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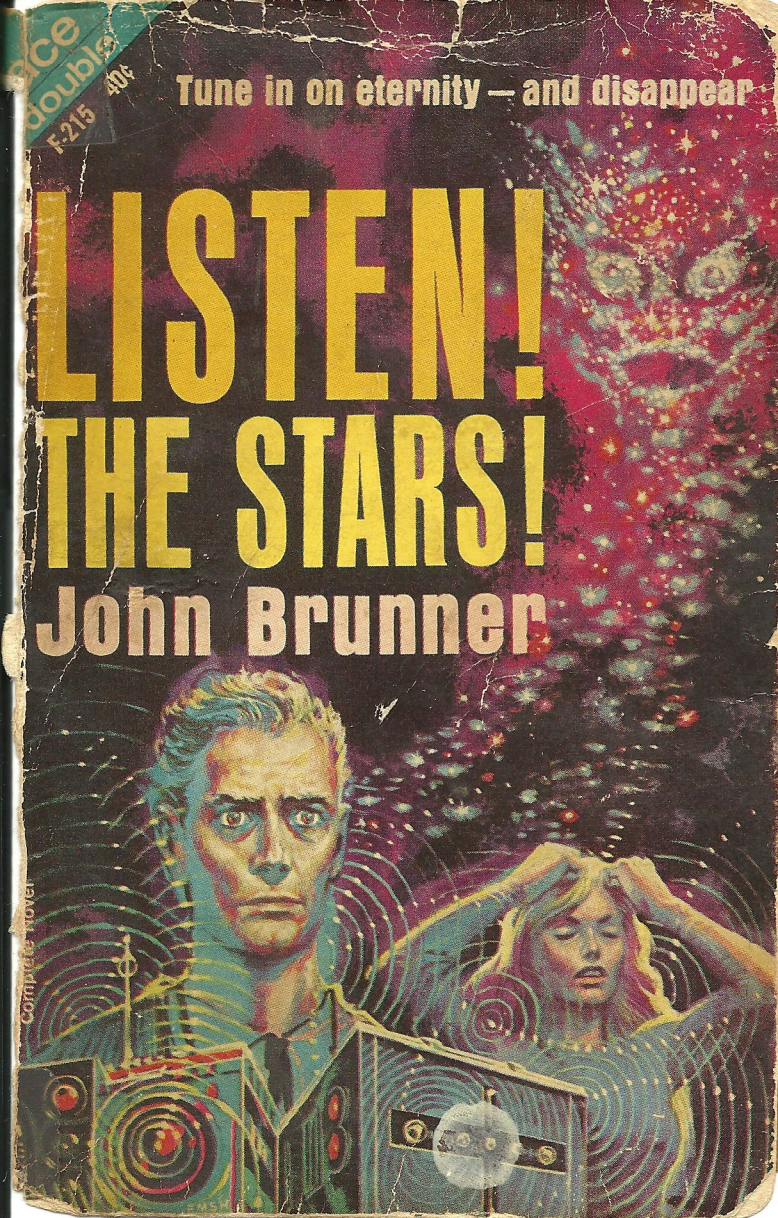
LISTEN! THE STARS!

John Brunner



DANCE TO THE TUNES FROM ETERNITY

What was this thing called a stardropper whose use was the rage all around the world?

Ostensibly a simple device made from an amplifier, a magnet, a vacuum, a power source and an earpiece. Add it up and you got nonsense—in the form of strange sounds, unintelligible to the human race.

But was it "nonsense" that drove people mad, creating an addiction similar to dope? Was it "nonsense" that caused people to disappear off the face of the earth without a trace?

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LISTEN! THE STARS!

by

JOHN BRUNNER

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LISTEN! THE STARS!

I

PAUSING WITH his bit of blue chalk ready to mark the first of Dan Cross's bags, the dark-uniformed customs officer said, "Stardropper?"

He could have meant Dan himself, or the instrument slung over his shoulder on a strap. Either way the answer ought to be yes. Dan nodded, and the customs officer thawed noticeably.

"Been at it long?" he asked. "I'm a recent convert myself."

"So am I!" Dan said with enthusiasm. To be precise, he had had the instrument four days. "What model do you have? This is a custom-built job, hand-assembled. A guy in L.A. turns them out."

"Wish I could spare time to look at it," the customs officer said with real envy. "Powerful, is it?"

"One of the best!"

From outside came the choking roar of a Mach Three express taking off under rockets. The man behind Dan, waiting for his bags to be checked, coughed and shuffled his feet. The customs officer recollected himself and slashed quick crosses on Dan's three cases.

"Hope you enjoy your stay in Britain, sir," he said, and

moved on. Dan smiled mechanically, tucking his passport back in his pocket. A porter came up and loaded his bags on a humming electric trolley, asking whether he should find Dan a taxi; Dan told him yes, and walked leisurely across the customs hall to a door labeled in dayglo letters; TRANSIT LOUNGE—Exchange Facilities—Shops—Conveniences.

All very smart and impressive, this brand-new building. The people, too, seemed smart and alert. There was a sense of bustle in the air. If you had to carp, you might say they seemed almost too eager—perhaps feverish. But Dan was chary of first impressions, and reserved judgment.

He kept his long-jawed face set in the right expression for a curious tourist making his first visit here, but behind it his mind was very busy. It was one thing to be told that the stardropping craze had a stronger grip in Europe than at home; it was another to have it demonstrated within minutes of his arrival.

And here was another proof on top of the first. Standing just inside the brightly lit transit lounge was a wild-eyed young man, hair untidy, shirt open at the neck and filthy round the cuffs, a smear of grime on one cheek. As the newly arrived passengers filed through the door he was saying fiercely to one after another, "Klatch remoo! Listen to me, will you? *Klatch remoo!*"

The passengers scowled and made irritated remarks to one another. Against a nearby wall Dan saw a policeman and a member of the airport staff, watching the young man with serious faces, but making no move to interfere. He wondered why not.

The instant the young man caught sight of Dan's star-dropper he seized him by the lapels of his jacket and thrust his face close. His breath stank, as though he had lived on cigarettes for days past.

"You! Klatch remoo—what does that mean to you?"

"Nothing," Dan said shortly. "Take your hands off me."

"It *must*. Listen again. Klatch—"

Dan tugged the clawing hands free of his jacket and shot a glare at the policeman, who came forward at last.

"Mr. Grey!" he said sharply. "If the gentleman says no, he means no. If you're going to be a nuisance we'll have to turn you out, understand? That's your last warning."

Grey let his hands fall hopelessly to his sides. A tear squeezed out of his eyes and mingled with the grime on his cheek. He turned away and tried to interrogate someone else.

Dan looked at the policeman. "What does he have to do to be classed as a nuisance?" he demanded.

"Well, he's expecting someone, you see, sir. Someone he says he heard of through his stardropper. You can hardly blame him, can you? After all, I see you're a fan yourself."

"But there's a time and place for everything."

The policeman shrugged. "He's no great trouble. And the slightest chance, you know—always worth taking."

"I guess so." Dan was not clear what the remark meant, but he had no wish to make himself conspicuous by saying so. He crossed the lounge to an exchange counter, much puzzled.

While waiting to be served he had plenty more reminders of the extent of the stardropper craze here. In glass-fronted advertisement display cases he counted four posters issued by firms making the things—two portable models, one fixed home installation, and a do-it-yourself kit. And on one of the padded benches nearby a girl sat waiting for her flight number to be called, meantime holding a stardropper on her knee with the earpiece half-hidden in her bright fair hair.

Building up a charge like the man Grey? Dan hoped not. She looked too pretty to go mad.

As the taxi spun down the Great West Road towards London he lit a cigarette and leaned back in his seat. Opening the case of his own instrument he stared at it for the twentieth time.

What the hell *were* these things all about, anyway?

About half the contents of the shallow square box made sense—the earpiece on its neatly rolled cord; the transistorized amplifier, conventional in design; the power source too. You could run a stardropper off anything within reason—

flashlight cells, house current, sunlight, even in theory, the kitchen stove. But this, as he'd told the customs officer, was an expensive handmade version; its power came from a fuel cell that converted butane gas directly into electricity, water vapor and CO_2, just about the most efficient process yet devised.

So far, so good. What could be made of the rest? Item: one alnico magnet on a brass slide; the slide was toothed and engaged with a worm. Item: one calibrated plastic knob on the same shaft as the worm, with a ratchet to hold it on a chosen setting. Item: one ultra-hard vacuum in a little aluminium box. There was a getter in the box to keep the vacuum swept, but about once a month you had to trade it in for a fresh one. The butane tank—a standard cigarette-lighter refill—was guaranteed to last a year, minimum, and in practice might go for three times as long.

Add it up, and you got nonsense. But . . .

Dan lifted the earpiece and put it in; it was covered with foam rubber and tapered for a snug fit. At random he twisted the knob and waited. Nothing. He moved it a little further, and a susurrus of noise began, like waves on a distant beach crossed with a pouring sound which rose steadily in pitch as the gurgle of water rises when a bottle is filled from a tap.

He closed his eyes attentively. True enough, the sound had an attractive quality. It seemed meaningful, like a voice speaking an unknown language. Or more nearly like music, capable of conjuring up images and ideas but not communicating them as such.

This was not a good setting, though. After a little while the sound broke up in a gabble of shrill squawks, and he took out the earpiece quickly. Noticing the cabby eying him in the rear-view mirror, he decided against another try and shut the case.

Maybe he just wasn't getting it. Plenty of his friends had joined the multiplying horde of addicts, but whenever he had been persuaded to try out one of their instruments he'd

found the experience merely interesting. Not fascinating. He'd taken the things for toys.

If what he'd been told was true, they had much more of the air of loaded pistols. Because at the end of the line might be a man like Grey, shouting desperate nonsense syllables at strangers and hoping for a meaningful answer.

Asking what a stardropper *really did* seemed nearly as futile. Dan reflected that he'd had the benefit of an explanation from Berghaus himself, the only person with a theory to fit the facts, and he hardly understood even now. To judge by Berghaus's helpless expression as he talked, he wasn't much further forward.

Moreover, for a scientist he had been driven to some appallingly unscientific-sounding terms. Psychic continuum, for example. There was apparently no alternative. This was simply an unscientific sort of phenomenon.

Point one: there was no logical reason why a hard vacuum plus a magnet plus a power source should generate signals you could put on an oscilloscope, record on tape, feed through a speaker or cause to jiggle the needles of instruments.

Point two: the signals were *not* random noise. They were at least as highly organized—and therefore presumably information-full—as the most complex human speech. Information, as Berghaus had been at pains to point out, was not *meaning;* it was a technical term related to degree of ordering. When the phenomenon had not yet been given its nickname, but was simply "the Rainshaw effect" after its discoverer, people naturally assumed the signals related in some way to periodicity of atomic or molecular vibration in the matter composing the equipment.

It was Berghaus who, after beating his head against the wall of the problem for months, found the extraordinary statistical correlation between the signals and the output of living nervous systems. The evidence was too technical for Dan, but he accepted Berghaus's words. So did millions of other people. The way Berghaus put it was this: "Just as the Zeeman effect, for instance, informs an astronomer of

the existence of a magnetic field surrounding a star, so these signals have characteristics suggesting an origin in an organized, percipient nervous system."

That was about a year after he had proposed his now-famous theory of precognition; evidence had finally piled up to such an extent that one was badly needed. To account for transfer of information future-to-past he invoked a space-equivalent for it to travel through, non-Einsteinian in that instantaneity re-acquired a definite meaning, and permitting knowledge of an event at moment x to become available at moment x-y when it was not yet appreciable by the normal senses. Controversy was still going on, but the hypothesis had served well so far.

Reluctantly, Berghaus said, "It seems to me that these devices may tap the space-equivalent which I have called the psychic continuum, just as the mind of a man with ETP does."

His precognition theory had made Berghaus newsworthy for a while. Reporters accordingly investigated this new idea of his. Seeking an angle, one of them demanded why, if these signals originated in living minds, they could not be translated in some way, perhaps into words. Honesty compelled Berghaus to say that in his view all living, aware beings—human or otherwise—might have access to this timeless channel of information.

"Human or otherwise?" the reporter pressed him. "You mean creatures on other planets, under other stars?"

"If they exist, as they very probably do," Berghaus agreed. To him it was just an interesting possibility which could not be excluded on the evidence to hand.

But the reporter went away and coined the phrase "eavesdropping on the stars." Someone put out a cheap portable version of the puzzling device, intending it as an amusing gimmick. Someone else nicknamed it a stardropper.

And the world seemed suddenly to go insane.

II

DAN'S ORGANZATION was thorough. Every least detail had been attended to before his arrival. He checked in like any casual tourist at his hotel, and had time to eat lunch and take coffee in the lounge before anything happened to remind him that other people could be thorough too.

At ten to three the lounge was nearly empty. It was therefore already a warning when the burly man walked through the door, came over, and took the other chair, at the low table where Dan was sitting. Dan studied him. He saw a big-boned man, going bald, with a bristly brown moustache and red cheeks, who smiled when he found Dan's eyes on him.

"Special Agent Cross?" he said in a voice that did not carry nearly far enough to be overheard. And smiled again, more broadly.

So someone had goofed. But there wasn't much point in argument.

"Just plain mister," he said after a pause. "The organization has a title. We don't."

"I see. Well, you'll want to look at this." The burly man flipped an identification card from his pocket. It had his photo pasted to it, and underneath was written Hugo Samuel Redvers, Chief Inspector.

Dan sighed and gave the card back. "What can I do for you?" he said.

"Oh, answer a few questions." Redvers settled more comfortably in his chair. A waiter came with a tray and asked what he wanted; he ordered black coffee and a cigar.

"Such as?" Dan invited when the waiter had gone.

"Mainly, what you're doing here. Our man at the airport was slightly puzzled to see a Special Agency operative with one of those gadgets on his shoulder." Redvers waved at Dan's stardropper, lying on the table between them. "Your London office stoutly denied your existence, so I had no option but to come and ask you personally. Cross isn't your real name, I take it?" he added in passing.

Dan shrugged. His real name was so far in the past he felt sometimes as though it had been just another of the dozen or so names he had used in ten years' work.

"Well, I won't press you," Redvers said after a pause. "I worry about what people do, not what name they choose to do it under. Well, Mr. Cross?"

The waiter brought his coffee and cigar. He unscrewed the aluminum cylinder and sniffed appreciatively before lighting up.

It was galling to have to declare any Agency interest to an outsider, but there it was. Fortunately there was no special secrecy about his visit—only what was necessary to preserve his future usefulness. He said reluctantly, "Stardroppers."

"I thought so. Well, well. I was wondering when you'd get into the act, everyone else has been in it for months. Just fact-finding?"

"That's about the size of it."

"You're welcome to that, then. By the way, you needn't worry that being seen with me in public will foul you up—my name isn't Redvers any more than yours is Cross, and this is one of my working faces I have on. Though the card is genuine enough; I had it made at the Yard this morning."

He looked for a reaction in Dan's face; Dan stonily denied him the pleasure of seeing any.

"I might also tell you your room isn't bugged. Two of my

men checked it. We knew which it was because another of our people made your reservation for you. All in all I feel rather pleased with myself today, which is why I'm treating myself to this cigar. I imagine Havanas are something of a forgotten luxury as far as you're concerned."

"For a guy who knows all the answers, you're trying very hard to needle me," Dan said.

"I suppose I am. I'm sorry. I'll get back to the point. There are two major and several minor reasons why people get interested in the stardropping craze here. Among the minor reasons—well, commercial rivalry is one. The thing was invented here, and became highly profitable in a very short time. Doesn't apply to you. We get occasional trouble from addicts who are convinced someone has found a way to turn the signals into plain English and is hiding things from them. Rubbish, of course.

"Of the major reasons, there's what I consider this idiotic rivalry between the various nations to extract from stardroppers some knowledge which will make them masters of the world. The Special Agency is the most fanatically internationalist of the UN organizations, so unless you've turned your coat we can rule that out too. Which boils it down to one thing. Are you looking for someone, Mr. Cross?"

He looked unblinkingly at Dan. A wisp of aromatic blue smoke drifted across his face.

"You do know all the answers," Dan said at length. "I apologize."

"I wish we did!" Redvers said, with sudden heaviness. "One of the constables at the airport mentioned that you were taken aback by Grey, as though you hadn't been prepared for someone in his condition. I assure you that even if Grey was acting, he's fairly typical of his kind."

"This wild-eyed guy yelling nonsense at people?"

"Oh yes, he was one of my men too. We've been living by our wits in this country for the past decade, Mr. Cross. We've got pretty good at it."

