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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

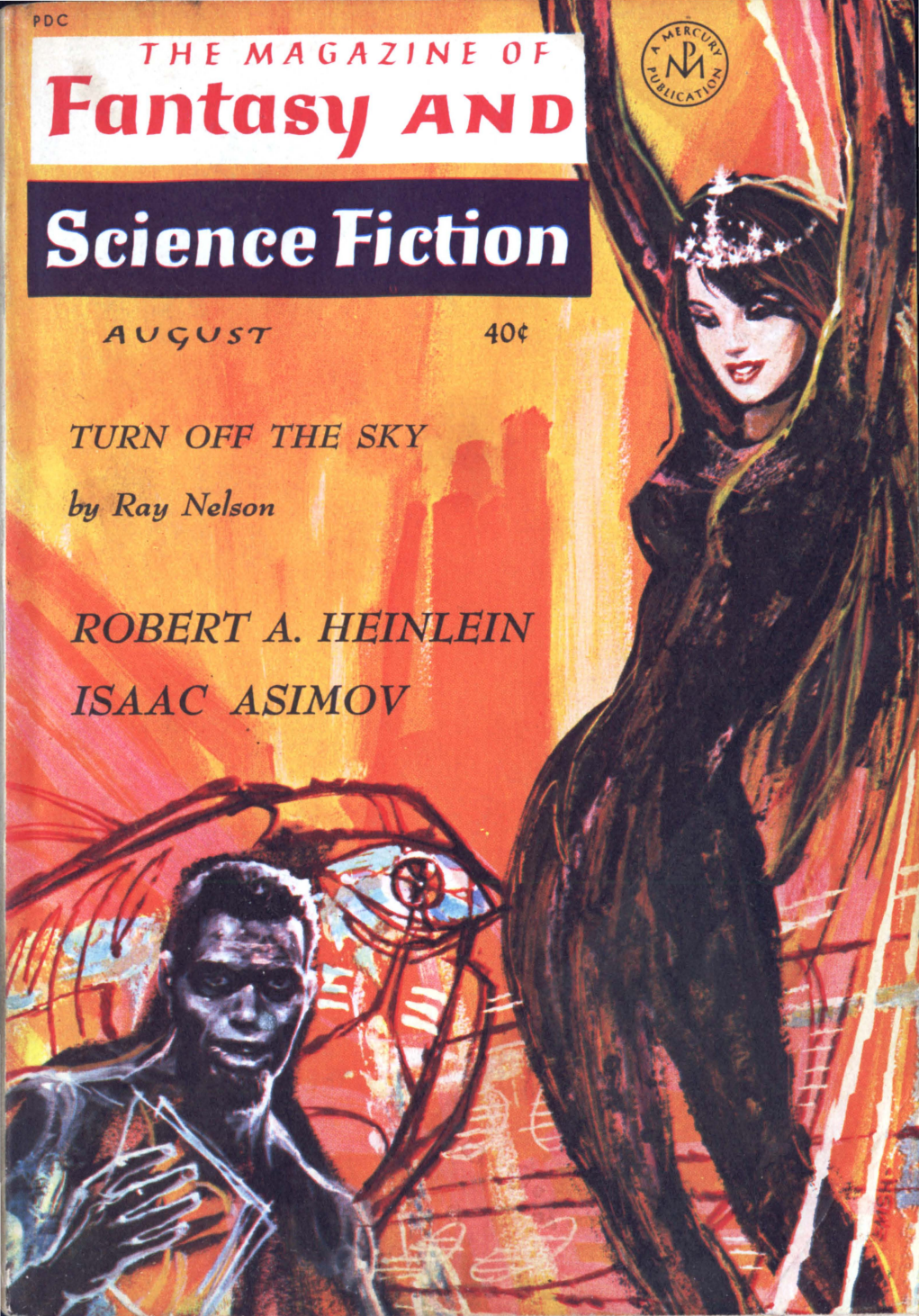
AUGUST 40¢

TURN OFF THE SKY

by Ray Nelson

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

ISAAC ASIMOV



Fantasy and Science Fiction

AUGUST *Including Venture Science Fiction*

Cover by Emsh (illustrating "Turn Off The Sky")

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 25, No. 2, Whole No. 147, Aug. 1963. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc., at 40¢ a copy. Annual subscription $4.50; $5.00 in Canada and the Pan American Union; $5.50 in all other countries. Publication office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. Editorial and general mail should be sent to 347 East 53rd St., New York 22, N. Y. Second Class postage paid at Concord, N. H. Printed in U. S. A.

In this issue . . .

. . . is the second part of **ROBERT A. HEINLEIN**'s three-part novel, *GLORY ROAD*: in which Oscar, his Lady, and his Squire face the infinite danger of the Never-Born in their quest for that puissant and precious article called the Egg of the Phoenix. Sharing the plupart of this issue with the Master is **RAY NELSON,** who enters, however, not as Apprentice but as a clearly accomplished Fellow of the Craft, in a short novel quite unlike anything we have published before. Also making a first appearance is our experimental LETTERS COLUMN—shall it appear again? What say you? **TP CARAVAN** offers a short, funny piece; **CALVIN W. DEMMON** returns with another fancy; and the roster of fictions is completed with the story of this number's second newcomer, **PAUL JAY ROBBINS,** about the dangers of nigromantic metamorphoses.

Coming soon . . .

. . . is our first exemplum of modern Austrian SF—Dr. **HERBERT FRANKE**'s *The Man Who Feared Robots.* For the many who like stories about things found in dusty old shops, we have such a one by **TERRY CARR;** do not expect, however, anything quaint or cute or fey from *Touchstone.* And, Your Servant To Command, after some absence, returns to the story pages of his favorite Magazine with *Faed-Out,* a tale of old and new Hollywood. Be sure to watch for our October All Star issue. **ALFRED BESTER** and **ZENNA HENDERSON** will be on hand, both with new novelets.

Introduction to Ray Nelson's TURN OFF THE SKY

This story came to our attention four years ago and we have been waiting for the chance to print it. It is the author's first sale and we are as proud of it as he is. Asked to supply some information about himself, Ray Nelson says, "I know the kind of thing they have in blurbs. 'Ray Nelson has been a . . .' and there follows a list of occupations as long as your arm, demonstrating the author's breadth of experience and inability to hold a steady job. I could write one of those, all right, because I, too, have never been able to hold a steady job for long. I have been a silk screen printer, sign writer, cartoonist, IBM machine programmer and operator, Great Books salesman, fork-lift truck operator, beatnik poet (one slender book of Poems published, entitled, Perdita: *songs of love, sex, and self-pity), movie extra, Abstract Expressionist, interior decorator (with a paint mixing stick in one hand and a bottle of Jack Daniels in the other), Dixieland banjo player, folknik guitar player and singer, bum, and etc. As to education, I have a BA in liberal arts from the University of Chicago and an Operation and Wiring Certificate for IBM machines from the Automation Institute of Chicago, I have also attended briefly the Art Institute of Chicago, and The Sorbonne; and have lived in or visited all the states in the original 48, plus Canada, Mexico, England, and all the nations of free Europe. I am married to a [beautiful—Ed.] Norwegian girl named Kirsten, whom I met while living in Paris and writing TURN OFF THE SKY. We have a four-year old son named Walter and live peacefully on unemployment checks in El Cerrito, California. I was born Oct. 31, 1931, in New York, have brown hair and eyes, am a little overweight but planning to fast a week or so to get back to normal (have been overindulging myself in the Good Things of Life, like my wife's Norwegian cooking). Also I don't get much exercise these days, sitting in front of the typewriter all day long staring at a blank sheet of paper trying to think of something clever." If Mr. Nelson's just-completed novel of beatnik life in Chicago is anything like his story here, his last phrase is much too modest. The story is quite unlike anything you have ever read, and—but, then, you haven't read it yet, have you? Do so immediately.*

TURN OFF THE SKY

by Ray Nelson

As usual, Abelard Rosenburg came to the party stark naked except for a briefcase full of left-wing propaganda and two coats of paint below. The paint was a beautiful ice blue, forming a striking contrast to his black skin and still blacker beard. He stood in the doorway of the little bookstore a moment, silhouetted against the blazing artificial aurora borealis in the sky; then when a few people had dutifully greeted him, he entered and opened his briefcase.

