. It was really a big place when you were standing near it, or inside it sorting mail. From here it was nothing, a small hidden box, blind and self-contained under the reach of all the sky.

"I'M ready. Can we move the ship now? Just by thinking about it?"

"Yes, we can, as we are working with the machines. Relax. Now hold *this* pattern in your mind." A thing indescribable in Earthman's words came to Kelsey's consciousness. "Think about it until I come back with another."

"Got it."

At about midnight, each of the higher-frequency radars working in North America cast on its scope a burst of noise. An alert was called, but nothing further out of the ordinary was observed.

And no one on Earth attributed the event to the making timelike of a great interval.

END

WHAT COMES TRUE

... there was a disposition on the part of literary journalists at one time to call me the English Jules Verne. As a matter of fact there is no literary resemblance whatever between the anticipatory inventions of the great Frenchmen and (my) fantasies. His work dealt always with actual possibilities of invention and discovery and he made some remarkable forecasts. The interest he invoked was a practical one; he wrote and believed and told that this thing or that thing could be done, which was not at that time done. He helped his reader to imagine it done and to imagine what fun, excitement or mischief would ensue. Many of his inventions have 'come true.' But these stories of mine . . . do no pretend to deal with possible things; they are exercises of the imagination in a quite different field.

—H. G. Wells

Just peel off protective backing.
Sticks to any smooth surface.
ACTUAL SIZE 12½" x 2"

KEEP AWAY! RADIO ACTIVE

SELF-
STICK

GET MILES OF SMILES WITH
Bumperniks

An assortment of humorous Bumper Signs created to put fun back into driving. FITS ALL CARS. Big, bright Day-Glo letters for long range visibility.

25¢ EACH or SIX FOR \$1.00

MAIL CHECK, CASH OR MONEY ORDER TO

BOX 188 • HARTSDALE, NEW YORK

◀ **PASSING SIDE** **SUICIDE** ▶

DRIVE CAREFULLY

QUIET! BACK SEAT **DRIVER ASLEEP**

KEEP AWAY! RADIO ACTIVE

CAUTION! SPEED TRAP AHEAD

If you can read this
YOU'RE TOO DAMN CLOSE

☐ CHECK ☐ CASH ☐ MONEY ORDER
CHECK CHOICE HERE ▼

STATE _____

CITY _____

STREET _____

NAME _____