Professional admiration was getting the better of Dan's

dismay. He said, "Maybe I shouldn't have troubled to fly over. I could have called you up and asked you."

"You'd have got nothing. We're too close to the problem to make sense of it. What I'd like most is advice from one of these alien creatures people claim to hear in their stardroppers. Failing that, an outsider's view. And you're a stranger here, aren't you?"

"Yes, it's my first visit."

Redvers nodded. "But you must be familiar with the general situation. I know how thoroughly your operatives get briefed. It would be a compliment if you'd been told not to mind people like me being nosey. Were you?"

"I was advised you might be exceptionally co-operative with Agency employees."

"We try to be. We appreciate your outfit's insistence on being on everyone's side instead of one side or the other—which of course is how we regard ourselves nowadays. But we have to watch ourselves carefully. This elderly continent of Europe is the battleground of the late twentieth century, and we're right in the firing line, if you see what I mean."

"Not that anyone would know, just looking."

"It is deeper than you can see, I guess. It's in the mind. When we opted out of the arms race ten years ago the decision was called cowardice or treachery or worse; I wasn't sure myself it was a good thing. It took us about five years to convince the world we meant it, and we wanted to spend our time better than figuring out ways to blow other people up more efficiently. Now I'm sure it was the right course for us."

"It stopped a lot of other small countries busting a gut in attempting to build their own nuclear weapons," Dan said. "For which one can be duly grateful."

"Not everyone is, unfortunately, even now. I asked one of your compatriots how he liked it here, and he said, It's a hell of a good place for a vacation, bar two things—the non-stop political arguments where you British try to figure out your own motives, and the knowledge that if things do ever

come to a head both sides are going to hit your country on the principle of denying ground to the enemy.' "

Redvers gave a chuckle. "Well, you only die once. I hope. From my own point of view, in my job, it's been a troublesome time. At first we were staving off American intriguers who were sure we'd had a momentary brainstorm and would reconsider, and Soviet intriguers who were sure we were really going to join the eastern bloc, neutrality being unthinkable. They were both wrong, as you can see for yourself. But they did contrive to turn this island into a sort of vast Tangier—a strategically situated zone where everyone and his uncle is plotting a *coup d'état* in the hope of securing permanent control. Life isn't dull, but it's a hell of a strain. And that, according to the psychologists, is why stardropping was taken up so avidly. People are desperate for security, and they'll grab at even so slim a chance as a hope of knowledge from the stars. If that were the whole story, of course, it would be fine."

"I've heard that theory before. Is it sound?"

"Possibly. On the other hand, the country where stardropping is most widespread, after this one, isn't in Europe at all. It's India. The Japanese get out this very cheap solar-powered model, and people go out with loads of them on incredible ramshackle lorries—I've seen pictures—and in the villages they club together to buy one. Then they put the earpiece in a tin bath of something to act as a resonator, and there you are—every man his own guru. It appeals to the religious instinct in the people. Take your choice of explanations. There are enough to go round, heaven knows!"

He realized suddenly he had forgotten his coffee, and gulped the whole cupful down at once.

"I gather the craze is about six months behind us, over in the States," he said after a pause.

"It has a hold on the west coast, but all kinds of fads have always flourished there," Dan said. "In the East it's mainly young people and Greenwich Village types who are hooked. I think you have a worse student problem than we do."

"For your sake I hope so. Insanity is the major factor.

Addiction to stardropping isn't just a figure of speech. It's possible to get obsessed by it, till you lose interest in everything else—job, family, other hobbies. Unfortunately it's mainly sensitive, intelligent young people it affects that way; students, as you mentioned, in particular. But of course what's far worse is that people do disappear."

Redvers spoke so casually Dan wondered whether he had heard right. He could not stop himself from jerking forward on his chair with surprise.

"Yes, Mr. Cross," Redvers nodded. "They disappear. From your reaction, I deduce that that's what brought you over to Britain. In the interests of co-operation, I'll tell you we have documented twenty cases where we can't shake the witnesses at all. Usually they go out with a noise like a door slamming. Up till now we've prevented any reputable news agency from picking up such stories, but we can't stop the rumors."

"What do they say?" Dan demanded.

"What you'd think—that these are people who've discovered mystic alien abilities through the stardropper and gone to put them to use."

"And you believe this?"

"No. No, not yet. But I have a sneaking suspicion I shall have to eventually. Now if this is true, of course, it's a pretty explosive fact. A power of instantaneous displacement, if it could be brought under control, could be put to use as a weapon. At the very least it might frighten someone enough to make him lose his head. Let's not name names. This is where you come in—and why, incidentally, I'm glad to see you."

Dan nodded. The Agency had one sole purpose: to identify threats to the peace of the world and ruthlessly cancel them out. There had been two sensational political assassinations, for instance, not long ago. Social psychologists had plotted graphs and said, "Such a man is not sane, and a lunatic in his position could start a war."

So . . .

"I want to be as helpful as I can," Redvers went on ur-

banely. "How would you like the opportunity of meeting Rainshaw—the man who started it all?"

"I wouldn't object."

"Fine. I'll arrange that as soon as possible. And I'll keep in touch during your visit. I don't ask for a *quid pro quo*—I just want to make sure you have no difficulties. You may come up with a solution. Lord knows we need one." He got to his feet and held out his hand. "Well, it's been a pleasure to make your acquaintance, I must say."

Feeling slightly numb, Dan shook with him and watched him stride away towards the exit.

I was never so politely told I was incompetent.

Gradually he began to relax. There was an honest man, and likable. A man you could respect for being clever without suspecting him for being cunning. That trap at the airport, for instance—with the man Grey. As brilliant a stratagem as Dan had ever seen. He hadn't thought how closely Grey could study his face, hear his voice and even feel his clothes while howling his nonsense.

And he *did* know all the answers. It was exactly those rumors that stardropper enthusiasts were vanishing which had brought Dan across the Atlantic. He had more than rumors now, and Redvers was clearly worried. Which implied that even if they had opted out of the arms race, these people—by turning stardroppers loose on the world—had lit the fuse on a sizable bomb.

III

SHAKING HIS head, Dan turned to the table beside him and picked up the gaudy-covered magazine on which his stardropper was lying. He had spent the flight from New York reading a stack of these magazines; probably the stardropping craze had set some sort of record for the speed with which it had produced clubs of enthusiasts, hobby magazines and do-it-yourself kits.

This one was from California. On the cover in bright white lettering, *Starnews*, and a line of puff: "The FIRST and still the BEST magazine for stardropper enthusiasts." Considering it had a hundred and twelve pages it was remarkably uninformative. Twenty pages of advertisements followed by chatty news of personalities and correspondence between people recommending new kinds of instruments and their own favorite settings.

Then the meat of the issue: articles, reviews of equipment, and progress reports by serious researchers, all illustrated in color. The tone of the articles was either technical or semi-mystical. One contribution aimed at proving that the truths of astrology had foreshadowed the stardropper, but the editor had put in a box on the second page to say contributors' opinions didn't reflect those of the magazine.

The most notable impressions Dan had gleaned were, first,

the overtone of respect in most of the contributions, such as is heard in the voice of a man discussing a religion he admires without belonging to, and second, the total absence of two subjects he would have expected to find everywhere.

There was no one to question the correctness of Berghaus's theories. It was taken for granted that stardropper signals were really a way of eavesdropping on alien minds.

And there was no mention of anyone having disappeared.

Of course, as Redvers had just said, the craze was six months late taking hold in the States; but there were plenty of items of British news, and advertisements from British companies. So that meant nothing.

He leafed through the advertisement section at the end until he found what he was after: a full-page insertion by an Oxford Street, London store. If it advertised on this scale in a magazine from Los Angeles it might be a good place to start asking questions.

Behind curved non-reflecting glass a six-foot star turned slowly in mid-air. Beneath it, a dozen recent-model stardroppers were displayed on red velvet. In place of a door there was an air-curtain. Dan stepped through.

Her feet hushing on deep-piled carpet, an attractive girl in black came up to him. "Good afternoon, sir," she said. "Can we help you?"

Dan lifted his stardropper. "I think my vacuum's gone soft," he lied, straight-faced. "Do you keep trade-in tanks for this model?"

The girl took the instrument from him and looked it over.

"Oh, yes. If you'll come to the counter I'll get you one."

"Thank you."

He followed her slowly, looking around. There was no doubt this must be a profitable business. This layout was too restrained to be called lush, but everything had a rich look. Even the stock shelves at the rear of the store were covered in the same red velvet he had seen in the window. Four other customers were present. A middle-aged man and woman sat side by side in the corner furthest from the door, each listening

intently to a portable stardropper; neither moved visibly all the time Dan was in the store. And at the counter two young Chinese were leafing through a catalogue and asking technical questions of a youthful clerk. Dan had already noticed how many Chinese tourists there were around, but according to his briefing stardropping was considered an anti-social time-wasting habit in the eastern countries, so it was surprising to find them here.

The girl came back with a fresh tank of vacuum. "Shall I fit it for you?" she inquired.

"Well—thanks very much."

She attended to the job deftly. "We haven't seen you before, have we?" she said conversationally. "You're American?"

"That's right. I saw your spread in *Starnews* and figured I should call in. Say—uh—I'm new to this, and I'd like to get in touch with a club. Meet some people working in the field while I'm in London."

"We can certainly help you there," the girl said, and shut the case. "That's thirty shillings, please. Uh—one pound, ten shillings. We run a club for our regular customers who want to do serious research. You should have a word with our manager, Mr. Watson. He's the chairman of it."

"That's very kind of you," Dan said, putting bills down.

"I'll ask if he can see you right away. Perhaps you'd like to glance through our catalogue while you're waiting."

She put a fat looseleaf binder before him, containing at least a hundred pages of heavy slick paper, and he hefted it in surprise. He said, "How many different models do you stock, for heaven's sake?"

The girl gave a faint smile. "Around sixty. But there are at least a hundred in production. Have a seat, why don't you? That's too heavy to read standing up."

And they were doing well. Impressed, Dan took a chair and opened the catalogue. There was a blurb on the first page.

We live in a strange era. Until recently, death was our closest neighbor; we walked with him day in, day out.

He has not gone from us, but since the discovery of the stardropper we have learned that life is as close as death and no more distant than the turn of a dial.

Some people seek in the sounds of a stardropper new knowledge of the universe. These are the serious students whose work becomes their life. Others ask no more than the comfort of experiencing for themselves the signals which, scientists tell us, indicate that other beings in the universe live, and think, and perhaps love.

Whichever class you fall into, we are at your service.

COSMICA LIMITED

Well, that was one way of looking at it . . .

Behind him a voice said, "Well, well! One of Harry Binton's hand-built jobs! And very nice too."

Dan glanced up. The speaker was a man of forty-odd, smart in maroon and black, and he was holding out his hand. Dan got to his feet. "Mr. Watson?" he said.

"That's right. Sit down, sit down. That is one of Harry's instruments, isn't it, Mr.—?"

"Cross. Dan Cross. Yes, this is a Binton. You know him?"

"We're his agents in this country. Very fine work he does. Though—oh, I'm probably parochial, but I prefer the British approach to the design problem. No doubt about the efficiency of his products, of course; there's no more powerful model you can carry on a strap. Have you tried many other instruments?"

"As a matter of fact, no." Dan shrugged. "I got hooked by a friend just recently, and he recommended a Binton to me."

Watson cocked his head on one side. "A little too powerful for a novice, possibly. People can get disheartened if they start with too advanced an instrument. Let me get you a Gale and Welchman—there's a setting on those that can be a revelation. It's only a dry-cell model, and one of the cheapest we recommend, but astonishing value for the price."

He went behind the counter and took down a large plain

instrument in a white case. Setting it on his knee, he passed Dan the earpiece.

"Tell me when I get the setting right," he said. "It's usually between fifteen and sixteen on this scale, but of course it varies from one to another. Getting anything?"

This earpiece was bigger and less comfortable than his own; he held it in place with one finger and obediently closed his eyes. After all, he was supposed to be an eager new fan.

Somewhere at the back of his mind a drum was beating. A slow rhythm built up from it, quickened, grew louder. A melodic instrument joined in—or was it a voice singing? No, it was more like a joyful shout. The drumbeat was changing to a tramp of feet. (Changing, or had he mistaken it at the start?) Yet it wasn't marching feet at all. It was the pumping of a huge heart, and signified life, awareness, vigor. Even violence! For it was the rumble of an earthquake at work on the building of mountains, and the shouting was the scream of rocks being ground upwards past their ancient bedfellows out of the once-level plain of—

It stopped, and he opened his eyes. He was shaking all over. Watson was smiling like a Cheshire cat; his hand rested on the adjusting knob, which he had turned from its setting.

"Well?" he said.

"You're right, it's amazing." Dan wiped his sweating palms with his handkerchief, reflecting that if any of his friends had shown him that one, he might be a real enthusiast by now.

"*That's* what stardropping is all about, you realize." Watson patted the instrument he held, like a pet animal. "This model has an excellent repertoire. I've known people who've gone on to build big fixed installations and haven't brought themselves to trade in their original Gale and Welchman instrument because they like the repertoire so much."

A reference noticed in *Starnews* crossed Dan's memory. He said, "You can't get that on any other instrument, then?"

"Oh, no. Why, even Gale and Welchman turn out the

occasional failure without the setting I just demonstrated. But I wouldn't sell one here, of course; It would be deceiving the customer."

He pointed to Dan's copy of *Starnews*, visible in his pocket. "You'll find a lot of correspondence in there between people who are trying to pair up signals received on different instruments. At present the system of calibration is arbitrary—not to say chaotic—and even one repeatable signal would serve as a cue for further research. Our club does a lot of work in this direction, incidentally, and I gather you were asking about it."

"That's right. Obviously there's a lot for me to learn, and I want to meet some real students."

"Delighted to help," Watson said. He took a card from his pocket and wrote his name on the back before passing it to Dan. "We meet every Wednesday, as you'll see. Please join us tomorrow if you want to. There's a small entrance fee to cover the cost of renting the room where we meet, and if you want to come more than once you pay a five-pound subscription."

The card said CLUB COSMICA and gave an address in the centre of town. From the other side Dan saw Watson's given name was Walter. He pocketed it.

"Thanks very much. What time should I arrive?"

"About eight. We have a demonstration this week, and it'll pay to be prompt."

Outside the store, Dan almost fell over a girl sitting on the sidewalk. She had the earpiece of a stardropper in, and with eyes closed and mouth open she was chalking a series of spiral lines on the ground. Half a dozen passers-by paused to look at what she was doing, but by now the spirals covered one another so heavily it was impossible to make out the sequence in which they were drawn. Presumably she was hoping someone would recognize the pattern and speak to her. No one did.

In a drugstore window shortly afterwards he saw single earplugs on sale, labeled TO AID CONCENTRATION WHILE STARDROPPING.

Waiting to cross the street at a stop light, he heard a boy in his late teens address a friend: "Dropped any good stars lately?"

Then a man of sixty or more went by pushing a handcart, old and dirty and with cracked boards. On the cart was a huge shiny stardropper of the heavy home-model type. From its speaker oozed a sound like something flat and clumsy being moved about in thick mud, sucking and plopping. Following the cart were five or six youths and girls, listening intently and scowling whenever a driver revved his turbine and drowned the signal.

One of the girls had a look on her face like a saint in ecstasy and her boy friend had to lead her by the hand. Next to her was another girl who was clearly getting nothing from the sound, and who was shooting envious looks at the lucky ones. She had short-cut black hair and a peaked gamin face with a sullen mouth, and she wore the leisure clothes currently popular with both sexes—a high-collared shirt and checked pants.

What it was that attracted Dan's attention to her, he didn't know. But what attracted her attention to him was obvious—it was his stardropper.

She fell out from among her companions, as though giving up in despair, and came up to the sidewalk where Dan was standing, fumbling in her pocket. She moved very swiftly as she went by.

When her hand came out it held a knife. The knife severed the strap of Dan's stardropper. She caught hold of of it, tugged it loose, and took to her heels.

IV

HALF A dozen people saw the act and tried belatedly to stop the girl, but clearly she was well practiced at this sort of thing. If she had picked on anyone else but a Special Agency operative she would probably have got away; as it was, he didn't catch up with her until he'd followed her across two dense lines of traffic, having to dodge cars like a doubling hare, and reached the edge of Hyde Park.

Then it was simply a matter of wearing her down, and as soon as she saw he was still on her track she gave up. He expected her to distract him by throwing the stardropper down and making off without it, but she did not. She just stopped, panting like a bellows and clearly exhausted even by a short chase.