"Share my burden?" he asked a young ballet dancer, handing her a thick fistful of printed and mimeographed sheets.

"Thank you just the same," said the dancer, "but I don't read that sort of thing. I'm sure it's all very nice and all, but I am sort of anti-political."

"So am I," said Abelard. "Nobody could be more anti-political than me."

"Do you belong to the Anti-Political Party?"

"Worse than that. I am an anarchist."

The ballet dancer shook her head, purple pony tail swinging behind her.

"I'm sorry, honey, but I don't know that word. What's an anarchist?" she asked.

"It is someone who is opposed to the state."

"How can you be opposed to the state? If there wasn't any state to give us food, how could we eat? If there wasn't any state to build houses, where would we live? Gee, honey, you can't be serious." She turned her round vacant eyes on him and stuck out her lower lip.

"I define the state as an armed body of men," he said, "distinguished from other organizations by its four particular functions: cops, courts, jails and taxes. Society does not need to rely on coercion to function. All man's needs are supplied by cybernetic machines which function perfectly well without any human intervention, let alone government supervision."

"Well, perhaps that is true," she said, "but if there were no government, what would keep people from murdering each other and stealing each other's property?"

He raised a finger skyward. "The need to steal and murder no longer exists. There is more than enough of everything for everyone.

Nobody needs to take from someone else."

She frowned, trying her best to think.

"Well, that's true enough of some things, like food and clothing and housing, but let's say I have a certain painting, a Boris Lee original, and someone else wants it," she postulated brightly.

"You could work out an arrangement with that person to lend the painting part time, or better yet, if you both liked the painting that much, you'd have enough in common to live together."

"Live together? What about that, now?" she considered, "What about crimes of passion?" She rolled the word "passion" off the tip of her tongue like a delicious drop of old French wine.

"That's the job of education. Passion is just an excuse the square gives to his conscience for enjoying the sexual pleasures he wants even though his religion tells him it is wrong." His grin was all teeth.

"Education? Honey, you know you can't change human nature." To her, this seemed beyond all dispute.

"That's not true. There was a time, long ago, when I would have been a social outcast—to be hunted, hated—even killed."

Her owl eyes grew wider still.

"You? Hated? Why it just wouldn't be possible to have a party without good old Abelard. Why would anyone hate you?" she asked, amazed.

"First of all, I am a Negro."

"So what?"

"Second, I am a Jew."

"You actually still go to church and all that stuff?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I am an atheist."

"What's that?"

"It means I don't believe in God."

"Oh." She frowned again and rubbed her nose with her purple fingernail.

"And being an anarchist alone might at one time have gotten me thrown in jail."

She crossed her arms on her chest and thrust out her chin.

"So what's the point?" she said.

"Just this . . . all these powerful forms of passion . . . hate, prejudice, religious and political intolerance, have been destroyed by education. Sexual passion is next to go."

"Somehow," said the little dancer, blinking her false eyelashes, "I think I'd rather keep the state than give up sex."

"You won't have to give up sex. Just the possessive forms of it, like marriage and the family. The race will be propagated by Universal Free Love." He spread his arms expansively.

She thought for a moment.

"Gee, that might be all right for the far distant future, but

could we have free love right now?" she asked.

"Certainly. Right now!" he said,

The dancer closed her eyes, tilted back her head, and whispered huskily, "Show me!"

"Right here," said Abelard, thrusting a mimeographed pamphlet into her hand, "It tells all about it in here."

The conversation lagged a little after that, and the dancer wandered off with a bald, bitter Ancient Texts Translator, reputed to be familiar even with the forgotten language of Denmark. It seems that even he had finally become technologically unemployed.

Abelard followed half-heartedly, pushing his way through the crowd, until they went into the back room. As Abelard was about to go in he met the alcoholic poet, Dean Natkin, coming out.

"You don't want to go in there without a woman," said Dean drunkenly. "They are all making sex in there. Going at it like mad minks."

Dean took Abelard by the arm and led him toward an improvised bar in the part of the bookstore called the "Old Smokey Reading Room." A jazz fan was sprawled on the floor in one corner, idly picking out Anglo-Indian jazz riffs on an old sitar while another jazzman of the "cool" or 43-tones-to-the-octave school looked on with annoyance.

"It's not that I drink, mind you," said Dean, pouring himself a fresh drink, "but I *appreciate* liquor."

Abelard politely declined a drink and reached into his briefcase for a handful of literature.

"Share my burden?" he queried, handing a fistful of publications to the unimpressed Dean.

"You're the anarchist fellow, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You are against being in the army, eh?"

"That's right."

"I can see why," Dean reflected, "All you get in the Army is a lot of little badges pinned all over you, and that might be painful to a fellow who dresses the way you do."

With that Dean downed another rum, drooling slightly on his black cape. The two jazzmen had begun to argue quite seriously the opposition of the spontaneous jazz of India vs. the intellectual 43-toned jazz of America.

"I read an interesting fact today," said Dean. "I say, do you know that what lice feed on is blood? I had an idea . . ."

He downed another glass and reached again for the bottle.

The argument in the corner was becoming quite violent. A small crowd had begun to gather to watch. The little ballet dancer came out of the back room buttoning up her blue jeans and joined the crowd.

"You think drink is bad," continued Dean. "You ought to see the chaps who take dope. There are quite a few here tonight. I wouldn't want to name names, but some of them play 'cool' jazz. They say even the President of the United World Government is on the needle. Nothing else to do, eh what? They had to make it legal when they found more than half the world's population were taking it. I heard one of them walk into a drug store the other day and say, 'Give me a bottle of Codeine, please. Don't bother to wrap it. I'll drink it here.' That's a hot one, what?—'I'll drink it here!' "

"Look, dad," screamed the cool jazzman. "Like that Raga sound is nowhere. It just don't make it. Like this open fifth drone is just too piercing, you know what I mean?"

"All the poets smoke marijuana, you know," continued Dean. "I heard a commercial on the feelies last night about it. 'For real, deep down inspiration, smoke POT, P-O-T, POT, the international joy smoke.' "

"This cookie has the word for you, dad," yelled the jazzman, "and you just better believe it."

The man with the sitar went on, idly whanging out his little riffs with a swinging 5/7 beat.

"The other day," said Dean quietly, "a fellow who was on the needle came into a United Buddhist-Christian church . . . they are very progressive, you know . . . they say they take the best from all the world faiths, but they really only believe in keeping their state subsidy . . . anyway, this junkie came into the church and told his story to the minister. The minister listened to the whole thing with his best bedside manner and when it was finished, you know what the minister said? He said, 'Do you really think this is the Best Approach to the Problems of Life?' "

"You want to make the scene, honey?" the cool jazzman snarled at the sitar player, who just kept on playing as if he were deaf. "You want to make some real sounds? Lemme show you where the real sounds come from!" He whipped out a leather case, opened it, and extracted a beautiful hypodermic needle, decorated with golden *Lingam* and *yoni* and precious jewels.