He came up to her wondering at the defiance in her dark eyes, and noted how undernourished she looked—a strange sight in this prosperous city. He said nothing.

After a moment, she hefted the stardropper in both hands, its cut strap trailing to the ground. As thought she had read his mind, she said, "No—I wouldn't have thrown it away. It might have got broken."

Her voice was flat and passionless. Dan went on looking at her steadily.

A few seconds of that and her self-control broke. She

thrust the stardropper towards him violently. "Here you are, then!" she said with an edge of shrill impatience on the words.

He made no move to take the instrument. Not understanding, she bit down on her lip. A crafty look crossed her face.

"You—uh—you aren't going to turn me in," she suggested.

"No, I don't think so," Dan said. At the sound of his voice the girl brightened visibly.

"Would you let me—try it?" she ventured. She folded her arms over the stardropper and pressed it to her chest. "That's the only thing I wanted it for, I swear it was. I didn't mean to sell it or anything."

Dan sighed. This was just about the most peculiar thief he had ever run across.

Alarmed, she licked her lips. "If you want anything—I mean, I'll do what you want if you let me try your 'dropper. Is that what you were going to say?"

"No." Dan moved his right arm like a striking snake and twitched the strap of the instrument, and the instrument on the end of it, out of her grip before she could react. He brought it up short an inch before it struck the ground, watching her face.

It looked from her horrified expression as though she was telling the truth. So here was one of the young addicts Redvers had mentioned, and which his briefing had referred to.

"You louse," she said. "Did you pull wings off flies when you were a kid, too?"

There was too much pathos in her attempted dignity for Dan to make the automatic answer. He began to knot the strap of the instrument together. "What's the trouble?" he said. "Don't you have one of your own?"

"I did have. My mother broke it a week ago. Said I spent too much time with it. So I walked out. But I can't afford a new one, and it's sheer *hell* being without, because I was getting somewhere. I know I was getting somewhere. I'd tried for months and I'd started at last."

"Have you no friends who'd have lent you one?"

"I've tried them all," she said. "They don't suit me. I

saw yours and it wasn't any of the kinds I've tried. Can I use it for a little? Just to be sure? I don't think any will work except the same kind as I had before, but it's torture not to be certain. Look."

She held one thin hand out in front of her. It shook like a wind-tossed leaf.

"What did you have?"

"Just a cheap one—a Gale and Welchman—but it was very good."

So this was the end-product of Watson's pet make of star-dropper. How had things been allowed to progress to this point? It looked as though stardropping ought to have been legislated against, like a dangerous drug.

Curious to know if she could explain the fascination that drove her, he said, "What is it about stardropping that gets you this way?"

"How can I tell you if you don't know? You're a fan yourself, aren't you?"

"It's no more than interesting to me. I could live without it."

She made a helpless gesture, closed her eyes and swayed a little. She said thinly, "Suppose you had a dream, a very important dream, in which you saw something important. A bit of the future, for example. And you woke up and you remembered you'd seen it but not what it was. It's a little like that, except that what you see is a matter of life and death. If you don't get it back, you might as well cut your throat."

"Are you hungry?" Dan said. "Have you eaten anything today?"

"No. Nor yesterday either." She smiled. "Doesn't matter!"

Wonderingly, he shook his head. "There's a stall over there," he said. "I'll make a deal with you. You eat something, I'll loan you my instrument for a while. Fair?"

She paused before replying, her dark eyes enigmatic. Eventually she said, "I'm sorry I tried to steal it. But you don't have to do that. I'll quit bothering you and go and try to find my friends."

He sighed and took her by the arm. She didn't resist.

Even with coffee in one hand and sandwiches in the other and on her lap, she couldn't stop looking at his stardropper for more than seconds together. He was sure she would have thrown the food away and put in the earpiece if he'd allowed her.

"What's your name?" he said when she had wolfed two sandwiches and drunk one paper cup of coffee.

"Lilith Miles."

"What do you do?"

"Nothing."

"Literally?"

"I was at school. I had a bargain with my mother—I'd keep up my school work if she let me go on stardropping. Not that what you learn in school seems very important after you begain to get results with a 'dropper. Then she went back on what she said and broke it when I was out. So I left, like I said."

"What sort of results have you had?"

"You can't explain!" She made a helpless gesture. "You just learn there's something there. It doesn't go in words. It makes a weird kind of sense, though. Some people get one thing, some get another. Like a friend of mine got news of his father's death in an accident. But that doesn't happen often. I mean, that sort of thing isn't so important."

"Some people go out of their minds, don't they?"

"Oh, plenty." The thought seemed not to disturb her, which was if anything more shocking than what had gone before. "I guess they get stuck halfway. They get impatient, and can't wait to see the whole thing clear. Another friend of mine—she started fixing nonsense names on things and went around telling them to everyone, thinking they'd mean something. But of course they didn't. It doesn't belong in words, what comes out of a 'dropper."

"Doesn't that upset you?"

"No. It's like death—happens to other people."

In its way, of course, that was an acutely perceptive

remark, Dan had to admit. He said, "How about—how about the stories of people who disappear? You know about them?"

A note of real envy crept into her voice. "They're the ones, aren't they?" she said. "They've got it and gone."

"You know where they go?"

"If I knew, I'd be there." She looked at him, puzzled. "How is it you don't know all this, or are you fooling me?"

"I'm not fooling. I want to know your view. These people who've disappeared—was anybody you knew among them?"

She shook her head.

"How did you hear about them?"

"Oh, everybody knows. You don't talk about them much. It's sort of scary, follow? But that's *it*, that's the thing."

"And nobody knows what really happens to them?"

"Not till it happens. Sometimes you begin to see, when you listen to a 'dropper. You almost get it. You make to catch hold, and it's gone again. But you're sure it's there. It's like trying to catch a wriggly fish with your hands. You miss it ten times, a hundred times, but you get closer, you get better at it. You have to keep trying. You have to be so hungry for fish you daren't get impatient; you have to keep calm, and concentrate, and go on trying. Can I try your 'dropper now?"

She tossed her second coffee cup in a litter bin and reached for the instrument without awaiting an answer. Reluctantly, Dan allowed her to open it; that was the bargain, after all.

"This is a beaut!" she said in an impressed tone. "I thought it looked pretty good from the outside, but inside it's a dream, isn't it? I never used a fuel-cell model before. How do you step up the power?"

He showed her the little sliding switch on the cell, and she tucked the earpiece into position, leaned back on the hard bench, and closed her eyes.

All the premature hardness went out of her face; the taut, nervous lines beside her sullen mouth faded and she began to smile a little. Dan watched her anxiously. He had an obscure sense of guilt, as though he were conniving at the

corruption of a minor, and yet it was pleasant to see the change that had come over her face.

She moved the adjuster knob with such patient care, seeking the right setting, that at first he did not notice when she stopped moving it. Then he began to wonder how long he should let her continue, what she would say if he interrupted her, and even—the thought was ridiculous, but it crept eerily into his mind—whether she would here and now find what she was after and vanish.

He shivered. It was growing cool as evening approached, and the rush-hour traffic was filling all the nearby streets, but that wasn't why he shivered. He lit a cigarette and compelled himself to be as patient as the girl. Sometimes the people coming and going around the park gave a second glance as they went by, but not often. It seemed that stardropping was too common a sight to be very interesting.

Almost half an hour had passed, and he was preparing to turn the knob and take the instrument away, when she stirred and opened her eyes. She looked vaguely disappointed. She removed the earpiece and closed the box with a sigh.

"It didn't work," Dan said.

"Oh, it was great." Her voice was warm, at any rate. "I think I could get used to it. It's much more powerful than my old one, so it's harder to sort out what matters. But it was great, anyway. Can I try again some time? I just can't concentrate any more at the moment."

Dan hesitated. This kid could clearly be a damned nuisance if she started to pester him for the use of his stardropper. On the other hand, it would be useful—and perhaps instructive—to watch and talk to someone who claimed to know what stardropping was really about.

"Please say I can," she begged.

He spread his hands and nodded.

She grinned like a monkey and jumped to her feet. "I said you were a louse," she said. "I'm sorry. Can I try again in the morning? You're an American. I suppose you're in a hotel, are you?"

"Yes. And I'll tell you which, and who I am, on one condition."

"That I don't become a nuisance? I promise."

This kid was definitely a character, whatever kind of mess she'd got herself into. When he'd told her what she wanted to know, she walked off across the grass with her hands in her pockets, whistling. After a little she began to skip on every other step, as if joy had made her too light to stick to the ground.

When she was out of sight, he opened the stardropper again and put the earpiece in, from sheer curiosity. The knob was still on the setting which seemed to give her so much pleasure. He upped the power and waited.

No, it wasn't any good. It sounded like a dozen banshees having a party, a pattern of shrill acid whistling noises. It was a setting he'd chanced across the first time he tried the instrument, and had disliked intensely.

Now she'd had a Gale and Welchman, and he knew already that that instrument had a certain attractive quality. How could this unpleasant noise relate to what Watson had demonstrated? More: how could it become meaningful?

Well, he had learned a lot, there was no denying. It was probably appropriate to the whole curious muddle that the more he learned the more confused he became. He got up and began to walk slowly away.

V

He was shaving next morning when the phone sounded. A familiar voice followed his touch on the attention switch.

"Morning, Cross. I've arranged for you to see Dr. Rainshaw today, as I promised you."

"Morning, Redvers. I don't want to seem ungrateful, but is all this purely for the sake of being co-operative?"

"Partly. And partly because, as I told you, I want an outsider's viewpoint. You're the best outsider I have on hand. Tell me, did Watson talk you into going to the Club Cosmica tonight?"

"Is that store bugged, by any chance?"

"No. Watson is merely utterly predictable. He talks every customer he can into joining his club. It's a genuine organization, by the way, not a commercial racket."

"You seem very interested in Watson. Why?"

"For the same reason that struck you. The biggest store of its kind in the country is a good place to keep in touch with what's going on. Look, I won't keep you from your breakfast. Dr. Rainshaw is at a government research establishment in Richmond, on the fringe of London. I'll have a car waiting for you at ten o'clock sharp."

Promptly at ten the car drew up. It was a small convertible

painted electric blue, not at all official-looking. Redvers was driving, with the same face on as yesterday. He was alone. From the reception desk in the hotel foyer, where he was leaving a message for Lilith apologizing for his absence, Dan indicated he should wait in the car and not come inside.

Having given his note to a supercilious and puzzled clerk, he went out to the sidewalk. He was getting into the car when he heard his name called shrilly.

And there was Lilith, hurrying up the sidewalk towards him with a suspicious expression.

"Just a moment," he told Redvers under his breath, and turned to greet the girl with a smile.

"I'm very sorry," he said. "I have to go and see someone unexpectedly. I left a note at the hotel desk for you, asking you to come back later."

"Ohhhhhh!" Lilith turned the corners of her mouth down in annoyance. "You did say I could, you know."

"I do know. But this is important business, and I didn't hear about the appointment till just before breakfast."

"What's the trouble?" Redvers called from the car. Dan explained in a few words about his promise to the girl.

While he was talking she turned miserably away and began to wander off, looking so woebegone it was almost funny. Dan began to unsling his stardropper, thinking he might as well loan it to her for the morning since he couldn't use it himself, but Redvers divined what he was thinking and shook his head.

"Not if you want to see it again," he said.

"You're probably right. Poor kid, though—I feel sorry for her." Dan glanced after her, and saw that she had spun round as if struck by an idea. She came running back, her face bright.

"Why can't you put me in the back of your car?" she said. "There's lots of room, and I won't be a nuisance, I promise, and then you'll know I'm not going to run away with your 'dropper!"

Dan laughed and looked at Redvers. But Redvers was not amused. He folded and unfolded his hands worriedly. At

last he said, "Up to you, Cross. I don't give a damn, provided I can't hear the faintest squeak out of the instrument."

"You heard what the man said," Dan shrugged. With a squeal of delight Lilith leaped into the back seat and curled up in a corner, holding out her hand for the stardropper. Reflecting that this was no crazier than anything else which had happened, he gave it to her. Redvers kept his back firmly turned.

"I'll keep the power down, I swear I will," Lilith said as she put the earpiece in. "You won't know I'm here."

"I hope not," Redvers said with unexpected grimness, and engaged forward drive.

When they had been traveling for a few minutes, Dan looked over his shoulder. Lilith was as far away as she had been yesterday, her face peaceful and happy. Noticing his movement, Redvers grunted.

"Is cradle-snatching a hobby of yours?" he said sarcastically.

"I don't make a habit of it. She tried to steal my stardropper yesterday. She was in a heck of a state."

"Addict?"

"If you can call it addiction." Dan knew he sounded puzzled, and he was. "It's something different, I think. I asked her all the questions I could think of, and I'm still working on the answers she gave me."

"Such as?"

Dan ran over them, frowning. "What fogs me," he finished, "is—not her cold-blooded attitude, because it's too enthusiastic to be called that. More like her open-eyed acceptance of the risks involved."

"They could hardly be ignored," Redvers answered curtly.

"Is something wrong?" Dan demanded, for Redver's voice had shaken on the last remark, and he was holding the wheel so tightly his knuckles were white. Sweat stood out on his forehead, glistening.

"She said she'd keep the power down," Redvers answered. "If she's not going to, she gets out here."

Dan tilted his head. At the edge of hearing there was a

buzzing noise like a swarm of bees, but it didn't seem to be coming from behind him. It was ahead. He said as much, not understanding Redver's sudden fit of trembling.

"You're perfectly right," Redvers said with an effort. He halted the car for a stop light. "I apologize. It's that car over there—see it?"

He pointed. Slowing down on the other side of the intersection was a big sedan with a loudspeaker showing through the open passenger window. The buzzing sound came from there, and it was now loud and clear.

"Wired up to a stardropper?" Dan said.

"Exactly." Redvers craned his head to read the registration number of the offending car. "He hasn't any business to be doing it. Illegal. Noise Abatement Act."

He fumbled under the dash ad produced a microphone on a spring-loaded reel of cord, and spoke briefly into it. As the lights changed to green, he put it away and let the car roll.

"Catch up with him in a few minutes," he said. "Can't help feeling sorry for the poor so-an-so, though—can you?"

He seemed to have recovered completely now the loudspeaker had gone past.

"I guess not," Dan said. "Why is he doing it?"

"Most likely it means something to him. Or *almost* means something. He's after someone else who can explain the rest of it. Quite common. Tell me, did Watson demonstrate his favorite setting to you, on a thing called a Gale and Welchman?"

"He did."

"Damnably attractive, isn't it? Any time you feel in danger of getting hooked yourself, call me. I'll get one of our specialists to give you a post-hypnotic against listening to stardroppers. Had to do that myself, actually. My work was suffering. You probably noticed what a state I got into just now when the loudspeaker went by."

Dan gave him a surprised look. He said, "I didn't realize you had first-hand experience."

"Set a thief to catch a thief," Redvers grunted. "I didn't

ask to be put in charge of looking after the stardropper problem. They picked me because I was already involved."

"So it wasn't just my being an Agency operative which made you take notice of me," Dan said. "It was the stardropper?"

"That's right. We like the Agency fine, and anyone on its staff is welcome to the free run of this island. Stardroppers on the other hand give us nightmares. Can you wonder?"

"After what I've seen—no." Dan took a lighted cigarette from the dispenser on the dash and drew on it musingly. "But it surprises me that you already have a special department to deal with this alone."

"A case of planning ahead, that's all."

"What was the main reason? The disappearances?"

"No, not at first. The insanity problem, then the addiction problem. Speaking of disappearances: watch your tongue with Dr. Rainshaw. I meant to warn you."

"Why?"

"His son Robin was one of the first to disappear."

When they pulled up at the research station where Rainshaw worked, Lilith was still motionless in the back seat. The security officer at the gatehouse was puzzled, but having checked Redvers's authority he said nothing and waved them on.

"You can leave her there quite safely," Redvers said as he drove down the road signposted to the scientific block. "The perimeter is well guarded. Anyway, she doesn't look as though she's going to wake up in a hurry."

She didn't, indeed. Dan gave her a worried look as he left the car, but she seemed perfectly content. She was smiling a little. Surely stardropping couldn't be wholly evil if it could bring such an innocent expression to a girl's face.

He shrugged, and followed Redvers into the building.

Rainshaw, he knew, had never claimed his discovery was other than an accident. He had been working on the relationship between gravity and magnetism, which accounted for his having brought together a powerful magnet, a chamber

containing a hard vacuum into which he was introducing counted quantities of ionized and non-ionized particles, and delicate instruments for tracking those particles whose signals required amplification before they could be recorded.

He also had the research scientist's prime gift: the ability to see things when they happened. Finding signals being generated in a way he could not explain, he followed them up. It was a matter of a few weeks to eliminate the inessentials and package the Rainshaw effect in a box. It was a matter of months before Berghaus formulated a theory which fitted the facts, even if it didn't explain them. But it seemed as though it was only a matter of hours thereafter that the Rainshaw effect was forgotten and the stardropper was part of man's way of life.

Dan's first impression of him was disappointing. He was a lean man, hollow-cheeked in a way that suggested he was not naturally thin but had worried himself into losing weight. He received them in an office from which a half-open door gave access to a laboratory. A man and girl could be seen there, working on a breadboard device and talking in low voices, and Rainshaw's eyes kept straying that way as though to make it clear he was enduring the intrusion of these visitors, not enjoying it.

For a while they conversed politely and icily about the stardropper phenomenon, and got nowhere; Dan felt he would have been better occupied talking to Watson at Cosmica. Fortunately, as he was getting ready to count the visit a waste of time, he happened to mention Berghaus.

Rainshaw's frozen manner changed magically. "You know Berghaus?" he demanded. "Were you a student of his?"

"In a sense, I guess," Dan exaggerated. "He taught me what little I know about stardroppers."

"He taught all of us, including me, what we know about them," Rainshaw said warmly. "The man's purely a genius. It was an inspired guess that led him to link his theory of precognition with my own peculiar discovery, and since then whatever we turn up fits his guesswork. Well, well! So you know him, do you? Then I apologize for my churlish manner

up to now—I thought I was suffering another Nosy Parker official." He beamed. "How can I help you?"

Dan breathed a silent sigh of relief. He said, "Well, Dr. Rainshaw, quite honestly I want a straight answer I'm not likely to get because of the question. I want to know if you think there is any useful knowledge to be had from star-dropping, and if you personally think the chance is great enough to justify all the suffering the habit can cause."

Rainshaw twisted his hands together. He said, "I sometimes wonder if I ought to feel guilty . . . Well, it was an accident, and I've never claimed otherwise. Is there information to be had through what they've now nicknamed stardropping? That's your question. Well, Mr. Cross, all I can say is that my son—"

He broke off, and the most extraordinary expression came to his face. It was shock, plus dismay, plus a kind of weary sadness. Redvers caught Dan's eye and shook his head very slightly as if to imply, "I warned you!"

Dan was framing some commiserating remark as sympathetic as he could make it, when Rainshaw recovered himself, and cleared his throat as though unaware of the start he had given his visitors.

"My son thought so," he said. "And I suppose in a way he proved he was right."

VI

THE SOUND when Redvers exhaled in relief was like a ray of light cutting brief but alarming darkness. Rainshaw did not notice. He went on talking, looking at nothing.

"He was never gullible, or easily deluded. I know that. He'd shown promise of more originality that I did at his age. And he was dependable to work with. We were working on my effect, right up till he—well, he disappeared. And he did believe there was usable knowledge to be had from star-dropper signals."

"What kind of knowledge?" Dan ventured after a pause.

"I can only quote what he said. I wish I could do more. On the last evening we'd been arguing about this very point, and he said, 'It's so hard to capture in words—so remote from everyday experience—that I get the feeling it may really come from an alien mind.' He'd been struggling for hours to make me see what he had discovered. I think it was actually painful for him to have to admit it couldn't be done. He even began to doubt himself, and that was why he went to his room to listen again to his big stardropper, the one he'd built himself. When I went to call him to dinner, he wasn't there."

He had a curiously empty expression, and his voice, recounting incredible things, was mechanical—drained of emotional judgments like belief and skepticism.

"You didn't hear anything?" Dan said. "No noise?"

Rainshaw seemed to come back to the present. "No noise, Mr. Cross," he said heavily. "I know why you ask that. I've heard the same stories, about people who vanished with a clap of thunder. I don't know anything about that. All I can say is my boy had gone, and he didn't go any normal way out of the house. He had nothing to run away from, anyway. He was working for his doctorate and he was fascinated by his research; he was engaged to marry a charming girl . . . I can only assume he was right. He learned something from his stardropper, and the knowledge enabled him to go elsewhere. I haven't any hope of following him. Young minds are flexible, and I'm getting old."

Like all-too-obvious background music, a spray of rain rattled at the window and settled to a steady depressing downpour.

They walked down the corridor towards the way out slowly, as if hoping the rain would be over before they reached it. Redvers said abruptly, "You were asking if I believed these disappearance stories, remember?"

Dan nodded.

"I didn't know Rainshaw's view. I suppose now the answer is yes."

In the double-doored porch of the entrance Dan hesitated, looking towards Redvers's bright blue car on the nearby parking area. The top had gone up, of course, at the first drops of rain, and Lilith, hunting her incomprehensible happiness like a dreaming child, was hidden from them.

He said, "Her, too—do you think?"

Redvers made a vague gesture. "It depends. You heard what Rainshaw thinks—young minds are flexible. She's young; she can't be more than about sixteen, seventeen. On the other hand the young ones go insane, too. I can't grapple with the problem any longer, Cross. I just get the feeling sometimes the world is shaking apart, cracking at the crust, and we're liable to drop into a bottomless fissure at any moment."

"We've felt that way for thirty years."

"This time it's different. You can point to the cracks and say they are wider than yesterday; you can say they'll be *so* much wider tomorrow, and you go and look, and there they are. It's one thing to be scared of what other people may do—a lunatic in a position of power, or an incompetent government, or a hysterical rabble-rouser. That's humanity. Underneath everything you can't really think of it as alien, and I believe that's what's saved us for so long. Just the plain undeniable fact that people are human.

"But you've got something else here—alien knowledge, they tell us. It changes people in subtle ways. You were telling me on the way down here how even that girl disturbs you because she cares so little about the risk of going crazy. That's not ordinary-human, Cross. Am I making sense, or just rambling?"

"I hadn't yet started to look at it that way. But yes, you do make sense."

"And we can't know," Redvers had only paused for the answer, not listened to it, "what goes on in these changing minds, unless we get involved ourselves. I did. I found you can go *so* far, and then you have to make a choice: quit cold, and seek help to prevent your going back, or decide that the rewards you can't yet understand are worth more than staying ordinary. Let's go. I have work to do back in town."

The rain had lightened. Their feet made blurry matt marks on the water-glistening pavement as they approached the car. Dan opened the passenger door and glanced into the back seat.

His stardropper lay, the lid neatly closed, on the padded cushions. The strap was wound round it and a slip of paper was tucked between two turns of the strap. It bore one word in penciled capital letters: THANKS!

But Lilith wasn't there.

He drew back and looked at Redvers. Neither of them said a word. They got into the car and drove to the gatehouse and spoke there with the security officer in charge. No, she

had definitely not gone out through the gate. No, she couldn't have climbed the perimeter fence. She must still be in the grounds or the buildings. There was a procedure for checking up. It was applied.

No sign.

During the drive back into the center of London, which was the longest journey in subjective time Dan could ever remember, Redvers said only one thing which afterwards seemed at all significant. The words stood by themselves, as though printed in flaming letters on the mind that heard them.

"This is where it really starts, Cross. Not when a young genius like Robin Rainshaw goes out. When a school kid who most likely took to stardropping as a thing everyone's doing forgets all of everything and doesn't care. I expect it to rain for forty days. And I don't know where the Ark is, nor even if there is one being built."

It was the flood-image, Dan thought, that fixed the whole in his mind. He had just been mentally comparing his situation with that of a man who sets out to cross an apparently level street awash with rainwater, and before going five steps finds water up to his shoulders and still rising.

His assignment had seemed petty enough compared to others he had undertaken for the Agency. It had been put to him in plain terms: go to Britain, talk with stardropper fans, find out if there's any truth in the rumor that more than one researcher in the field has physically vanished, assess the social disruption it's causing, and if anyone is exploiting this disruption say so—it will be dangerous.

According to what he had been given so far—it would be an exaggeration to say *what he'd found out*—the Agency had fallen into a trap it had managed to escape in its twelve years of previous existence. It had taken for granted for too long that a clearly visible threat was less menacing than a threat you had to hunt for. It was not surprising that Dan himself, as an individual, had for a long time regarded star-dropping as just another craze like hi-fi, or cushioncrafting, or saucerspotting, or Zen. He was otherwise occupied.

But the Agency, with eyes and ears the world over, must have known about stardropping. And because it was different from all the other problems that had gone before, they'd left it till now before they started to worry.

If Redvers was correct, they'd better start making up for lost time.

The car halted outside his hotel. He made to get out, and hesitated. He turned to Redvers.

"Which are you more scared of?" he demanded. "A rising wave of disappearances, or—"

"The disappearances don't count," Redvers cut in. "The insanity doesn't count. It's the fear that matters. Fear of someone else getting there first."

"I saw two Chinese in Cosmica Limited yesterday. I wondered about that. Their government discourages stardropping."

"And has a crash research program staffed by brilliant university students. You knew that? I thought you must. And Rainshaw is working at a state research station here, instead of at a university any longer. Listen, Cross: I told you that everyone else had got into the act before you. I wasn't making with words. It's *fact*. I feel like a man trying to beat out a fire with an old dry sack, and finding sparks burning holes in it every time he thinks it's smothered. You imagine what will happen the day someone really newsworthy vanishes in plain sight of reputable witnesses. Headlines: SECRET LORE FROM ALIENS! MIRACLE TALENTS FROM STARDROPPING! A few thousand people will kill themselves with disappointment; a few tens of thousands, already in the act, will move over to the stage of real addiction and give up thinking about ordinary living; a few *millions* will go out and buy stardroppers hoping that they'll get the same results."

"Is just disappearing such a tempting thing?"

"You think of it that way. Try looking at it less critically. Think of it as *performing a miracle*, and you'll see." Redvers beat on the steering wheel with the heels of his hands. "Maybe that's inadequate. It doesn't satisfy me. But be-

cause of Berghaus's theory the reasoning will go: someone has alien talent I haven't got; someone can use them against me; I've got to get in first. It's what we thought was going to happen with the arms race anyway—would have happened, if the big bombs had ever got down to the small countries. But you can spy on another country's scientific progress, keeping a precarious balance. Here's a slew of wild factors coming in, and you can't spy on the mind of one man with one stardropper. Cross, if you're reacting the way I hope you are, you're going to put in an emergency report to your office. The Agency is a kind of fire-brigade in times of crisis, and this is one time."

"Is that why you're being so affable and helpful?"

"Isn't it a fact that the Agency is bound not to do anything for any single nation or group, but only to act when the whole world is in danger? I've been setting out facts for you. If they add up the same way for you as for me, you must act now." There was urgent appeal in Redvers's eyes.

Dan nodded, his mouth dry, and got out of the car.

He put the call through from the privacy of his hotel suite. He got a very good connection very quickly, and heard the recorded voice inviting him to go ahead, the three shrill pips which were a key to his personal code. He closed his eyes.

"Four," he said. "Equanimity is inversely by the clyster. When it was in the trivial four-by-four the virtue was imparted, but the wall fell between the crackle and the potiphar . . ."

It was a curious uplifting sensation to hear himself speak this way. During his first two years at the agency, before he was operating on his own, he had been analyzed. From the complex personal associations revealed by the analysis they had built up a word-for-word code covering a hundred thousand words. New words and names could be spelled out; for every letter there were a dozen associated phrases. He learned the code, next, having it pumped into him under hypnosis. The Agency used hypnosis a good deal.

The process had taken three months. Now at the Agency there was a computer—number four—into which they would feed the tape with his report, and it would print out in clear.

It wasn't perfect. It ran twenty percent longer than clear language, and sometimes sentence-structure survived the coding process. But because the equivalence depended on Dan's memories and not on a process which could be attacked statistically it would probably take as long to break as it had done to build up. Even Dan could not decipher it; he had to have a post-hypnotic trigger before it was accessible to his mind—the three recorded pips, or some other signal if he was on an assignment where phoning might be impossible.

Four pips on a lower tone followed his signing off, and he forgot again how to speak in the code. The sense of elation lingered, though. It was sometimes very strong, much as he imagined the aftermath of a vision might be—a feeling that he had been briefly in closer touch with reality. Ordinary language was a series of labels invented by other people, but his code was derived from events that had happened to himself and were significant to him.

He dropped into a chair and took his stardropper on his lap. The slip of paper Lilith had left was still caught in the strap.

Had she slipped away like a mouse into a hole? Or had she gone as Robin Rainshaw went—miraculously? And did it matter? It seemed far worse not to be able to decide whether to pity her.

Or to envy her.

Which?

VII

THE CLUB COSMICA met in a big room over a smart modern pub. A heavy curtain, three-quarters drawn, divided it into a sort of antechamber with a bar, and a meeting hall with rows of chairs and a dais. When Dan arrived about a quarter-hour before the scheduled time of starting, there were some forty people standing around in knots of four to six. The sheer incongruity of it all was what bothered him. When else in all of history had people joined chatty social clubs to meddle with something so dangerous?

Maybe they had firework parties in classical China and amused themselves with the newly discovered substance, gunpowder.

Watson greeted him, bought him a drink, and took him to meet some of the members. As he was piloted from group to group he caught snatches of conversation, but like the articles in the hobby magazines he'd read, it all seemed remote from reality.

". . . but the whole question of objective-subjective comes in here, so let's not get metaphysical. Objective so far as we are concerned means you can make it do things. Postulate a field such that . . ."

". . . concede that an installation like his certainly uses a lot of power, but where does that get you? Anyone

could hook a 'dropper on a thirty-two-thousand-volt power cable and the signals would be heard from here to Yucatan, but it's a waste of time, *I* think . . ."

Some of them were serious, intense young men, illustrating their points with slipsticks; others struggling, their eyes haunted, to get across things there were no words to express. They seemed infinitely distant from a childishly happy girl curled up in the back of a car listening to her beloved alien sounds.

". . . nature of the signal in Berghaus's view. I mean, identity of function isn't identity of nature. Department of truisms now open." This was a man of about thirty in an old suit, his hair rumpled, his eyes fierce and bright behind glasses. "To say this is what the signals are *like* tells you precisely nothing. Any day now someone may work up an explanation without reference to psychic continua at all."

On his left a girl with shoulder-length fair hair, dressed in expensive lounging slacks and a fashionable sleeveless tunic, gave a slow headshake. "I think you should try being a bit more humble, Jerry. To my mind the first thing the signals say is what they are. Just by listening you get an instinctive sense you're eavesdropping on the minds of the universe at work."

"It says this to you, Angel. To me it doesn't. You're that much more susceptible, is all. Your imagination was caught by Berghaus's idea, and bang! It was revealed truth!"

The girl he had called Angel raised one eyebrow. She was very pretty, but her face was drawn and tired. She said, "Well, well! Jerry Berghaus-plus, I presume! You know as well as I do that Berghaus approached the matter with an open mind—"

"And leapt a mile ahead of objective evidence!" snapped Jerry.

"Because he experienced for himself the self-identifying information in stardropper signals!" the girl flared.

Watson excused himself in a whisper and went through to

the other half of the hall to see how the preparations were going.

"Look," Jerry said with careful patience, "no one disputes that he accounted neatly for precognition. What I'm saying is that when he came to stardropping he applied Occam's razor needlessly and stretched his precog theory to include it simply because neither could be explained in traditional terms."

A lean, fiftyish man on the other side of Angel took a pipe from his mouth and frowned. "But is Berghaus what you'd call an enthusiast?" he said. "I gather he's not."

"He told me—" Dan coughed, because instantly all the eyes of the group were on him. Well, it was a fast way of getting into the conversation. "He told me he thought that if the signals are of alien origin they're apt to be incomprehensible."

"You know Berghaus!" Angel said in a wondering voice.

"Well, I've met him and talked about this with him."

"And that louse Wally Watson didn't mention it to us?"

"I don't think I told him," Dan said. He felt an impressed mood permeate the group: here's a man who knows Berghaus and is modest about it. All the dogmatism went out of Jerry. He spoke in a changed voice.

"Well—uh—I'm Jeremy Bartlett, and this is Angel Allen. And Leon Patrick." The man with the pipe nodded. "And—"

The other two in the group muttered names Dan barely heard; they both seemed to be listeners, not talkers. Angel kept her eyes on Dan's face.

"But he takes his theory seriously," she insisted.

"Berghaus? He certainly doesn't pin as much faith to it as most other people seem to."

"So much for your 'self-identifying' bit," Jerry said.

"Not at all." Angel turned to him. "Can you tell me how it feels to ride a bicycle?"

"Be reasonable. You sit astride it, you put one foot—"

"I didn't say explain the mechanics of it. I said tell me how it feels. You can't verbalize the balancing sensation you experience. But you can learn it when it happens to you.