"There's a lot of queers here tonight, too, I suppose you noticed." Dean droned. "That one over there that looks like a boy isn't queer, though, but she tries. She was taking Lesbianism One and Two at Yale, but never quite passed her finals."

Abelard could not take his eyes off the needle. He felt paralyzed, hypnotized, by the points of light dancing and leaping over its jewelled sides. The sitar player spoke softly.

"Put that thing away," he said.

"This take toooooo much for you, honey?"

"I don't like that stuff. It's habit-forming."

"No lie? Is that the true word?"

The little ballet dancer squealed, "Look, he's scared!"

The crowd moved in closer, excited now.

"We go my way or we don't go at all. Isn't that right, cats?" said the cool jazzman.

The crowd was with him. If there was anyone present who didn't like dope or cool jazz, he was careful to keep it to himself.

"He's a coward," said the translator.

"A square," said an abstract painter.

"Hey," said Abelard, "what . . ."

"Shut up, friend," said Dean. "You want to get us both killed?"

"Why not try a little?" asked the jazzman, coaxingly. "Come on, the first time is hard but after that it's easy. It's so good you just can't put it down."

"No, thanks. I think I'll just run on home . . ." said the sitar player uncertainly.

The crowd was like a solid stone wall blocking his escape.

"Everyone said she was a real butch," said Dean, downing another rum, "but I knew better. 'She isn't gay,' I said, 'she's just neurotic.'"

"What are they going to do?" whispered Abelard.

"What else can they do but stick him? Sure you won't have a little drink?"

"No, I . . ."

The sitar player tried to get to his feet, but the balding translator shoved him back. Abelard tried to go to help him but found Dean holding him back with arms of iron. The ballet dancer giggled hysterically and put her sandaled foot through the sound-box of the sitar. The jazzman moved in like a cobra, poisoned fang poised to strike.

"Look," whispered Dean, "I thought you were a nonviolent anarchist! There's nothing you . . ."

The sitar player screamed in terror as the crowd moved in on him. He tried to struggle but a thousand fingers held him helpless.

"Hold him still, somebody," said the jazzman. "Here's mud in your eye."

And he carefully inserted the hypodermic needle and pushed the plunger.

Abelard broke free of Dean's grasp and bolted for the door, his ears torn by the player's screams. He ran into the street and almost without thinking made for the entrance of the nearest underground. "The trains . . ." he thought. "The trains . . ."

He dashed down the stairs, in too much of a hurry for the escalator, and emerged on the platform panting. There was nobody in the

station but a lone security policeman. Abelard thought desperately.

"A cop. Maybe I can tell the cop what happened at the party . . . but how would that look to everyone? Me, an anarchist, calling the cops? The jazzman might not even be arrested, and it would throw a bad light on anarchists everywhere if it ever got out I had called the cops. I'd be laughed at . . . even more than now."

With a sinister hiss, the subway train swept in and Abelard stepped on board. It was bright and luxurious and airconditioned and soundproofed inside, but outside, through the windows, Abelard could see the rushing darkness, the two wires near the window weaving up and down as they swept by. The undergrounds were always the same, whether they slunk along on rubber tires and hydropneumatic suspension like this local, or hurtled through a vacuum, magnetically suspended and propelled, like the transcontinental and transoceanic tubes, at over a thousand miles an hour, cutting a chord through the depths of the earth, a straight line between two points on the curved surface of the globe. The basic idea of all underground trains is the same . . . to rush blindly through the blackness from one identical station to another, to burrow through the earth in a huge metal worm, to hide from the blinding brilliance of the never-darkened sky, deep in the womb of the earth.

The basic idea of all underground trains is the same. To sit and stare into the face of one's fellow man and never speak, never betray by the slightest movement of the eyes a recognition of his existence. During rush hours to be crushed against him, chest to chest, back to back, so tightly you cannot move, so close you can inspect the pimples on his face, the dandruff on his shoulders, smell his sweat and hear his breathing, yet never say hello, never know if he is married or single, if he has children, and if they are healthy. To stand pressed as close to a woman as if in the tenderest embrace of love, and yet think about the ball game or the latest programs on the feelies—then to part and never see her again. To stand, perhaps, crushed back to back against the one person who has the missing piece to the puzzle of your life and never know it.

Abelard sat and watched the two wires outside his window rise and fall, rise and fall . . . then suddenly they were in Greenwich Village Station. After the dimness, the station lights were blinding, but he could see the station had not changed. The same paintings on the walls, the same statues and mobiles. Only some of the names of the artists had been changed.

One person got on, a tall, pale, exotic Eurasian girl with long

black hair down to her waist—dressed in black leotard and tights and carrying a black purse with a lizard's claw clasp.

"Greenwich Village Station," thought Abelard. "That could just as easily be the name of any station in the world. Greenwich Village extends to meet and blend with the Near North Side of Chicago, with the Left Bank in Paris, with North Beach in San Francisco, with Taos, New Mexico and London and Tokyo and Leopoldville and Rio . . . all showing the same paintings and sculpture and mobiles and dancing the same dances to the same music."

The girl sat in the seat directly opposite from him and began to do her lips. Abelard noticed with a start that she wore a diamond tiara in her hair, an anti-democratic gesture if there ever was one. How did she dare? He felt sure, somehow, that the diamonds were real.

Some of the others in the car had noticed it, too, and stared at her openly with mingled surprise and resentment. Abelard hoped there would be no unfortunate incident like the one at the party, but, no, nothing would happen on the train. Rushing through darkness in temporary conjunction was not the same as being drunk at a party, a so-called social function.

"You were born in October," said the girl, "around the first of the month." It was a statement of fact.

"Why, yes," gasped Abelard, "that's true. October third, to be exact."

"Your mother was African, your father Black Jewish."

"How did you know?"

She snapped her purse and inspected her reflection in the window. The two wires outside leaped upward suddenly and slowly settled back.

"Your parents didn't get on. Your father probably killed himself or something. That's why you hate the world so much."

"No," said Abelard, "that's not true about my father. How do you know so much about me? Are you a cop? Do you know some of my friends?"

She shook her head.

"The truth of the matter is," she answered, "I never saw or heard of you before in my life. If I am wrong about your father, what's the réal story on him?"

"You're close, too close. If you never heard of me before, how do you know so much about me?" he said guardedly.

"Astrology, mixed with psychology, mixed with the methods of Sherlock Holmes, mixed with witchcraft, mixed with woman's intuition. . . . I've studied a lot, but the truth is, I haven't the faintest idea how I know. I just know."

Abelard was silent for a moment, examining her explanation with suspicion.

"Are those diamonds real?"

"Of course they are, boy. Now what's the real story on your father? Did you love him?"

Abelard had never spoken to anyone about his private life before. Never. He was speechless, tongue-tied. Desperately he wondered how he might steer the subject around to safe, normal ground like anarchism, or atheism, or free love. He fumbled with the clasps on his briefcase, trying to open it, but his hands were shaking too much.

"Don't ask me to share your burden," she said, "I know that line. You say 'share my burden' and hand me a fistful of meaningless trash, then we talk about Karl Marx or Robert Heinlein ad nauseum. You aren't the first red I've met, you know. Now about your father?"

"A-about my father?" stammered Abelard.

"Did you love him?"

"Yes, yes, sure I did."

"A lot?"

"God, I worshiped my old man. I worshiped him. He was always laughing, always bringing me presents," he said, running his hand through his beard.