Human beings *can* absorb non-verbal knowledge. We just aren't very good at it."

"You're not going for this supernatural wisdom bit, are you?" Jerry's bluster was beginning to return.

"If you've started to fall back on loaded words like 'supernatural,' it seems to me you're afraid of being convinced. If you don't believe it, what are you doing here?"

"I'm a physicist. Stardropper signals are a phenomenon in my province, that's all. I don't claim to know more than Berghaus about his own speciality— I don't need you to tell me I must be humble!"

Angel sighed. "When did I claim to know more than Berghaus? I say he proposed his theory because the signals convey a hint of their own nature, which I've experienced myself. If Berghaus does have reservations, that's simply a scientific attitude."

Watson's voice, raised loudly to call them to their places for the demonstration, interrupted them and they joined a slow shuffling procession into the other half of of the room. Dan hoped the argument might resume later. It was just getting interesting.

He took a place in the front row at Angel's invitation, between her and the pipe-sucking Leon Patrick. On the dais was a huge stardropper on a rubber-tired trolley, to which Watson and a roly-poly man were making final adjustments. When the audience had settled, Watson introduced the roly-poly man as their demonstrator, Jack Neill, and left him to it.

Neill was very excitable; he talked fast, with a great deal of jargon, and Dan followed little of what was said. He let his mind drift down the line of the argument between Angel and Jerry.

The girl's contention that the signals were self-identifying was as useful a piece of logic as a medieval schoolman's. If you didn't accept the postulate, it fell down; if you did, it was beautifully satisfying. She was satisfied. Though she was tired she was a long way from Lilith's terrible obsession-state, and not yet tied in the same mental knots. (Or was it

merely that she was better equipped than a schoolgirl to put it into words?)

Jerry was a different proposition. A sceptic, waiting for the evidence of his own experience before conceding that the unlikely was also the true. He said he was a physicist, and was investigating something in his own province. You could make out a good case that he was fooling himself. A star-dropper was outside orthodox physics. That might well be what was making him so dogmatic and agressive.

Neill reached the end of his exposition, to the relief of some people in the audience, and the lights went down and the demonstration began. A vast busy noise suggesting a factory, or perhaps a whole industrial town, began to swell from the speaker. Dan went on frowning over his own thoughts.

One thing was clear: not everyone accepted the notion that stardropping was a key to mystic alien knowledge. Jerry had specifically pooh-poohed it. And this man Leon Patrick, serious of manner and aged about fifty, had seemed to incline to the same view. He didn't look particularly credulous.

There was a tremendous racket coming from the loud-speakers now. He recalled the snatch of conversation he had overheard about an installation that used a lot of power. Could the instrument referred to have been Neill's? Granting Berghaus's hypothesis of a non-Einsteinian continuum, was there a linear relationship between power and range in the case of a stardropper? If so, adding more power would defeat its object. The more power you used, the smaller the chance of getting signals from human sources which you'd have a chance of understanding. The thing to do would be have a minimum amount of power . . .

He was beginning to feel foggy. It gave him a curious frustrated sensation, like having a word on the tip of his tongue, to contemplate the improbability of a linear power-range relation in a Berghausian continuum. Anyway: it was unjustified on the grounds that it was an *a priori* assumption. Identity of function isn't identity of nature, and the fact that stardropper signals were conveniently presented

through an audible medium was an accidental human predisposition. Words and mathematical symbols and variables in an analogue computer went through the same kind of motions as their counter parts and were not the same. Human beings were used to learning through their ears first, eyes next. The consequent resemblance between a stardropper and a portable radio was accident, no more . . .

Wth an effort as tremendous as heaving up a gigantic weight, he seized control of his mind. He had had a momentary impression that he was thinking in several directions at once, as though his consciousness were ballooning out from a center. It was one of the most shocking sensations he had ever experienced.

For a few seconds he remembered where he was and what was going on, and heard the sound from the stardropper on the dais as it now was: a liquid pulsating bubbling noise, with a definite but irregular rhythm. Then he felt himself tugged back into his stream of speculation.

Look: it couldn't be that a big, power-consuming stardropper had a greater *range*, because the whole point about Berghaus's new kind of continuum—invented to account for information transfer future-to-past—was that there distance, in the normal sense of space-covered-in-measured-time, was theorized out of existence.

But if you discarded distance, how could you have separation? How could there be discrete—anythings?

Easily, of course. That was the truly astonishing thing. Weren't there events turned up by nuclear physicists which called for just that? Like an electron departing simultaneously in more than one direction from a given point, or coexisting with itself on two different paths. There was your separation, and there was your absence-of-conventional-distance. Because the *one* electron involved wasn't traversing an intervening space. The whole point of Berghaus's proposition was that instantaneity had to reacquire in his continuum the meaning it had lost in an Einsteinian continuum because there it does take time for even a beam of light to cover distance.

You could justifiably say, in that case, "at the same time." Which you couldn't in Einsteinian terms.

But that meant—!

He was never so angry in his life as he was for the next few moments. On the brink of fitting together his newly formulated thoughts about the nature of things in this eerie alternative kind of space Berghaus had postulated, he was slammed back to the here-and-now, back to the room where he was sitting, back to the distractions of sensory information. Choking with rage he could not control, he opened his eyes.

Fractionally afterwards the lights went up and he felt idiotically astonished that he was sprawling sideways over the chair next to his own. The noise of the stardropper ceased abruptly. There was a shrill cry in a girl's voice, and a wave of astonished and frightened exclamations.

"Leon!" someone said clearly. "Where's Leon?"

Dan pushed himself back into an upright position and remember that the chair next to his had been Leon Patick's. He looked around. He saw everyone else he recalled seeing at all since he arrived, but not the lean, pipe-smoking man he had sat next to.

He got to his feet slowly. Neill and Watson were coming down from the dais, the former wide-eyed and horrified, the latter solemn but calm. Everyone fell silent, as though confident Watson would give them a lead.

"You were thrown across Leon's chair, weren't you, Mr. Cross?" Watson said puzzlingly.

"Yes!" Dan felt his palms sticky with sweat.

"And there was a slamming sound—like a gigantic hand-slap?"

A dozen eager voices confirmed this.

"Then," said Watson with apparently sincere regret, "I'm afraid we've seen the last of Leon Patrick."

He hesitated while a wave of terror and dismay went through the audience, and finished, "Poor devil!"

VIII

SLOWLY DAN looked at those near him. He remembered clearly when he had last seen so many ghastly-white faces at once: at the scene of a collision between a bus and a station wagon with five kids in the back. Four of the kids were killed. And it wasn't just the paleness that was the same. There was the same expression, too—the look of people reminded in a flash that they were involved in a dangerous pursuit, then expressway driving at ninety miles an hour, now stardropping.

He had a brief insane vision of young Lilith's face, and the idea crossed his mind that perhaps he had become a bearer of disaster, being next to two people who vanished in the same day.

But he realized quickly that that was a by-product of the dying anger which still muddled his thoughts, turned against himself by the shock and transmuted into self-disgust.

"Someone tell his wife?" A nervous half-question from a man Dan hadn't been presented to, met by a nod from Watson.

"I'll see to that, Eddie. Don't worry."

People began to turn away, making towards the way out. Surely that couldn't be the end of it—the snuffing out of a

man to be passed over as lightly as the extinction of a candle? Dan wanted to call after them, ask questions, demand an inquiry. But no one else seemed to question that Patrick's vanishing was simply an event to be accepted. The slamming noise indicated that something had gone wrong. That was all.

Helpless, he looked round for guidance. He saw the girl Angel staring at Leon's vacant chair, her face pale, her lower lip caught between her teeth; she was hugging her arms close to herself as though to control a fit of shivering. Neill, his face lugubrious, went to the dais to disconnect his machine.

"Well, I guess that's all for tonight," he threw over his shoulder.

"No! Oh, *no!*"

The cry was flung like a bomb, and everyone still in the room turned to face the speaker. She was a drab woman of young middle age. Her clothes were shabby, and the only touch of color about her was her hair, a sort of washy carrot-red. Dan had noticed her, but had not spoken to her.

"No, that's not fair!" she went on, aggressive now she was the center of attention. Dan saw a trembling of her lip that suggested she might break out crying. "I was getting something, I swear I was, and it's the first time I ever did, and I don't see why I should be cheated like this!"

"Ghoul," said Angel, barely above a whisper. Dan was the only person who caught the word.

"Who is she?" he asked, equally softly.

"Her name is Mrs. Towler. I think she's crazy. Can you imagine anything more ghoulish than wanting to go on after—?" She gestured at Leon Patrick's empty chair.

Dan shook his head.

She gave him a bitter smile, sidelong. "Shall we leave them to fight about it? Or are you in the ghoul line, too?"

For a moment Dan found himself hesitating. He remembered that he too had felt he was on the edge of some revelation, and that he had been angry when it was snatched from him. But it was no more substantial now than a dream, or the transitory euphoria which followed his use of his personal

spoken code. He said, "I think I could do with a drink. Let's go down."

The bars were already crowded with other club members, who were being interrogated by the ordinary customers about why they were so upset. They managed to elude questioning themselves—Jerry Bartlett among others had not been so lucky—and sat down in silence at a corner table.

After a long interval Angel gave a mirthless laugh. She said, "It's different actually being there when it happens, isn't it? I'm sort of re-arranging my personal universe to accommodate it."

Dan fumbled out cigarettes and gave her one. When he held up his lighter his hand shook visibly. He said, "Didn't you believe it?"

"I had to believe it in my mind. After all, I was engaged to Robin Rainshaw. But I didn't believe it in my guts. The place where it matters."

"*You* were Robin Rainshaw's fiancée?" Dan halted the lighter in mid-movement as he made to light his own cigarette.

"I was. Am, I suppose, failing his return to collect this." She turned a ring on her finger which he hadn't noticed. "You sound surprised. You didn't *know* him, did you?"

There was a pleading note in the words, but wistful, and prepared to be disappointed. He shook his head. "I only heard about him."

"Not many people even heard." She moved her glass on the table as though on a chessboard—a knight's move.

"What I want to know," Dan said after a pause, "is how it can all pass off so lightly. What happened to that man Patrick—and to your fiancé? It can't be that everyone knows, and takes it for granted!"

She gave him a curious look. "You're a real novice, aren't you?" she said. "In spite of claiming to know Berghaus, and being so well-informed in so many ways."

"How do people stop being novices, if they don't ask and learn by asking?"

"You don't learn by asking in this business. You learn by experience."

"But if you're apt to vanish in a clap of thunder, what in hell can induce anyone to want more—*experience?*"

Before Angel could reply, the red-haired Mrs. Towler came down the stairs from the club-room and marched through the bar to the street door, tears streaming down her face. A murmur of incredulous comment followed her.

Directly behind her Watson appeared, his face tired and pale. He stood watching till Mrs. Towler had gone out, then turned away and caught sight of Dan and Angel at their table. Unbidden, he sat down with them.

"I calmed her—sort of—with the promise of a private session with Jack Neill's equipment," he said. "It was all I could do."

"She isn't going to make it, is she?" Angel said, looking straight at him.

"Her? No. If she goes out she'll go like Leon." Watson passed his hand over his face.

"Do you think I'll ever make it?" Angel said in a dispirited tone. Watson shrugged.

"You can't predict it, Angel. You just keep trying."

"It seems to me," Dan cut in, choosing carefully the nastiest way to phrase the thought, "people who want to go on when they've got an example like Patrick before them are like drug addicts, going on doping when they know what's in store."

Watson raised reddened eyes to him. "Do you think I'm a dope peddler?" he said. "Do I look like one?"

"They never do."

Watson flushed. He said, "I'm not in the mood to rise to cheap attempts at baiting. Stardropping isn't a drug, Cross. It's what Berghaus suggested—a path to new knowledge. But to grasp it requires an act of mental agility you can only compare to making a great scientific discovery. Let me tell you a story.

"Once, a European found himself among a people so primitive they had not discovered the wheel. He decided to give

them a cart to lighten their work, and at first they were delighted.

"Then the wheels were made and set on the axles, and a venturesome native touched one of them. It spun round. And they all took to their heels. They wanted nothing more to do with it. A cart rolling along the ground, that was all right—but a wheel spinning in the air by itself smacked of magic, and they were terrified.

"And you're the man teaching us about the wheel?" Dan said sarcastically.

"No. Berghaus is—though he may not realize it."

"Do you have this secret? Or are you still merely hoping?"

Watson smiled sourly. "You expect an answer to that? If I say yes, you'll say, 'Show me! Teach me!' And that's impossible. But if I say no, you'll ask why I'm so sure it exists."

"*Something* happened to Leon Patrick. Do you claim to know what?"

"Yes, I do. He learned something. He didn't get the whole of it. Tell me, have you ever dropped an old-fashioned lightbulb, the kind called vacuum-filled?"

Angel was looking from one to the other of them, mystified. "Light bulbs?" she said mockingly.

"If someone did physically vanish, there would be an implosion. And a sound like a thunderclap. Displaced air rushing into vacancy." Dan felt his nape prickle, and he turned to her.

"I don't think I—oh. The sound?"

"That's right."

"There was no noise when Robin disappeared, was there? Watson, suppose Patrick had vanished silently?"

"He would answer to 'Hi!'," said Angel and laughed.

"What?"

"Carroll—*The Hunting of the Snark*. Don't you remember that when the snark proved to be a boojum he softly and silently vanished away?" She finished her drink and got to her feet. "I'm sorry—I'm a bit hysterical. I'd better go home."

"Shall I run you back?" Watson made to rise. "You live round the corner from Cosmica, don't you?"

"Thanks, I have my own car. You stay and answer our friend's endless questions. He needs his hand held. He's scared."

With quick uncertain steps she went to the street door. As she passed, Jerry Bartlett called after her but she ignored him. He looked round uncertainly, caught sight of Watson, and came hurrying over.

"I didn't see you hidden in this corner," he said. "Wally, I want to talk about Leon. Can I join you?"

He sat down without waiting for an answer, and Dan had to give up hope of an answer to his question as he began to speak with machine-gun rapidity.

"I don't have to say I'm in a damned confused state. I was never there before when someone went out, and I wasn't even sure it actually happened. Now I've been present myself, I'm spinning so fast I'm dizzy. I've been talking with Jack Neill, who hadn't seen it before either, and he fetched up against the same problem I did. We can't work out the conditions for instantaneous displacement. I mean, it must be instantaneous! If a man-size body were to leave at finite speed the shock wave would probably bring the building down! All we got was a bang consistent with air imploding into a sudden void."

"If you spent more time with your stardropper and less time playing with words, Jerry, I think you'd make it," Watson said.

Jerry didn't hear him. He went on, "If Berghaus is right, the loudest signals on the stardropper are from the most highly evolved and most actively conscious races, right? Now what's human evolution? Basically a story of learning to impose a desired form on environment. But not just physical environment. It includes the sequence of events experienced. The more man evolves, the more he consciously plans ahead and—uh—manipulates randomness. But there's a gap here." He broke off, looking unhappy.

"Jerry," Watson said, and this time made the words an

order, "you need to spend more time with your 'dropper and less time talking."

Acquiescently Jerry got up and wandered away, lost in thought. Dan stared at Watson.

"You're not just a store manager, are you?" he said. "To these people you're more like a guru. A bonze."

"Am I?" Watson answered enigmatically. "Can you think of a better niche in a commercial society for someone who's concerned to propagate knowledge he believes important?"

"Dangerous knowledge!"

"What makes knowledge dangerous, in your view? Which seems more innocuous—to teach a man to read and write, or to make gunpowder? Yet more revolutions have been carried through with literacy than with shot and shell."

He stood up. "Well, you've had a very eventful visit to our club," he said. "Can I give you a lift home? I have the penthouse apartment over Cosmica Limited, if that's anywhere on your way."

"No. No, thank you. I'm going to walk. I think the night air will calm me down." Dan stared at him. "Tell me—do you honestly feel happy calling what's happened *eventful*? Can't you think of a stronger term?" He heard his voice tinged with bitterness.

Watson fixed him with his eyes. "I'm not callous, Mr. Cross. Leon was a good man, and I liked him. I simply have to face the fact that he wasn't *better*. Good night."

IX

His eyes stinging from lack of sleep, he walked across the foyer of the hotel from the elevators to the breakfast lounge. He had had nightmares, and he preferred to eat in company rather than call room service.

There was a knot of people around the reception desk arguing with the clerk. Several of them carried cameras. He had a sudden premonition and quickened his steps.

There was a stand of newspapers in the foyer. Headlines caught his eye as he went past, shocking in bright red and pale blue. Pausing, he fumbled small change from his pocket and bought a selection. As he was making his choice, he heard a voice raised authoritatively behind him.

"No! We do not allow anyone to intrude on our guests' privacy, press or no press!"

I thought so.

He seized his papers and went on into the lounge, grateful for the reception clerk's obstinacy. It was clear what had happened.

He dropped into a chair at an unoccupied table and shook out the papers one after the other. WHERE DID HE GO? STARDROPPER FAN VANISHES! DISAPPEARANCE OF BUSINESSMAN! REMARKABLE EVENT AT "STARDROPPER" CLUB. IT *IS* TRUE ABOUT STARDROPPERS! (IS IT?)

There was a waiter bending over him. He said absently, "Coffee. Black. A lot of it, and quickly."

"The manager sent me, sir," the waiter said under his breath. "There are several reporters at the reception desk asking to interview you. We do not wish to draw their attention to you and let them guess who you are, but they are very insistent. Would you allow them to talk to you?"

"Tell the manager I'm delighted with his horse sense," Dan said, raising his head. "But the reporters can go jump in the Serpentine before I'll talk to them, and I'd appreciate you keeping them well away from me."

"Very good, sir," the waiter said, and added, raising his voice, "And the main dish, sir? Smoked haddock, ham and eggs, vegetarian savoury—"

"About a gallon of coffee. I'll decide about the rest later."

"*Very* good, sir."

Now that was what you might call service, Dan thought. He bent to study the papers more closely. Yes, this looked like what Redvers was so afraid of—the disappearance of someone newsworthy. For Patrick, it seemed, was director of a large real estate agency, and his son was a champion cushioncraft jockey.

He had a sickening sensation of sliding helpless towards a disastrous crisis.

The press had been quick, and thorough. They had got hold of Jerry Bartlett, Watson, and Angel Allen; no paper had comments from all three, but they had all got hold of at least one of this trio and one or more of the other club members. The treatment varied from the sceptical to the sensational. It looked like a dull day for news otherwise. That was why it had been seized upon and blown up into a big feature.

But they weren't making fun of the story. It was fact at last.

Worse yet, someone had been digging in the morgue and had discovered the human interest angle of Angel's engagement to Robin Rainshaw. Clearly Redvers—or someone else—had planted a story to cover up for his early disappearance,

but this new mystery had stimulated a reporter's imagination. And there it was in black and white under a red subhead:

Can it be a coincidence that brilliant Robin Rainshaw, his celebrated father's co-researcher, was working on star-droppers at that time . . . ? No one dares come out and say that openly, but it MUST BE SAID.

"Mr. Cross?" a mild voice inquired. He looked up. Taking a place at his table was a nondescript man with sandy hair and glasses and a wisp of beard on his sharp chin. Could this be a reporter who had eluded the staff's vigilance?

Then a memory clicked in Dan's mind, and he recalled seeing this character among the forty or so in the audience at the Club Cosmica last night. No good denying his identity, then. He said, "Who are you?"

"My name's Norman Ferrers, Mr. Cross. I saw you at the club last night, but I didn't get a chance to speak to you. You were actually sitting next to Mr. Patrick, weren't you? Well, I want to talk to you about that."

"I have nothing to say to you, and I prefer not to be bothered at breakfast."

Ferrers was not at all put out. He blinked and grinned, and picked up one of Dan's papers.

"Possibly you haven't seen this yet, Mr. Cross. Have you read the editorial in here?" He deftly opened the paper at the leader page and folded it so that the opinion column was uppermost. "I think you should."

There was a world of meaning in his voice. After a second's hesitation, Dan took the paper and looked at it.

Not since the advent of atomic energy has there been a new power so pregnant with possibilities and so fraught with danger as the miraculous talent which, we must now believe, is hidden in the signals of star-droppers.

Fraught with danger, because not yet brought under control, as far as we know. Pregnant with possibilities, because if such control can be obtained, the implications are enormous.

Dan looked up. This empty pontificating was so ridiculous

he could not imagine why Ferrers drew his attention to it. He said, "A lot of hot air."

"Is it, Mr. Cross? Think carefully. I know that over the past decade or so there has been a divergence between your country and ours, and our government has shut us off from you, but there is a real identity of interest which some of us have worked to preserve and maintain. Now it turns out that there definitely is some strange knowledge to be had from stardropper signals, we've got to have regard to this community of interest and we've got to move fast. Now suppose that the eastern bloc managed to control this—"

Dan cut him short. He said, "What's your point?"

"I'm a member of the Blue Front, Mr. Cross. We believe that our government's behavior over the past decade has been designed to play into the hands of the Reds. I'm appealing to you as an American. Our organization is conducting an emergency inquiry into the Patrick case, and why I've come to see you is because you were there next to him and any snippet of information you may have might be invaluable. And I put it to you frankly: wouldn't you rather that this power was first gained by people whose community of interest with your own country's—?"

It took Dan that long to marshal what he wanted to say. He lowered the paper he was holding, and drew a deep breath. If there was one thing he had learned in his years of work for the Special Agency, it was that a nationalist in the nuclear age was as much of an anachronism as a crusader waving a sword and yelling, "Death to the infidel!" And the Blue Front was among the most reactionary groups in Europe; the Agency had tangled with it on more than one occasion.

He said, "Listen to me. This is the twentieth century—do you know that? This is the nuclear age. This is the period in which we've only managed to survive by coming to our senses and swallowing our national pride. This is the modern world of rockets and satellites, which have shrunk our planet so small we have no room to lose our tempers or think with our muscles. My community of interest is with the human

race at large. I'm a human being first and an American second, which is the right order. *Go away.*"

The waiter brought his coffee and food. He turned his head pointing with a rolled newspaper at Ferrers, and said, "Get this--this *person* away from my table, will you?"

The waiter nodded, taking time to set the coffeepot down before turning to Ferrers. He said, "I don't think you're a client of the hotel, sir. This gentleman is, and wishes to be undisturbed."

Ferrers got to his feet slowly. His face was suddenly very ugly. "I don't know whether you're a conscious traitor or just a fool," he said. "But we're going to watch you. It won't be only the press who want to pump you--it'll be the Reds as well. This country is crawling with them now."

"If it'll ease your small mind at all, they'll get exactly the same answer as you've had," Dan told him grimly. "Are you going?"

Ferrers bared his teeth at him, spun on his heel and marched towards the door. Pouring the coffee at last, the waiter said in an undertone, "Nasty piece of work, sir. We do very much apologize for not keeping him away from you, but it is sometimes difficult, you know."

"You haven't done badly so far," Dan said.

"Thank you, sir. There is someone waiting to speak to you--a Mr. Redvers, he said he was. Would you rather I told him you were not available, or shall I bring the phone to your table?"

"Oh, you mean he's calling up? Not actually here waiting for me?" Dan sighed. "Okay, I'd better talk to him."

"Morning, Cross. What do you make of it?"

"You're slow. I've already had a Blue Front member bothering me, wanting to know if I'd learned anything by sitting next to Patrick when he went out."

"Did you?"

"No, I was preoccupied, of course. Listening to the star-dropper being demonstrated."

Dan would have sworn he detected disappointment in Redvers's voice when he spoke again.

"You didn't get any inkling—any premonition, perhaps?"

"Nothing. It was a complete shock. So was the reaction of everyone else. I didn't sleep worth mentioning, and when I did I got nightmares."

"I have them, too. You do realize that this is probably the one we've been waiting for? The one that's going to scare people really badly?"

"Is there no way of checking it, in your view?"

Redvers gave a mirthless laugh. "Not that I know of. It's up to you, isn't it?"

He broke the connection. Dan hesitated a moment, then signaled his waiter to take the phone away again. It was odd, the way Redvers seemed to be looking to him for something—not even to the Agency, which would be logical enough, but to Dan Cross personally.

Turning to his neglected food, he ate absent-mindedly, his mind running on the same track it had followed during his wakeful night. Time and again he fetched up against the same conclusion. He had facts but no sense, evidence but no information.

He recalled what he had said to Watson: that he was not just the store manager he appeared, but a leader. Logically, then, he must go back to Watson.

X

COSMICA LIMITED was full. People were struggling and jostling one another not only inside but in the street in front of the store, and two policemen were trying to control the crowd. Occasionally a way was forced for someone to escape outside again. As Dan approached, he saw a middle-aged man with a new white-cased instrument—probably a Gale and Welchman, he thought—emerging on to a patch of clear sidewalk, followed by a dozen other eager customers, each offering to buy it from him.

Redvers's gloomy prophecy was being fulfilled to the letter.

You couldn't yet say it had reached the stage of hysteria. You'd find worse at the bargain sales of a big department store. But there was already a fearful greed in the eyes of the purchasers, a lovingness about the way they held their new possessions, which made Dan's nape prickle.

He was well over average height, and as part of his Agency training he had been taught to exploit this when necessary. Accordingly, he made sure that he caught the attention of the customers as he came near, and bore himself commandingly and without hesitation into their midst. Automatically they gave way; without knowing why, those who bumped into him apologized and gave him room, and he

managed to enter the store ahead of a score who had arrived earlier.

Once inside, it was more difficult, but he had the advantage that he was not interested in any of the stardroppers on sale, whereas everyone else was concerned to try the available instruments and to buy whatever he or she could afford. He worked himself to within two or three places of the counter at the back.

The staff—supplemented by four clerks he had not seen on his earlier visit—were getting harassed and irritable. He caught the eye of the pretty girl who had served him before, and raised one eyebrow at her. She grimaced and smiled, pushing her long hair back from her face. She had just sold another instrument to a client so eager to make use of it he turned to struggle towards the exit even before she had made change for him.

Directly between Dan and the counter were two men in business dress, one of them carrying what Dan took at first glance to be a stardropper. It was not. It was a camera, and as became clear directly the girl came to attend to his companion, the pair were journalists who hadn't yet given up hope.

He didn't catch what the man without a camera said, but he got the girl's answer because it was shrill with impatience. Probably she had had the same question fifty times already.

"No, Mr. Watson is *not* available and I don't know where he is!"

The reporter persisted. Obviously bored, the cameraman nudged him.

"Jack, why don't you just put it down that he vanished up his stardropper too?" he suggested cynically.

Jack scowled at him. Other customers clamored for the girl's attention. Seeing he was distracted, she made to move away, but he caught her arm.

"Uh—miss, I think I'll take the chance while I'm here and buy one of your 'droppers!"

The girl slammed the firm's catalogue on the counter before him, and said in a hard voice, "Numbers five through nine

and twenty-nine and forty-two are out of stock. We have all the others. I'll be back when you've made your mind up."

"Jack, you're not falling for this too?" the cameraman said.

"I don't know," Jack said slowly, beginning to turn the pages. "I don't know."

It was nearly ten minutes before Dan got out of the store again, and the crush round the entrance was worse than ever. Seeing he had bought nothing—he had left his own instrument at the hotel—a sly-faced man hanging around the fringe of the crowd sidled up to him.

"Say, I have good bargains in stardroppers if you want one. I have good scarcely-used secondhand instruments of the highest quality. Prices ridiculously low, you understand." He winked. "But not so many. I can get you almost any type on two or three days' notice for slight extra charge. Give you examples. Hand-made American stardroppers for fifty pounds in cash. Regular British instruments for twenty-five and up—"

Dan ignored him. The chances were excellent he was offering stolen goods, of course. And that gave him an idea.

Seeing his sales talk was not taking effect, the sly-eyed man turned his attention elsewhere, and Dan walked briskly away along the street. Last night Watson had mentioned in passing that he had the penthouse apartment on top of the building where Cosmica was located. Now this whole area was one of the many parts of London that had been totally rebuilt as part of the British government's overall scheme to absorb the labor and materials liberated by the disarmament program of ten years before. To eliminate traffic congestion caused by delivery trucks unloading most of these blocks had been designed around an access tunnel running parallel with the streets on either side of the buildings.

Correct. He had gone barely a quarter-mile before he came to one of the ramps sloping down into the tunnel serving the block which included Cosmica Limited. Without hesitation that might have attracted attention, he marched smartly down the railed-off pedestrian way at the side of the ramp.

There was no difficulty in finding the delivery entrance to the firm, either. A huge truck lettered with the name GALE AND WELCHMAN, BIRMINGHAM, was being unloaded at the moment, and several eager would-be stardroppers to whom the same idea had occurred were clustered around it, trying to bribe the truckers to let them have instruments straight from the packing cases.

A harassed apprentice in a brown coat was trying to work his way through the door into the storerooms with a big case in his arms; with all the aplomb he could muster Dan held the door for him, and the boy noticed him only long enough to mutter thanks. He did not question Dan's right to follow him inside.

He walked quietly through the stores, found himself in a corridor running behind the salesroom, and directly on spotting the open door of a waiting elevator car strode into it. He punched the penthouse setting. It had been almost too easy. Surely, if any of those reporters had been really persistent, they could have located Watson's home address from one of the sales staff or even out of a directory, and come this way to see if he was at home?

Well, perhaps they had, come to think of it. The difference was that he didn't care whether Watson was at home or not.

He stepped out in a short corridor at the top of the building. There was hardly a sound. He looked both ways, seeing that there was nothing on the landing here at all. At either end a frosted-glass window let in the daylight; to conform to fire regulations there was a sign beside each window saying that by breaking the glass access could be had to an outside escape. There was also a narrow indoor stairway for use if the elevator was ever out of order, but when he looked down he saw that there was a faint layer of dust on the treads.

And there was the door opposite the elevator shaft, on which a printed card was affixed. WALTER K. WATSON, it announced.

He thumbed the buzzer under the card, and heard it

faintly through the door. There was no reply. While waiting an extra few minutes as a precaution, he inspected the edge of the doorframe. There was a Laxton and Carpenter alarm system, to judge by the tiny metal tabs of which the edges were visible between the door and the jamb. In which case he could get in with only a little trouble.

If he had had his stardropper with him, it would have been even easier, because of the power source in it.

He set to work patiently, whistling soundlessly as he fiddled with the contact tabs. When he was satisfied with his adjustments there, he traced the point at which the leads passed the window frame to the external junction box and shorted them across with a coin. Fair enough.

The lock itself yielded with a minute's use of his pocketknife; it was a perfectly good pocketknife, but it was also a Special Agency operative's standard tool kit and adaptable for purposes which even a close examination would not reveal. If you didn't know how to open it, an oxyacetylene torch or an X-ray photograph at very high intensity was needed to show up its secrets. He never carried anything more compromising than the knife, and had seldom found that he wanted to.

He left the door open long enough to walk round the apartment—it was small but luxurious—and ascertain that Watson was not, in fact, at home. All clear. He closed the door and began a more intensive inspection. A way of escape, first; simple enough. Watson's bedroom had openable windows, and from one of them it was possible to reach the fire escape.

Unhurriedly, because Watson had probably decided to stay away for some while in order to elude the press, he worked his way through the lounge first, then the bedroom. It was not until he reached the bedroom's tall built-in closets that he came across anything peculiar.

He had glanced through correspondence, books and notebooks, and many other personal papers in the lounge, and had found nothing referring to stardropping except incidentally,

as one might expect from Watson's job. Yet he could *not* be a mere store manager . . .

. . . and what the heck was he doing with a diving suit hung up in his wardrobe?

Dan stared disbelievingly. Yes, a diving suit. He recognized it as one of Siebe and Gorman's modern ultra-lightweight outfits, made of scarlet imperviflex for easy seeing under water. It looked almost new. And the suit was not on its own—there was the goldfish-bowl helmet, a quarter the weight of a conventional metal one, and a sealed camera, and the set of oxygen tanks. According to the meters, they were full and ready for use.

Who in the world made a hobby out of suit-diving nowadays? Who had ever done so?

He looked again, some incongruity itching at the back of his mind, and realized: no boots. For suit-diving you had to have the weighted boots. And there were none with the suit.

He hunted further, and did not find them anywhere. He did come across sundry other peculiar things, though. In a drawer containing socks and shirts there was also a file of papers, mostly typed notes, headed C.P.F. and a date of about two months ago. The typed notes were simply lists of numbers with brief comments against them, such as "Unconfirmed" and "This one definite!!!"

What was unconfirmed or definite he didn't know. He went on searching, and the next thing he found was a box containing color slides. He guessed they might have been taken with the camera he had found in the same closet as the diving-suit.

The places shown were unfamiliar to him. He hazarded they might be in Australia and South America, for they showed thick dark greenery and red-yellow desert with eroded rock formations. Inspection of twenty of them decided him against wasting more time; they were uninformative.