"Yeah?" She leaned forward.

"Why should I tell you all this?"

"Don't you want me to share your burden?" she asked.

Abelard felt the ground drop from under him. The past rose in a wave, drowning him, throwing him around like a twig in its tide. He was only half aware of the girl before him when next he spoke.

"They were always fighting, always," he said, barely audible. "She would scream that he was running around with other women and he would scream that she was frigid. Sometimes I couldn't sleep all night for their fighting. Then there was a whole week they didn't fight. My mother seemed like a changed woman, she was so sweet and nice to daddy and me. When Sunday came my mother fixed a wonderful supper for us with all my father's favorite foods. Daddy and Mommy were laughing and kidding and kissing each other like newlyweds. I was so happy I ran out in the backyard singing like a mad canary bird and bouncing my little ball. Bounce, bounce, bounce. It was sunset, before the invention of the artificial northern lights. Everything was all red and peaceful and beautiful and I bounced my little ball around and sang little songs to myself. Then, all of a sudden I heard a loud bang in the house and my mother started calling to me, 'Abe! Abe! come here a minute.' I ran inside and there on the kitchen floor was my old man, with a little hole in the front of his head and a big hole in the back and everything was all over blood."

There was a sudden flash of light as they passed through a station, then darkness outside as they rushed onward. Abelard felt tears, rotted, ancient, painful tears claw-

ing his eyes, rolling down his cheeks.

"Baby," whispered the girl.

He continued haltingly, "Mama had a gun in her hand and the air was full of smoke. I can still smell it. I cried, 'Mama, what did you do? What did you do?' 'Nothing,' she answered, 'that's all. Nothing.' Then she put the gun in my hand and called the cop in from the street and told him I did it. *I did it?* Oh, God, I was just a tiny little boy. I couldn't murder anybody. And I loved my father. I worshiped him! How could anyone believe I could murder my own father? They took me off to the reformatory and kept me there for five years and every day they came and asked me why I did it, but I never told on my mother. Never. If they took my Mama away I'd have nobody."

"Never mind, baby. Never mind," whispered the girl, taking his hand. "That's all past and gone. I'll take care of you. No matter what happens, you'll always have me."

"You? You? Who are you?" he demanded.

"We'll go off somewhere together and be alone," she comforted him.

"There's no place in the world where we can be alone," he cried, "Where there were once deserts, now there are crowded cities. The polar regions are busy cybernetic farms, even the sea is one big algae and seafood farm—and darkness? . . . God, they never turn off the sky! Not for one second. Not anywhere."

"But under the sea," she persisted, "What about the trans-Atlantic tube? It's dim in the tube cars and black as outer space outside the windows. Nobody is riding the tube at this time of night. Look, we're almost to Grand Central Station. Let's go. What do you say?"

"All right," he agreed.

They got off at Grand Central, picked up a meal and a bottle of wine from the free vending machines, then rode down the interminable escalator to the subterranean departure station.

The crowds moved heedlessly this way and that . . . the station seemed busy, but actually, compared with other seasons and other times of day, it was all but empty. If the trains had been run for profit, they probably would not be running at all. As it was, they left once every five minutes for Chicago, San Francisco, South America, Africa, France, England, wherever anyone could wish.

"Let's go to France," said Abelard.

"No, England," said the girl. "There's something there I want you to see."

They crossed a crystal bridge and emerged on the Trans-Atlantic tube platform. It was deserted. The feelies were playing to a host

of empty chairs. Abelard tried to keep his eyes away from the screen. He always resented the power the feelies had over him, the way they could manipulate and control his emotions through control of the ionization of the air and the calculated use of sounds above the audible range. The way they could convince him that he was receiving a blow on the jaw or a kiss, or was drowning or flying. Some people who did nothing but watch them during their every waking hour, had no other thoughts than those impressed on them by the feelies, no other feelings, no other lives.

With a hiss, the airlock opened and a recorded voice said, "Train leaving for London. Please watch your step upon entering and remain seated during the first part of your journey. You will feel a slight pressure pulling you toward the back of the train during the first part of the trip, but do not worry. It is only inertia force resulting from acceleration. Thank you."

They entered the dimly lit corridor, turned right, and passed a long line of compartments, entering the last one and closing the door behind them. Abelard switched the lights to dim and turned to the girl. She clasped her hands around his face and kissed him once, on the lips, very gently. The train began to move.

The wall outside the window melted into a grey blur and the acceleration force pressed them gently but firmly into the deep, soft seat. Abelard took her in his arms and held her, the tension draining from him, the sadness drifting away. Gently, her tongue touched his lips, his ears, his neck. He nipped her lightly on the ear lobe, nibbled her lip. She returned his love-bites, softly at first, then so they hurt just enough.

"I love you," she said softly. "You know that, don't you?"

"And I love you, too," he answered. "I don't know why or how, but I do."

She sighed and kissed him on the lips. His hand moved, feeling the flesh of her beautiful young body through the thin leotard.

Outside the movies painted on the walls flashed by unnoticed, casting a flickering, multicolored glow into the compartment. The acceleration increased slightly.

"I tried to kill myself a few months ago," she said. "Have you ever tried that?"

"No."

"I guess you wouldn't," she mused. "You aren't the type. I couldn't do it either. I went for a swim in the Pacific Ocean near the Golden Gate Bridge. I took off my clothes and waded into the surf. My plan was to swim out a little ways, then a little ways more, then a little ways more, until at last I was too far out to get back. I figured that way I could trick my survival instinct into letting me die. I knew it had to be some accident

or impersonal force that finally finished me off. Otherwise I would chicken out at the last minute."

"What happened then?" asked Abelard.

"I couldn't do it. The water was too cold."

Another movie flashed in through a window. A huge eye, watching, watching. On the screen outside appeared the words, "See it!" Then a huge hand appeared, reaching, clutching.

"Darling, darling!" she gasped. Outside danced the words, "Touch it!" A huge mouth appeared, opening and closing. A gigantic tongue licked its lips. Breathing deep, sobbing breaths, Abelard and the girl kissed each other.

"Oh, darling, oh, darling," she whispered.

The movie outside flickered, "United Nations Hams are real meat, a treat that can't be beat!" A huge ham appeared at the window, dripping with juice. A knife appeared from the left hand side of the screen and sank deep, deep into it.

For a moment afterward, he was unconscious. Then he woke again, drenched in sweat, burning with fever. They lay a long time side by side, now and then kissing, now and then shifting slightly.

"Tell me something," she asked at last.

"What?"

She whispered in his ear.

"I don't think so," he said. "Why?"

"Because I feel sort of bluish inside," she said.

They were silent again for a while. The acceleration gradually stopped. Another ad flashed on outside.

"We're going pretty fast now, eh?" she asked.

"Over a thousand miles an hour," he answered.

They were silent a while longer.

"What do you expect from me?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Abelard.

"You'd better not say that. People generally get just what they expect."

"What do you expect from me?" he asked.

"Oh, plenty, plenty."

"What?"

"I want everything you have," she said. "I want your mind and soul and body, your every waking thought and all your dreams."

When they reached London they switched to a local, then another local, and finally emerged above ground at Angel Station, in one of the nearest things to a slum that still existed in London. Angel Station!

As they walked down the shadowless street, the name "Angel Station" echoed in Abelard's mind like the sound of two hands clapped in a huge empty auditorium. On the other side of Torrens Street a line of students with their

arms around each other's shoulders danced the grapevine sideways down the walk, singing, "Boom chicka boom chicka boom chicka boom." That reminded Abelard of the thousand-leggers, frightful little bugs which he had, when a little boy, delighted in killing with a burning glass. He remembered his delight when he managed to catch one of them with a point of concentrated sunlight, how it twisted in agony and then lay still, slowly turning black.