In the last closet he came to there was a sack of rocks. He was no geologist, so he could merely puzzle over their presence.

Replacing everything else exactly as it had been, he went back to the file of notes and studied them more closely. This time he turned up a handwritten sheet he had previously disregarded, and found what the abbreviation C.P.F. stood for. The writer—Watson, presumably—had noted, "Seems straightforward enough. It's the cocktail party factor. No simple solution."

Cocktail party factor. The relevance was instantly obvious. This was the standard nickname for sorting a particular sequence of information out of a jumble of background noise. But all he had learned from this was what he was aware of anyway: that Watson undertook serious research into stardropper signals. He replaced the notes in their original place.

There was no sign of a stardropper anywhere in the apartment, but presumably Watson could have his pick of stardroppers from the stock of his firm downstairs; if they carried sixty different models that was enough for anybody.

He left the bedroom, setting the door exactly as it had been when he arrived, and moved to the kitchen. Again, nothing in the least peculiar . . .

A man-shape moved across the opening of the kitchen door.

A bright red man-shape.

Dan froze, reviewing his movements, and had still not had time to decide on a course of action when the man-shape came back on its tracks. A pleasant, rather tired voice said, "Wally? Wally, is that you?"

And the intruder glanced through the kitchen door.

He was young—not more than twenty-five—and he was wearing a diving suit identical to the one in Watson's closet. In place of the lead-soled boots which went with the suit he wore ordinary rock-climbing boots with cleated soles. He had taken off the helmet and now clasped it under his arm like Ann Boleyn carrying her head around the Bloody Tower.

He smiled at Dan. "I thought you were Wally," he said. "Do you know where he is?"

"No, he's—" Dan's mind was suddenly working like a super-efficient machine. "He's keeping out of the way of the

press. Someone went out at the club last night, and it's been made a big scandal."

The stranger sighed and laid his helmet down. Dan moved warily out of the kitchen to the lounge.

"Give me a hand with these bottles, will you?" the stranger said, unfastening the harness holding his oxygen supply. Dan obediently helped him to wriggle free, and he stretched luxuriously.

"Not being able to crack the damned suit for twenty-four hours at a time is a bit wearing," he said lightly. "How bad is this scandal, as you call it?"

"Very big. It's going to be an international incident before it's finished, and everyone and his uncle is out buying a stardropper."

The stranger unzipped and peeled off his suit, shrugging. "I suppose we couldn't get away with it any longer. By the way, I don't think we've met."

Superstitiously, Dan visualized crossed fingers and gave his name. The other nodded. "You're a member of the club?" he suggested.

"Since just lately."

"Ah-hah. Well, I've been away up at Sixty-One so much recently it's not surprising I don't know you. I'm Robin Rainshaw, in case you hadn't guessed."

XI

THE RIGID control Dan had imposed on his mind held good. The matter-of-fact announcement was a tremendous shock, but he did not betray it by movement of a single muscle. Only he paused for a few seconds before he could trust his voice to remain steady while he spoke again. Rainshaw did not notice. He was clearly very much at home here. Having dropped his suit across a convenient chair he walked into the bathroom and began to fill the tub. While it was running he moved on to the kitchen and helped himself to a plateful of salad from a dish in the refrigerator.

The first thing to become clear was why he had accepted Dan's presence so calmly. If he was a close friend of Watson—as seemed obvious—he would know about the alarms, and since it took a specialist with Agency training or exceptional talent for burglary to get past those alarms, he would take it for granted that Watson must have let Dan in or given him a key.

Or that Dan had come by the same route he himself had taken.

Either way, Dan must be party to the secret, on that reasoning—the stunning secret that the powers gained from the stardropper *had* been understood, controlled and put to use.

Dan looked at him without seeming to stare, thinking that

he was a rather ordinary-looking young man: fair-haired, fresh-faced, the sort of person one felt would smile easily and often. He did not look in the least like a man who could walk into a securely-locked apartment without bothering to use the door.

Rainshaw came back with his plate of food and sat down to attack it voraciously. Dan said, weighing the words carefully, "I met your father recently, by the way."

Rainshaw nodded. "How is he?"

"He looks very worried. He's losing weight."

"The strain must be dreadful for him now," Rainshaw said, frowning. "I wish he could make it, but I doubt if he ever will. I even wish sometimes I'd been hardhearted enough not to tell him that I'd gone out, but I thought it would be even worse for him to think I was dead, or gone for good."

So Dr. Rainshaw was keeping up a pose. He was doing it very well, too, Dan realized. He had never given away a hint of the real facts, for if he had Redvers's attitude to him would have been altogether different.

"Where did you say you'd been?" he ventured, and wondered whether he should add "this time." He decided against it, as Rainshaw showed no sign that the question was unusual.

"Sixty-one again. Sixty-one Cygni."

This time the shock was worse yet. Fortunately Rainshaw was preoccupied with eating—he ate like a starved man—and failed to notice his reaction. But 61 Cygni was a *star*, and not just any old star, either, but one which had become famous because there astronomers had ascertained the existence of an extra-solar planetary system. Oh, it hung together! The red diving-suit, against an alien atmosphere or alien disease germs; the color slides of which Watson kept such a big file, which showed scenes Dan hadn't recognized as being anywhere on Earth—and the man could come home (in a flash?) as calmly as from a walk around the block. *That* was the shocking part.

But you couldn't adjust to such a vast change in the world around you without time to consider the implications

calmly. Here, illegally in a stranger's home, was no place to try and figure it all out. He would have to probe, and prompt, and discreetly ask innocent-seeming questions, and the task was made doubly difficult because he simply didn't know how someone in the position Rainshaw automatically ascribed to him ought to react.

"How was it, this trip?" That should be innocent enough, surely.

"Interesting, but not very rewarding. The Earth-type planet of the system matches our gravity very closely, of course, so it's a convenient trip. But we're going to have to look a lot further afield for our friends who originated the signals. I think they're somewhere in towards the center of the galaxy. More than likely there's no one except ourselves in this whole area who's got so far."

Inspiration followed the words in Dan's mind; grasping at half-remembered information, he suggested, "You mean—we're sort of prematurely arrived on the scene?"

"Oh, I'm sure of it. It would probably have taken another million years of evolution if my old man hadn't chanced across the stardropper. Still, there's no shame in our getting there by a technical trick. That's always been our particular gift—gadgetry."

"There's definitely no one at home at—uh—Sixty-one?"

"Not so far as we can determine. The general level of evolution suggests Earth as it was half a million years ago, so it's hardly surprising." Rainshaw put his plate aside with a grunt of satisfaction. "Nothing to eat, either. We're allergic to just about the most basic protein-complex of the local life forms. Have to do something about that. Got a cigarette?"

Dan gave him one and lit it for him. "You're American?" Rainshaw said, puffing the first smoke. "How are things on your side?"

Dan thought wildly for a moment of the probable consequences of the news that was now blazoned across the papers. But he said, "Very quiet, compared with what they are here. I got into this through being slightly acquainted with Berghaus." No reason why dropping that particular

name shouldn't improve his precarious standing with Rainshaw. "But I'm a real novice to the whole thing. It just so happened that . . . You know I told you Wally Watson is dodging the press at the moment after what happened at the club; well, I'm doing the same, sort of, because I happened to be next to the guy who went out."

"A good one or a bad one? Who was it?"

A good one or a bad one? Dan fained to see the right answer for a second; then of course he knew. "A bad one, I'm afraid. Unmistakable. It was a man called Leon Patrick."

Rainshaw showed no sign of knowing him. He got up and went to turn off his tub, but returned at once, saying he would finish his cigarette before taking the bath. "You were right next to him?" he said. "Not comfortable, I imagine."

"Very uncomfortable. And annoying, too. Jack Neill was running a very interesting demonstration, and—"

He broke off. Rainshaw's pleasant face had changed completely. It hardened into a look of intense suspicion, and so did his voice.

"Who are you?" he said. "And what are you doing here?"

Stunned, Dan tried to re-hear what he had said and to decide what had given him away. He was still silent when Rainshaw made to rise, and in the act of rising disappeared.

Dan swung round. There he was, at the door, inspecting the lock and the alarms. He would find no sign of tampering, and so that was halfway all right. But his mind might leap to the open bedroom window giving access to the fire escape . . .

Rainshaw was gone again. And yes, he had thought of the window and was examining it. And he was back, confronting Dan from just beyond arm's reach, his eyes hard as stone.

"Well?" he said.

"Well, what?" Dan said. He had to play innocent for all he was worth; he was terrified, and not ashamed of the fact. How could anyone help it, suddenly faced with a man who could go *instantly* from one place to another and even, on his own statement, to the stars?

He saw a flicker of puzzlement break through Rainshaw's suspicion. Logic: a stranger and an outsider ought to have

been more obviously taken aback by that demonstration of teleporting. Dan's acting was proof against that, at least.

Seizing his chance, Dan said, "What's *wrong?* I was going to say that there was a Mrs. Towler there who got hysterical at the demonstration being called off, that's all."

"Why?"

"She thought she was going to . . ." *watch it!* ". . . go out too."

And success. The suspicion was going out of Rainshaw's eyes. Exploit it quickly, Dan told himself, and put on an injured expression.

"Did you think I was a—an outsider or something? Damn it, you just saw for yourself that the door is fast! And you can't imagine anyone walking up that escape in broad daylight, can you? For pity's sake, calm down."

"I'm sorry," Rainshaw said, and knocked ash off his cigarette. "It was what you said about Neill's demonstration that worried me for a moment."

"What?" *What was the actual word?* "Calling it interesting, you mean?"

"Yes." Rainshaw sat down slowly, his hostility fading but latent. He kept on staring at Dan. "There can't have been any more to it than there ever is to a club demonstration. And least of all at Club Cosmica. Only the signals matter. Nothing else."

Dan's mind raced past that, and he took another gamble. He said, "Well, the Mrs. Towlers of the world aren't to know that, are they?"

"This hysterical woman you mentioned? If she was really going to go out she'd have known by then!" Again the doubtful note in the voice. Dan cursed himself for being too clever.

As smoothly as possible, he said, "Ah, but she'll be a bad one if she ever does go out."

His head was threatening to spin with the illusion that he was playing some kind of childish game of forfeits, instead of fencing in a deadly serious duel of words. However,

quick improvisation seemed to have saved him so far. He began to relax.

Too soon. But there was nothing on earth he could do.

For there was Watson standing behind Rainshaw's chair, more suddenly than a conjuring trick.

A long second ticked away, while Dan thought of the way Watson had summed up Patrick's disappearance—denying that he was a callous man, and yet using such a ruthless turn of phrase as an epitaph for the vanished man that Dan had been shocked.

Well, he was trapped. And you couldn't run away from a man who could interpose himself instantly between you and your way of escape.

But he desperately wanted to try.

"How did you get in here, Cross?" Watson said in a mild enough tone, but with his narrowed eyes menacing. Rainshaw stood up.

"Then he's not a friend of yours? Not one of us?"

"No," Watson said shortly. "He's an American, posing as a novice stardropper fan, who turned up two or three days ago." (So short a while? It felt like an age.) "But there must be more to him than that. Well—Cross?"

Rainshaw looked almost comically crestfallen. He said, "I talked too freely, Wally. When I found him here I naturally assumed . . ."

"Couldn't be helped." Watson brushed the apology aside. He looked agitated, and his manner was brusque. The phone began to ring insistently; he shot a glance at it and Dan saw that the attention switch moved in, twice, making and then breaking the connection.

Oh, God. He can move things at a distance, too . . .

"I warn you!" Watson said, his patience snapped by the ring of the phone. "I want to know who you are—whether you're dangerous or just nosy. And quickly. I assure you I could pick you up without touching you and hang you a hundred feet over the street if I had to, and since you're heavy I'd get tired and you wouldn't have much time before I had to let you drop. Do you want me to prove it?"

Rainshaw made to voice an objection; Watson glared at him.

"All right," he said to Dan after a pause. "I'll prove it to you."

There was a kind of snatching sensation—not a feeling that someone had taken hold of him, but that all of his body was being moved, like the express-elevator feeling but acting *sideways*. By reflex, Dan resisted, and for a moment he was seeing blackness.

Blackness? Not just the lack of sight caused by blinking, though it lasted no longer than a blink lasts, but blackness of an intensity he had never imagined: *dazzling* blackness. His eyes stung. His whole skin felt as though it had been pounded with tingling wet leather straps. There was a straining tension in his ears, and he *had* to exhale as though he had been punched in the belly. His sinuses hurt like blazes, and added to the stinging of his eyes.

But he had seen something in the blackness, very sharply thrown into relief, like a fantastically over-exposed photograph. He had seen a shape like a spread-eagled man.

And all this happened so quickly he had no time to be puzzled by it before there was light again, and he found he was not facing Watson and Rainshaw. He was behind them, on the other side of the room, and they were just turning to each other with expressions of blank amazement.

"But he can!" Rainshaw said, and then, seeing where Dan was, swung to look at him, and changed the words. "But you *can!*"

XII

INTO THE frozen tableau the phone-bell stabbed again, like a dagger of brilliant sound. Watson stopped it without even looking towards the instrument. He said, "I think—"

And broke off, putting his hands to his forehead.

Rainshaw, not less taken aback, said, "But I thought that was *impossible*, because I'll swear that was a first time, and no one has ever gone out for the first time when not actually listening to a 'dropper!"

Watson rocked back and forward on his heels. He said, "I think this man is an exception. An exception to everything. Cross, Cross, for pity's sake *who the hell are you?*"

Dan wiped tears from his tortured eyes. He did not understand. He did not know how it was he had gone from where he had been facing Watson to here, the other side of the room; he did not know the meaning of the vision of darkness that had seemed to punctuate his journey. And all that mattered now was that Watson and Rainshaw apparently did know what this crazy pattern added up to.

He shivered, as though belatedly responding to a gust of ice-cold wind, and said wearily, "I'm an operative of the UN's Special Agency."

Rainshaw gave a humorless chuckle. Glancing at Watson, he said, "I guess we're lucky at that. Rather him than that

little rat Ferrers from the Blue Front, or any other of those amateur spies."

Watson took no notice. He said, "And you're really a star-dropper fan, or just using that as cover?"

"I was given a stardropper by my chief last Friday. I never more than dabbled before then."

"Then all I can say is you've set a record for speed of assimilation which is perfectly incredible." Watson was recovering his poise. "Maybe a predispostion, Robin? Ferrers and people like him won't make it, or if they do they'll lose their narrow-minded views; they can't go together."

Rainshaw bit his lip. Now the first panic reaction was past, Dan felt he was being regarded like a natural curiosity. He burst out. "Will you, for God's sake, tell me what this is all about?"

Watson hesitated. "What happened when you went from here to there just now?" he said.

Dan told him briefly.

"Right," Watson said with an air of satisfaction. "No one could have dreamed *that* up without seeing it. Fantastic chance that you should have happened to see one of the failures . . ."

"Failures?"

Watson nodded. "Perhaps it was even Leon Patrick, poor devil. Though the point must have shifted—no, more likely it was someone we don't know about who went out near here a little while ago. They're coming thick and fast now; it looks as if the news of Patrick's going out was all that was needed to tip a lot of people past the point of incredulity and let them cut loose." He looked suddenly tired and sad, and gestured to Rainshaw.

"Look, I'm in a hell of a state. Explain things to him, will you?"

Rainshaw, not taking his eyes off Dan, licked his lips and nodded. He sat down by feel in a nearby chair. Conscious of near-exhaustion, Dan copied him.

"All right," Rainshaw said, "Well, just now you went out. That's to say, you found yourself at a particular point between

here and the sun—in empty space—where the gravitational potential is equivalent to that here in this room. Through luck, or subconscious realization of what had happened, you were able to come back before much harm was done. But I see your eyes are watering, and you came back gasping like a stranded fish, and you'd be bloody well advised to go to a chemist's shop and get a heavy dose of Radinox or some reliable anti-radiation drug. And a broad spectrum antibiotic as well, in case any of your tolerated bacteria have been mutated. But you've got two or three hours' leeway; in fact, you're better off than you would have been if you'd gone there in a spaceship, because the primary cosmics just went through you as though you weren't there and inside a ship you'd have stopped a lot of slow secondaries . . . Hell, I'm rambling!"

Dan sat numbly waiting for sense to emerge from what Rainshaw was saying.

"That's what happens to the bad cases, as we call them. A person "goes out' to the point-of-equivalence for an excellent reason: it's easier to aim for than another place on the surface of the Earth, and it has the attraction of being a spectacular trip, too. Accurate aiming close up takes practice; out there, there's nothing to crash into and accuracy follows automatically from the least-resistance principle.

"Then a bad case panics, or fails to understand what has happened, and dies. There's no helping him. I wish there were. A good case—like yourself—recovers, comes back, and by simple reflex balances the accounts of energy involved. Think for a moment and you'll see that someone who goes out quietly has exchanged places with an equivalent volume of air. You did that, over-elaborating slightly because you took a long way round. But there was scarcely a whisper of sound during it. You're *good*—or you're going to be, once you've practiced enough!"

"But I don't know what I did or how I've done it!" Dan protested.

Watson pointed at him, a light seeming to dawn on him. He said, "I think I have it. If there's one thing everyone

knows about the Special Agency—from TV and movies—it's that the operatives have a personal-association code, every one tailored to the individual. Is this true?"

"Yes, but I don't see—"

"And it's hypnotically locked away from consciousness?"

"Except when it's triggered. *But I don't see—*"

"This makes sense," Watson said. "A code like that, and the fact that memory of it was circulating in your subconscious mind, would free you from the worst tyranny of language, and short-circuit the biggest obstacle most people meet in trying to understand stardropper signals. Human knowledge is transmitted in words—arbitrary labels chosen by others than the user. Even neologisms are made up of spare parts, so to speak—not truly originated. But a personal association-code has reference to the user's real, remembered experience. That's halfway to the basic condition on which you must understand stardropper signals. They aren't labels. They're analogues. They correspond to real experience on a one-for-one basis."

"Then why can't people comprehend them immediately?" Dan demanded. "Why can a—" He thought of Lilith: *So that's what happened to her; lucky kid to go out quietly and therefore presumably survive.* "Why can a school kid succeed and an adult fail?"

"Fewer preconceptions is the shortest answer, and also one of the least accurate," Watson replied. "Partly: the experience they correspond to is, in everyday human terms, impossible; and partly: one man plus one stardropper is like one fisherman trying to catch *only* one sort of fish in an ocean that contains a thousand species, all hungry."

"The cocktail party factor," Dan said.

"That's exactly what we call it," Watson said with some respect. Dan decided not to say how he knew that already. "If you lose the right thread of information, out of lack of concentration or ignorance of the rules, you wind up insane, or dead."

"And otherwise?"

"You may make no sense of the signals at all; you may be

tantalized forever by a suggestion of meaning, a hint of sense, which you never formulate properly. Or you may pick out and keep hold of one strong, clear sequence of signals long enough to acquire the vicarious experience which shows you how to carry out the corresponding action."

Dan remembered Angel's phrase. "Tell me how it feels to ride a bicycle." Angel was probably going to make it if she had formed that close an analogy. He wondered in passing whether she knew what had become of Robin and was trying to follow him, or whether she had given him up for lost.

"The clearest and strongest signals," Watson went on didactically, "presumably come from the most highly evolved minds. Now, as Jerry Bartlett was saying last night, evolution is a question of improving the degree of control over the environment. The commonest talent to learn first from stardropper signals is teleportation, and telekinesis associated with it. Because control of environment is also control of probability. I *can't* put the actual mechanism into words for you; it doesn't belong in words, and that's why you have to learn it through a medium like the stardropper. But that's what it is. There is a vanishingly small statistical likelihood that a given particle might be elsewhere than where it is observed to be. This can only be observed on a microcosmic scale—or could only be, till now.

"You must take it for granted that control of one's location by an act of will is the terminal point of a continuous sequence which begins with the manipulation of tools, the planting of seeds in spring against a harvest in autumn, and the laying of plans for future events. Not to be able to verbalize it doesn't matter. We used fire for untold generations before anyone formulated a theory of combustion, and the early theories were wrong, anyway."

"But, it takes energy to go from place to place!" Dan said. "And to go to a *star* . . .!"

Rainshaw cleared his throat. "I let that slip," he said apologetically.

Watson shrugged. "Fallacy," he said succinctly. "Grant

that teleportation-telekinesis represents a high point of evolution, regarding *that* as progress towards control of environment and including control over the events experienced, and I'll show you where you're wrong.

"Imagine a planet as smooth as a billiard ball and totally airless—yes? Now imagine an object—a satellite—one millemeter above the perfectly smooth, level surface. In orbit! Is there any reason why it shouldn't continue for ever without expending energy? I mean, in ideal space. Forget about the other bodies in the universe."

"In orbit at one millimeter! But—yes, all right," Dan frowned.

"At point A on its orbit, it has the same potential energy as when it reaches point B, doesn't it? But that it's in orbit is purely incidental. I'm merely giving a vivid illustration of an easy-to-overlook fact. The return of a body to a former state of potential energy is essentially no different from its continuation in that same state. The energy account balances, and that's what matters. Hence you yourself went to the equipotential point between here and the sun, and returned, and expended the following energy: *one*, that consumed by your mental processes in making an act of will, and *two*, that consumed owing to the difference in mass between your body and the air with which you exchanged places. So long as there is inertia you can't avoid that. But since you're accustomed to moving—what?—a hundred and seventy pounds, by the look of you, every time you take a step, you didn't give it a second thought.

"There are points on the surface of planets throughout the universe to which one can go—or we shall be able to, after practice and experiment—as easily as stepping across a room. An animal doesn't know how it converts food into energy, but can run regardless. We'll figure out the mechanics of it later; meantime, we're better occupied doing it."

"Most of it follows from the Berghausian continuum," Rainshaw said diffidently. "Actual instantaneity, previous action, separation without distance—"

"I was getting that!" Dan said, thunderstruck. "At Neill's

demonstration! I was fumbling after this when Patrick went out and I was interrupted!"

Watson nodded. "I thought so. And probably you'll find that this whole area of your subconscious memory which is full of your memorized association-code has been working on the logical consequences. Everybody knows about this—scientists do it, creative thinkers of all kinds. It's what's usually called sleeping on an idea. Do you think you could go out now?"

"I—I'm not sure. Weren't you threatening to lift me off my feet when it happened? If you'd started, perhaps that was what made it possible." Dan put his hands to his head; there was a kind of grinding, earthquake-like sensation going on in his brain, as all his personal perspectives shifted to accommodate new facts. You could walk to the stars. There really were alien intelligences. There really were supernatural—no, natural talents. And, this being true, the world was a different place. His reactions had to change. He had feared and hated these men a few minutes ago. Now it all seemed so petty he wanted to forget it.

Odd that the phone had not rung again.

Why on earth should that cross his mind when there were fifty other questions burning his tongue? He said, "And you—well, I saw you arrive, so I know you have the talent. Why are you a store manager? Why don't you—?"

"You had the answer last night," Watson said, with a smile. "You just didn't realize how true it was. Through the Club Cosmica and its sixteen other branches I'm in contact with better than three thousand stardropper fans, from serious experimenters down to sensation-seeking kids. The store itself has an international reputation and an international trade. It's purely practical!"

"I see. I guess it must be, at that. And" . . . Something Rainshaw had said crossed his mind. " . . . the demonstrations and so on are just a way of bringing particularly informative signals to people's attention?"

"Not exactly. They're a way of studying—not the signals but the audiences."

The buzzer on the door sounded. Watson glanced at Rainshaw.

"See you later?" he said under his breath. Rainshaw nodded and vanished. Dan felt his stomach turn over; it would take a long time to adjust to this casual attitude.

"I think," Watson said meditatively, getting to his feet, "that that is a police man I know. In view of your work with the Special Agency, I imagine you very possibly know him, too."

"Redvers?" Dan said.

"That's right." Watson was walking towards the door. Dan saw with another twinge of restrained alarm that Rainshaw's red suit had gone from its place under his very eyes. "I would have mentioned—except that we've not had time—that I went out for a purpose this morning. I think we've just made it. We've had to be savage; I wish we hadn't. But we have made out—with perhaps some small margin of safety." He was talking to himself rather than Dan as he opened the door.

Standing back, he said, "Hello, Hugo. Come on in."

XIII

Two THOUGHTS occurred to Dan as Redvers came in—apparently unrelated, but in their different ways significant. First: *he called him Hugo, and I didn't know they knew each other.* Second: *maybe it always happens like this, but one thinks of the crucial decisions being made in palaces and council chambers, not in the private apartment of a wealthy bachelor.*

Redvers looked at Watson with burning eyes and strode into the room. He carried a portfolio, which he hurled into the seat of a chair. He glowered at Dan, but said nothing.

Watson came back from closing the door.

"Well, Wally, I suppose you're pretty pleased with yourself?" Redvers said at last in a dead voice. "How did you get him on your side?"

"I did nothing," Watson said. "He went out. He did it for himself."

Redvers shrugged and lowered himself wearily to a seat. He said, "Well, what the hell am I asking for, anyway? We haven't got much longer. Seventy-two hours, at the outside."

And then his forced apathy broke apart and his real passion flooded into his face and voice. "Jesus *God!*" he almost screamed at Watson. "Do you realize what you've

done by this *lunacy*? And do you know what he was doing all this morning?" he added, swinging to face Dan. "I'll tell you! The bastard has been amusing himself at the expense of our lives, vanishing and re-appearing under people's eyes! Fleet Street! Piccadilly! Lime Grove television studios! The Bull Ring in Birmingham! Piccadilly in Manchester!"

"And Fifth Avenue, and Red Square, and the Boulevard Mao-Tse-tung in Peking, and a few other places," Watson said as calmly as though describing a world cruise. "But I wasn't by myself, of course. There were over fifty of us working together. I couldn't have done it by myself, Hugo. Not in the time available. If I tried to go from here directly to the street, I'd be just as smashed up as if I'd jumped; the other way, it's as exhausting as running upstairs full pelt."

His face crumbling with incredulous dismay, Redvers said, "It's driven you out of your mind. What you've done seems to amuse you. I suppose now you've got your godlike powers, the idea is you can stir up us ordinary mortals like a man kicking an ants' nest to watch the ants run about and panic. You, Cross!" He shifted his gaze. "What do you think the results are going to be?"

Dan got slowly to his feet, so appalled he could barely speak. He said, "It *is* lunacy! Why—well, this must have been calculated to drive people crazy with fear. It makes a mockery of international frontiers, of all security, secrecy and even personal privacy. Did you say seventy-two hours? I doubt if we'll have more than twelve! At first it'll be disbelieved; then people will begin to wonder if it could possibly be true, because if it is and the other side have the power it may already be too late to take action—and they'll take action out of sheer fright!"

He looked accusingly at Watson. "Are you deliberately stampeding the world into war?"

Watson took a cigarette from a box on a table near him, but he didn't light it. He held it thoughtfully between finger and thumb, looking down at it. After a pause he said, "That's the general idea, of course."

"You are insane," Dan said, his mouth going dry. "Did

you know that this very moment there is nuclear potential equivalent to—?"

"A hundred sixty tons of TNT for everyone on Earth," Watson said in a bored tone. "It was only eighty tons a decade ago. Yes, yes. And enough bacterial toxins to kill everyone about three times. And enough chemical weapons to do the same job about another four times. I read the papers."

"Cross, for God's sake!" Redvers said. "Isn't there anything that can be done to stop what this maniac has started?"

There was a curious empty feeling in Dan's guts. He had to shake his head.

And yet Watson remained quite composed, toying with his unlit cigarette. He said, "So you didn't get what you thought you did out of the stardropper—is that the sum of it, Hugo?"

Redvers crushed the heels of his hands against his temples, as though to hurt himself and convince himself this was actually happening.

"What's that?" Dan said.

"Out of the stardropper," Redvers said in a choking voice. "Damned crazy nonsense. I've been a fool. You were all I ever got out of a stardropper, Cross—know that? I wasn't so clever I could be waiting for a Special Agency man the moment he came off the plane. I knew about you beforehand, out of the stardropper I used to have. Grey—remember him? I based him on the way I damned nearly got to be. I had this one piece of comprehensible news, that a big cross man was going to come out of the west and bring the answer to the problem. When we saw your name on the plane's passenger list we checked up. Then we got who you were by other means."

He beat his closed fist into his palm. "I thought for a while the Special Agency was the answer. Only you were too damned late. This crazy idiot has done what he set out to do and the whole world is going to be smashed to bits and us along with it."

Dan thought of hardened missile sites pitting the world

like the sores of some disease, of submarines on patrol with still more missiles, of all the orbital hardware like spy satellites . . . He found himself incongruously grateful that Antarctica had been made neutral territory so long ago; apart from the South Pole there was nowhere on this little planet where you could safely launch a rocket into orbit with a nuclear warhead, because there was no such thing as an utterly safe rocket, and that alone had ensured that there were no bombs actually overhead.

But what the heck was the difference, anyway? There was plenty of margin to play with.

And yet a tiny itch of doubt remained at the back of his mind. Thinking he might be clutching at a straw, he looked at Watson. No—a maniac surely might be calm, but could he be so sardonically amused? And if Redvers had spoken truth . . .

Watson, holding his cigarette before him with his elbow on the side of his chair, said meditatively, "If you hadn't lost heart, Hugo, and had yourself proofed against star-dropping, you might not be so abjectly miserable now. I figured out, too, from what you told me that this man Cross probably held the answer. I admit I didn't see what it was until a little while ago when he did something rather spectacular and unprecedented, and then told me who he is. Have *you* worked it out yet, Cross? Or are you still stuck where poor Hugo is, in a morass of pointless despair?"

A spark of wordless hope flickered up in Dan's mind. But he could not bring himself to speak.

"Look!" Watson said in a commanding tone, and held the cigarette out at arm's length.

It disappeared.

"There are a practical infinity of points in the universe," Watson said didactically, "where the gravitational potential corresponds to that at a given point. There is positively nothing easier than to distribute a small object's constituent particles among a number of those points. Compared with sending the object to a particular destination it's literally no trouble."

"A small object," Dan said. "But a fairly massive one?"

"Exactly." Watson smiled. No, this wasn't a maniac. This was a man with so much common sense you automatically didn't believe it. Dan smiled back. He couldn't help it.

"What the hell are you grinning like an ape for?" Redvers said hysterically.

"Didn't you see that cigarette vanish?" Dan said shortly. "Go on, Watson. Spell it out."

"First tell me this," Watson answered. "I've been assuming that if anybody knows where it all is, the Special Agency does. Am I right?"

"I can tell you myself, down to a mile or two, where every hardened missile site, every major stockpile of bacterial and chemical weapons, and every troop concentration of more than a thousand men is located. My information is correct up to about eight days ago, when I last checked. You are, of course, not supposed to know that I know; the Special Agency has more such information than any single national organization. It has to."

"The submarines will be the problem," Watson suggested.

"Yes—but they'll need orders from somewhere. I think the trick would be to put out the transmitters at the various bases; I know all those too. They're of special importance because some of the submarines carry thirty rockets and could by themselves wipe out Europe." Dan's mind was racing. "It's going to be damned difficult!"

"What do you expect?" Watson said with sudden vehemence. "We've been at this business for a generation or so—plenty of time to make it *impossible* to save the world! Do you remember what I was saying as I went to let Hugo in? I said I thought we'd just barely managed it."

"How many are there?" Dan said. He had almost said: *of us.*

"Oh, three hundred at least, and more coming in all the time." Watson chuckled. "Our best recruits come from the government-organized projects of both East and West—it's the first thing that you get out of a stardropper, even before concrete information. The knowledge that in a universe

full of who knows how many other intelligent life forms this is one small pebble and it's *too* small to contain narrow local loyalties."

Dan gave a sudden burst of laughter with little real amusement in it. He said, "I wonder how they're going to react."

Already he was thinking in terms of *they* and *we*. And yet that was wrong. Not already, but always. That was why men had set up organizations like the Special Agency—to combat the mysterious *they*, always someone else somewhere else, who did cruel, stupid, dangerous things.

Watson turned to Redvers. "Are you with us yet?" he said.

Face buried in his hands, Redvers shook his head.

"Oh, for—!" said Watson. "Listen, Hugo! Didn't it occur to you that this was the first useful purpose we thought of to apply our new talents to? We've been working on it for months! I'm already certain that there isn't going to be a war—not a nuclear war, anyway—because all today, since the news of Patrick's disappearance made it certain there would be a crisis, we've been working that little trick I showed you with my cigarette. Only we've been working it on plutonium cores in H-bombs, and botulinus toxin, and military bacteria, and small but crucial objects like the remote-controlled switches which actuate the firing-circuits in missiles. Three hundred really determined people with skill—this kind of skill!—and above-average intelligence can do a great deal in a short time."

He turned to Dan and beckoned.

"Come on," he said. "I want to check up on whether we've missed out anything really important. We probably have, so we shall have to hurry."

The second time, Dan found, it was really incredibly easy.

And eventually, of course, there would be the stars.

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