They turned another corner and stood before a building that looked as old as civilization itself. A sign in ancient, faded, cracking paint said, "Collin's Music Hall."

"It's still there, thank God," said the girl. "They have been on the verge of closing for the last two hundred years."

"What is this, anyway?"

It was an old-fashioned British pub and music hall, the only place left in the world that still had professional entertainers outside of the feelies. "Have you got any money?" she demanded.

"Why, no, I never use it," he replied. "It's taxable, and if I were to use it I would be helping to support the government."

She laughed at him.

"But you don't hate the government enough to turn down its free food and housing, do you? Here, I'll pay."

She bought tickets at the box office and they went in. The seats were mostly empty, and the theatre was dark except for the stage, where an old woman dressed in gold and spangles was singing, accompanied by an old man at the piano. The tune fell on Abelard's ears like a blow. It was in the hauntingly simple chromatic scale, a folksong, probably, from the distant past. "Oh, it's a long, long time, from May to December . . ."

He had not heard one of the old songs since he was a child. His ear, trained by now to think of the chromatic scale as a single, consonant chord, was charmed and seduced by the monotonous wavelike repetition of major triads, sevenths, and sixths . . . he seemed to relax and stretch out in the vast distances between the chordal tones. No longer was the ear lost in a grey continuum of relative dissonance . . . a chord was either a triad and consonant, or it was not Black and white, and even the most intense dissonance of the scale was milder than most of the consonances his ear was trained to accept. Anglo-Indian jazz was condemned as primitive . . . what if one of those 43-tone purists could hear this?

The woman, as nearly as Abelard could tell, was about two hundred and fifty to three hundred years old . . . the man at the piano even older. Even so, she was able to make herself clearly heard and understood in the far-

thest corners of the theatre without benefit of electronic amplification. Few, if any, of the modern ultra-refined crooners could say the same, and Abelard realized with a start that she was putting across the emotional impact of the song without benefit of ultra-high frequency jabs in the audience's ribs.

"These precious days, I'll spend with you," she sang.

When the old woman had finished her song she bowed stiffly, first to the right, then to the left, then straight ahead of her. Abelard was startled. People just didn't bow these days. It was undemocratic! There was scattered applause as the woman left the stage, followed by the piano player. Suddenly there was only one person in the theatre applauding, the strange Eruasian girl at his side. She was clapping wildly, hysterically, tears running down her cheeks. "Encore!" she shouted, "Encore!"

"People are looking at you," whispered Abelard.

"I don't care! I don't care! More! Encore! Encore!"

She stood up, but Adelard pulled her down again, afraid someone would notice her diamonds and start a riot. Finally she was silent, staring into space with her lips half parted, humming the final bars of the song in a barely audible whisper. The next act came on immediately; another old man, doing imitations of famous people. The audience roared when he did one of the World President giving a speech while high on H.

"It seems I've forgotten my speech," said the comic. "Ah, here it is." He drew out of his coat a huge hypodermic needle, the kind used to give injections to horses, pretended to jab it into the main artery of his arm, staggered, rolled his eyes, steadied himself and said, "As I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted . . ."

The audience roared with laughter.

Next he produced an old beat-up sitar and gave a startlingly good imitation of Aga Carlson, the idol of the young and the central figure in the world of Anglo-Indian jazz, complete with a sexy Hindu dance at the end.

Everyone laughed but the Eurasian girl, who was still lost in the spell of the ancient folksong.

The rest of the show went by unseen by Abelard. His eyes were fixed on the profile of the girl beside him, studying her curiously theatrical makeup, the long black hair that hung to her waist, the diamonds above her forehead, hanging from her ears, and in rings on her fingers. He looked down at her sandalled feet and saw, even there, diamond rings on her toes. He was sure that they were real. Anyone could buy artificial diamonds which only an electron microscope could tell from real ones, but only someone who had a job could afford real ones,

and no one had jobs but soldiers, policemen, techmen, and politicians. She was not a soldier and was too young to be either a techman or a politician. She must be a cop, he reasoned, a plainclotheswoman. Perhaps now, on the eve of an election, the government had finally decided to crack down on anarchists, to make an example of them. Perhaps she was a feelies star, but no, the feelies had been manned by volunteer workers for a good ten years. And how did she know his birthday? Only a cop could know his birthday. But then, if she was a cop, sent to spy on him, why did she give herself away by wearing diamonds? There was only one thing he was sure of. She frightened him.

"Let's get out of here," she whispered.

He followed her out of the theatre and into the pub next door. They sat down at a table near the door and looked around at the other patrons. They were mostly quite old . . . there were a few soldiers and one table of techmen, but not one of the artists, poets, chessplayers, dancers, philosophers, etc., Abelard was used to seeing in pubs. One of the old men strolled over to their table and, to Abelard's intense surprise, asked, "Sir and Madam, what can I do for you?"

Abelard was speechless, but the girl said, "Two glasses of half and half."

"Very good, Madam," said the man, and walked quickly away.

"I see you're surprised," chuckled the girl. "This is the first time you've ever been called *Sir?*'

"Why, yes, it is, as a matter of fact."

"That's not the worst of it, baby. When he comes back we are going to have to tip him."

"Tip?" He was astounded.

"That's right," she chuckled. "The beer we will drink is, of course, free, but we are going to have to pay hard cash to have it brought to our table by a human being instead of a machine. We are going to have to pay hard cash to have a fellow human being call us Sir and Madam."

"What's going on here?" he demanded. "What kind of a place is this you've dragged me into?"

She gestured at the crowd.

"This is nothing but one of the last outposts of capitalism," she said. "That man who just called you Sir is the last of a class of men who once literally owned the world. What you buy from him is nothing different than what has always been bought from him. In the days when he owned the world, the issue was confused by the difficulty in procuring and processing raw materials, but really there never was in all the history of man and never will be anything at all for sale but the privilege of having another fellow human being call you *Sir.*

Just then the old man returned with two beers on a tray and carefully set them on the table. Abelard noticed that the old man, too, wore diamond rings on his fingers and diamond earrings in his ears . . . and even in his nose. The girl laid a coin on the tray as great as an average man's pension for a year.

"Thank you, Madam," said the capitalist with a deep bow, and strode away.

"Try the beer," she said. "It's something different from what you might expect."

Abelard sipped it.

"Ugh! It's warm, and it's gone flat!" he snorted.

"That's the way it's supposed to taste. You'll get used to it."

"I don't like this place," Abelard grumbled. "How can you stand to see a fellow human being degrade himself in front of you the way that so-called capitalist just did?"

"Watch what you say," she said, eyes flashing. "I'm a capitalist too, *Sir.*"

"You?"

"Of course. How else do you suppose I can afford these diamonds, *Sir?*"

Abelard laid a hesitant hand on her arm.

"But what do you sell?" he asked.

"The same thing that fellow who brought us our drinks sells. The only thing anyone has ever sold since the beginning of time. Myself!"

"What are you saying? Are you a . . ."

"A prostitute? A whore? That's right, *Sir,* that's what I am."

He was really confused now.

"I don't understand. Why? Why do you do it? Everything you need is given you. For the sake of a few diamonds you . . . I can't believe it! How can anyone sink so low?"

She drew herself up proudly.

"How can anyone be so useless as *you* are! You dare to preach to me? I work. I earn my money. I give something to somebody and receive something in return! What do you do? Hang on to the metal hand of the state and call yourself an anarchist! Paint pictures and try to give them to people who can paint pictures of their own, write poems that people only read in hopes that you will read theirs, pass out your mimeographed rubbish that people only use to blow their noses on. If the Anti-Political Party is elected there won't be any government any more. There won't be any more army, there won't be any more cops, courts, jails and taxes. What will you protest about then, eh? What will you write about then in your mimeographed throw-away sheets? What will you march around with signs and demonstrate against then? What will you fast about, what will you strike about? What will you passively resist? I don't give a damn

what party is elected. It doesn't effect me in the slightest. I'm a working girl, *Sir*. I have no time for politics. I'm a capitalist. I wear diamonds. Why shouldn't I wear diamonds? People throw rocks at me in the streets, children follow me and call me every foul name in the language, but I know this. If I take my diamonds off I'm dead.

"There are men, and women, too, all over the world in little bars and pubs . . . they go there every night, night after night, for only one reason. There is an outside chance they might run into me. I might drop by, maybe, and sit with them an hour or two and listen to them talk and let them give me presents and money and, maybe, if I feel like it, kiss them a few times or maybe even sleep with them. I just might. Sure, they could go to a government sex-house and sleep with a beautiful robot . . . twice as beautiful as me, twice as soft to the touch, twice as tender and responsive, with a voice that says 'I love you' so you almost believe it.

"Funny, isn't it, how you never quite get around to going. Funny how some men still get married, or live with real flesh and blood women, or wander into bars every night looking for me. Who cares whether *you* live or die? Who would weep if the whole anarchistic movement were to pass away some night? If I die and the people who love me hear about it they will cry and get drunk and kill themselves and go on the needle. You try going to those robots once or twice. The illusion is absolutely convincing except for one thing; you know ahead of time that under that flawless flesh there is nothing but wires and tubes and gears, and you never forget it.

"But I'm a real woman, *Sir*, with a real womb and real breasts and a real liver and even a real belly-button. Do you know that I even have real periods? I bleed like a wounded animal, I lie in bed moaning with the pain of my cramps . . . and right within arm's reach are the anti-menstrual pills that almost every woman but me takes these days. I have them right there, on my bedstand, all the time, but I have never taken one. Those are wonderful little pills, baby. You take one a month and you never need worry again about menstruation or pregnancy. I sleep with a man almost every night . . . always a different one, and every time I think maybe this one will make me pregnant.

"I'm only 23 years old and I've had two children already. I don't go to the big, beautiful government hospitals to have my babies. They would say I wasn't a fit mother and put my children in those damn, big, perfect, beautiful kindergartens. I go down into the trans-Atlantic tube and go into a little compartment and lock the door and dim the lights and lie down on

the seat and let the contractions come. Have you ever watched a woman have a baby? Of course not. Nobody watches childbirth any more but the impersonal eyes of the surgical machines. It isn't pretty. I go down into the trans-Atlantic tube in a little sound-proof compartment deep down under the sea, deep down under the earth, and have my baby. Do you know I scream with pain? Do you know I squat in that little room all by myself and scream at the top of my voice? The contractions are slow at first, then a little faster and a little more painful, a little faster and more painful still, faster, faster, still faster. I'm rushing through the darkness at over a thousand miles an hour and nobody is watching me but the big eye of the UN Ham movie, sweating and screaming and wiggling and shoving down with all my strength, and all of a sudden the baby comes and I hit it and it cries and I cut the umbilical cord with my jackknife or my fingernail file and put the baby on the breast and come up in London or New York or maybe Paris with one of those big black capes around me and the kid on my breast, hoping the security police won't hear it cry. I'm a real woman. I'm a working girl. I work for my diamonds."

Abelard sat stunned as the torrent of words rushed over him. All this time the girl had hardly raised her voice, but her words were charged with an intensity that drove every other thought from his mind. She was leaning forward, staring into his eyes with the unwinking hypnotic gaze of a snake. Impulsively, she took his hand.

"Look, buy me something, will you?" she whispered.

"I have no money. You know that."

"I'll lend you some. Buy me a flower. There's an old woman here who sells flowers. She grows them in her own windowbox. Here," she slipped him some money under the table, "you can pay me back later. She's sitting by the bar, back by the lavatory. See her? Call her over and buy me a flower."

Abelard was still too stunned by the strange monologue he had heard to refuse. He signaled the old woman to come over.

"Flower, sir? A pretty flower for the lady?" said the old woman as she came up to the table.

"What kind do you want?" asked Abelard.

"A white one. I need a white one."

"Here you are," said the old woman. "It's called a gardenia. Maybe it ain't as nice as what you can get from the government nurseries, but I grew it myself, sir. There's love went into the growing of that flower."

Abelard paid the woman, and she bowed and went away.

The pale, intense Eurasian girl sat a long time, silent, holding the

gardenia in her hand and studying it.

"You're a beautiful thing, little flower," she said at last. 'Beautiful and imperfect. There's a wonderful, beautiful spot on one of your petals. You're dying, poor thing, the same as I am, the same as everybody is, and that's what makes you so beautiful. It's the promise of death, and decay, and rebirth, and growth again. Isn't it beautiful, black baby?"

"Yes. Very beautiful," he murmured.

"Don't spoil it by trying to call it 'very beautiful' as if you were trying to make words mean more than they really do. It's just beautiful, that's all. Don't talk about it. Just look at it. Look!"

Abelard looked. The girl turned the flower around and around in the tips of her fantastically long, thin fingers.

"This flower is mine, you know," she said, "I think it's really mine."

"Of course," said Abelard softly.

"No. Not, of course. Maybe it doesn't belong to me at all. Maybe it belongs to God. Maybe I belong to God and you belong to God, too, whether you believe in Him or not. Maybe there's nothing in the world that really belongs to a person. Not even his own life." Her voice was gentle and far away. "I could die now, you know. Some day I will surely die and lie quietly in the earth, slowly rotting away. Will I still be beautiful then, baby? You don't like to think about my flesh turning grey and black and hanging off my bones, do you? You don't like to think about the little white worms that will burrow into my brain, my breasts, my womb, do you? I do. I like to think about it. I think everybody should think about it often. Perhaps when my body rots away it will turn into beautiful little blades of grass or perhaps a white, white flower like this. I wouldn't mind dying if I could become a flower."

She bowed her head ever so slightly before the flower and said reverently, "Sir."

Then she gently pulled one of the petals from its blossom and began to nibble on it. She ate it slowly, and when she had finished, she broke off another petal and ate it too.

"Can I have some?" asked Abelard.

"Here, darling," said the girl, and placed a petal in his mouth. It was soft and nearly tasteless, but he ate it anyway. She gave him another. Quietly, petal by petal, they finished off the gardenia and sat a long time, looking at each other without tension, without thought. While he was eating it, he had tasted little or nothing. It left a bitter aftertaste, however. He washed it down with beer.

"Darling," said the girl, "if anything ever happens to me, try to get along without me. Don't forget

me, but, you know, go on doing whatever it is you are doing. I won't always be around to watch out for you. Even when I'm not with you, remember that I still love you, I still care about you. Keep warm, baby, and don't take dope. Okay? Promise?"

"I promise."

"And try and get some money and give it to that woman with the flowers. She takes care of my children, you know. And maybe, some day, one of my children will be yours. Promise?"

"I promise."

Abelard felt a sudden need to go to the lavatory. It was not the moment for such a thing, but it seldom is. It was probably the beer. Quickly he excused himself and made his way back to the men's room.

It was an old, old lavatory. The walls writhed with inscriptions on inscriptions on inscriptions . . . Faded names and addresses of homosexuals, drawings, dirty jokes. "Make date." "Tourists, please do not eat the rock candy in the urinal." "Do not throw cigarettes in the toilet. It makes them soggy and hard to light." "Donald Duck is a Jew."

There were even a few half-obliterated remarks in lipstick dating from that fantastic period just after the World Civil War when men had taken to wearing makeup. When he had finished and washed his hands, Abelard was still reluctant to leave the safety of the lavatory. "What will that girl do next?" he wondered, but he braced himself and went out.

She was gone.

He rushed to the table but found nothing there but a note saying, "I will always be with you. You will see me again the next time you need me."

It was signed "Reva."

"Where is she?" he shouted at the old flower woman. "Where did she go?"

"I don't know, sir. She comes and she goes as she pleases."

"When will she be back?"

"I don't know that either, sir. All I know is when she does she'll have her arms full of things for the kids. Most likely she'll have two or three men with her, all loaded down with presents. It's like an old fashioned Christmas whenever Reva comes home."

Desperately Abelard dashed out into the night shouting, "Reva! Reva! Come back! You can't just leave me like this! REVA!"

There was no answer.

He ran all the way to Angel Station.

"REVA!" he shouted again.

Silence.

He went down the stairs three steps at a time and emerged onto the platform.

"REVA!"

Only the echo of the tunnel answered him.

With a rush and a hiss, the train pulled in and opened its doors. Abelard got on board in a daze. The doors closed behind him and the train was moving again, with no perceptible jerk. At each station he searched in vain for some glimpse of a tall, thin figure in black with black hair to her waist . . . some glimpse of a glittering diamond. There were people on the train now, a few at first, then more and more until they were packed in solid. Once or twice Abelard thought he saw Reva in the crowd and struggled through the packed bodies only to find that he was wrong. Once or twice he thought he saw her in a station as the train pulled out. He had no idea how long he had searched by the time he fell asleep in the seat. He only knew, as he slept, that he was being watched over, protected. He awoke, looked through the window, and saw her standing on the platform, not three feet away from him, smiling gently. Before he could rise the train doors shut, and Reva slipped away behind. He was asleep again before the next station, asleep and at peace. In a trance he boarded the trans-Atlantic tube for New York and fell asleep again. As he staggered into his little apartment in Brooklyn, his roommate stared at him amazed. It was the first time Abelard had ever been seen without his briefcase.

"Where's your burden?"

"I don't know," said Abelard. "I guess I lost it somewhere. Not important."

Some months later, Abelard strolled into Miss Smith's Tea Room on Grant Avenue in San Francisco with a new briefcase and a new supply of left-wing propaganda. It was possible to obtain a great many things in Miss Smith's Tea Room, none of them tea. The legends of the place had it that it was originally a hang-out for lesbians in some dim and distant period in the past, that there had once been a real Miss Smith who owned it and several other businesses in the Bay Area. It seems the "tea room" had gradually become infiltrated by heterosexuals until at last Miss Smith sold it in disgust. After passing through many hands and many different types of clientele it had at last become a meeting-place for the non-voting minority of anarchists in the area; that is, those who had not been swallowed up in the Anti-Political Party.

"Comrade Abelard!" said George, sitting in the front booth by the window. George was a permanent fixture in the window. It was said that he slept under the bar.

"Comrade George!" cried Abelard, sitting down and pouring himself a beer from the wall tap. "Share my burden?"

"Certainly. Certainly."

"Still on the job?"

"That's right. My job is just to sit here in the window of Miss Smith's and talk to whoever wants to talk to me on any level he wants to talk. Like I told them, when the time comes to move, I'll move; up, down, backwards, forwards, or sideways. They say, why don't you go somewhere, George, and I say, Man, there's really no place to go. You want to go to London and see the Collin's Music Hall? This is a music hall right here, if you look at it from the right angle. You want to go to the Mistral Bookstore in Paris and buy some dirty books? Listen, any book is a dirty book if you read it right. I can get aroused reading the telephone book or the dictionary. That's what I told them. There's only one direction that's worth going and that's inward. That's all I'm saying. Inward. They say, George, haven't you got anything better to do than talk, and I say I'm working, what about you? I look around at all these poor fools who want me to do this and do that and there's only one thing I can say about them, no wonder the ship sank—look at the crew! Now I can tell you are thinking about getting married. You've even got pants on to show what a faithful husband you can be. There's no such thing as a marriage with your pants on. You've got to love the person you are with. That's all I'm saying. Right now I'm your wife. And your kids, and your mama and papa, but don't get an electra complex. You're here, that's what I told them, so you're married to me. I can be anything you like to you. I can be a bird if you really want me to, and fly to Mars and back, and never get up from this table. We can go together. Just don't get hung up, that's all I'm saying don't get hung up on any one special thing or you're hooked. People say, George, what are you hooked on, and I say Life, man, Life, that's all. I just can't put it down. You think 200 or 300 years old is old. I don't look it, but I'm older than that. I was here before this place was built. I helped build the pyramids. Ever heard of Caligari? That was me. I'm in the Bible two or three times. Ever heard of Judas? That was me. Don't give me a bad time about it. I was under orders. Ever heard of Cain? That was me. Doomed to walk the earth forever and never die. In the Bible it neglects to mention that the earth is a beautiful place, that there's enough beauty in one hair of your beard to last all eternity. I don't want to go to Heaven. Man, I'm there! That bridge out there has been remodeled three times, but they still call it The Golden Gate. I've crossed over it hundreds of times. I could cross over every day if I wanted to. Who are you marrying?"

"Her name is Reva," said Abe-

lard, looking away. "She's a prostitute."

"The Reva with the diamonds?"

"You know her?"

"Sure I know her," laughed George. "We lived together once, a few years back. Everybody knows Reva, or has heard of her. They call her Reva, the Witch."

"Reva, the Witch? Why?" asked Abelard, leaning forward.

"If you don't know she's a witch, you don't know her at all. I'm a witch, too."

"You?"

George grinned proudly.

"How do you think I know what you're thinking of all the time, eh? You've got eyes, but they're for decoration only. Sure she's a witch. Anyone can be a witch if they just open their eyes a fraction of an inch more. She's a saint, too. The first authentic saint in two thousand years. She'd even be a martyr, except that there isn't anything left worth dying for."

"You say you lived together?" Abelard was amazed.

"That's right," said George. "I had a place across the bay in Berkeley, just off Telegraph Avenue. I got up about noon one morning as usual and opened my front door and there she was, curled up on my doorstep, fast asleep. I woke her up and she looked at me with no more recognition than if she'd just been born, and said, 'I feel very ethereal this morning.' She pulled my face into her hair and I sniffed and she was reeking of ether. She had spent all the previous night on the fourth floor of Cowell Hospital with some student medical technmen, sniffing ether to see what it was like. And when she has menstrual cramps, she won't even take an aspirin. Well, she walked in and looked around my place and finally she said, 'How do you like your eggs?' and I said 'Scrambled,' so she scrambled some eggs and we had breakfast and went to bed together. Two months later I came home and there was a note on the table saying, 'Darling, I have to go to Tibet, love, Reva!' I never saw her again. Do you see her very often?"

Abelard shook his head sadly.

"I've only seen her once, months ago," he said.

"And you're in love with her? You want to marry her? Isn't marriage against your principles?" demanded George, thrusting a quivering finger under Abelard's nose.

"I know, I know. It's just this damned insomnia. I can't sleep. I've tried pills, I've tried booze, but nothing helps. I just keep thinking about her and thinking about her, carrying on imaginary conversations with her, trying to clearly visualize her face. When I get her face into focus, there is a moment of wonderful peace. She's smiling at me! She loves me! Then I think of some key phrase, some

particular sentence, like 'years and years' or just 'somewhere' and my eyes fill with tears and I cry and cry and cry, and can't stop crying. Whenever I don't get enough sleep it's bad for my complexion. Look at my face, all over pimples, painful ones. There's more on my back."

"What about your principles?" said George. "I can see your pimples."

"Those mimeographed 'Principles' in my briefcase?" snorted Abelard. "I used to read them by the hour, but now I start one and pretty soon I find I've read the first sentence over ten or eleven times without getting a mote of meaning out of it."

The Tearoom door burst open and Little Brother Ivanovitch strode in, short, stocky, unkempt, with shaggy, matted red hair and a bushy mustache. He was carrying a heavy package.

"Comrade Ivanovitch!" cried Abelard. "Share my burden?"

"Don't comrade me, you yellow-bellied pacifist! You can share *my* burden!" and with that he plunked the package down on the table.

"What's that?" asked Abelard.

"It's a bomb," said Little Brother.

"A *bomb!*"

"I'm an anarchist of the old school. The bomb-throwing kind!"

"Sit down and have a beer, Little Brother," said George. "How is the Destruction of Civilization coming along?"

"Go ahead and laugh, you Capitalistic Dog, you Lackey of the Ruling Class. After the revolution you'll be laughing through the holes in your chest."

"So, it's Brother Ivanovitch's turn to throw the bomb, eh?" chuckled George. "You'd better hurry up, comrade. If the Anti-Political Party wins the next election, there won't be any government for you to throw bombs at. You'll be out of a job."

"The State will never voluntarily give up its powers!" roared Little Brother. "Don't you know any history? Social progress can only come through violent revolution! The old order must be washed away in a bath of blood."

"Sometimes," said George, "I think you are more interested in the bath of blood than in the social progress that is supposed to come out of it."

"Never mind," growled Little Brother, "you'll see. Nothing can alter the inevitable tides of history. The new social order will come and at its head will be the professional revolutionaries, like Lenin, Trotsky, and me."

"If you want to destroy civilization," said Abelard, "why don't you become a Feelies techman? Those hi-fi feelies can broadcast a tone above the audio range called the 'death whisper' that can kill a man."

"That's right," said George. "Just picture it, Little Brother. All over the world everyone is listening to the feelies. Maybe the President is giving a speech."

"His inaugural address," said Abelard.

"Everybody is listening," continued George, "except for the revolutionary elite. You are in the control room. You throw a switch, turn up the gain a little."

"People feel uncomfortable and they don't know why," said Abelard.

"You turn up the gain a little more. A few high-strung people go nuts and fall on the floor, kicking and screaming. You turn up the gain a little more and everybody craps out. A little more and it starts to work on the tissues of their bodies."

"They go deaf," said Abelard.

"They start bleeding from every pore," added George. "They scream and thrash around in their blood, a bath of blood, just like you want. Then you turn up the gain just a hair more and they stop moving. All over the world they stop moving. They're dead, Little Brother, and all because of a musical tone, a little musical tone they can't even hear, because of you, Little Brother. Doesn't that make your mouth water?"

"You know I don't know anything about electronics. It would take me fifty years of study to become a feelies techman!" shouted Ivanovitch, pounding on the table with his fist.

"You are only worried about the practical angle, eh?" said George. "Suppose I could smuggle you into the control room while the President is speaking. Suppose I pointed out to you which switch to throw, which knob to turn? What then?"

"Could you do it, really?" asked Little Brother, eyes glowing; then he saw that George was laughing at him. "PIG!" screamed Ivanovitch, "COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY SCAB! You are only trying to trick me! You are trying to make fun of me! You'll see!"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Abelard.

Ivanovitch was stunned.

"Who are you telling to shut up, you yellow-bellied pacifist? Who do you think you are, *me?*"

"Excuse Brother Abelard," said George. "He is not himself. He is in love."

"Oh, he is, is he?"

"He wants to get married."

"Oh, he does, does he? And who, may I ask, is the poor, stupid, misguided, idiotic, bad-smelling female?"

"Reva, the Witch."

"If only I knew where she was," moaned Abelard.

"I know where she is, pig," said Little Brother.

"WHERE?"

"Right outside the Tearoom in my car, waiting for me."

George and Abelard leaped to their feet, as one man. "If you're lying . . ." growled Abelard, as he dashed past Little Brother and out the door, with George right behind him. Sure enough, there she was, sitting in the sky-car, reading a dogeared copy of "Capital."

"Reva!" shouted Abelard.

Carefully Reva marked her place and closed the book. "Black Baby!" she said, "and George! Hello, boys!"

She opened the door and got out. She was very, very pregnant.

"I've been looking for you, Black Boy," she said. "You know, I don't even know your name?"

"Reva, the Witch," said George. "Let me introduce you to Abelard Rosenburg."

"How do you do, Abelard?" said Reva, shaking his hand. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Reva," cried Abelard. "I've searched and searched for you! Where did you go?"

"To Chicago," answered Reva. "You didn't have to search for me. I told you I'd turn up when you needed me."

"I was in Jimmy's Tavern, near the University of Chicago," said Little Brother, "when Reva came up to me and said, 'You're an anarchist, aren't you?' and I said, 'That's right. I'm the only true anarchist left. The rest are all fakes. You're a prostitute, aren't you?' and she said 'Yes, I'm the only true prostitute left. The rest are all amateurs.' She wanted to know all about anarchism and she kept pumping and pumping me, so finally I said, 'Look, I can't possibly teach you all about anarchism in one night. Why don't you come and live with me for a while and we can exchange services?' She said, 'All right,' and we went home together."

"You went home with . . . him?" gasped Abelard to Reva.

"Why not?" she answered, "He said he would teach me about anarchism, and I really wanted to know."

"I did teach you about anarchism, didn't I?" said Little Brother.

"Frankly, no, but you were a barrel of fun anyway. All we ever did was make love and work on the bomb and play games."

"What games?" asked George.

"Different games," answered Reva. "Believe me, there was never a dull moment with Little Brother Ivanovitch."

Abelard felt sick. Suddenly all he wanted to do was to leave, to run, to get away. He turned and took a few steps.

"Hey," said Reva, and he stopped. "Come back here," she said, and he slowly returned. "You shouldn't be so touchy. You may be seeing a lot of me for the rest of your life."

"What-what do you mean?" Abelard stammered.

"Well, not marriage exactly," answered Reva, looking away. "But you know, when I found out I was pregnant I thought maybe the child might be yours. If it's white, it might be anybody's, but if it's black, it can't be anyone's but yours. You know how these things go. You'll know it's yours and I'll know it's yours, and you'll always be coming around to see it. Well, pretty soon it will start to think of you as daddy and my other kids will get used to seeing you around too. I'll keep running into you all the time when you're there and have to make supper for you and lunch and if you stay overnight even breakfast. We'll be all the time playing with the kids together and we'll get to be really good friends, not just lovers. I know how these things snowball. All the time sitting around and talking and doing the dishes together and listening to music together and reading the books we recommend to each other. Do you play chess? I do."

"I play chess a little," said Abelard.

"I play the guitar, too," said Reva. "I like to sing the old songs, the simple ones like we heard that night in the music hall. Do you sing?"

"I could learn."

"It's not hard with these songs. I know how it will go. We'll be all the time sitting around the kitchen table singing together and when the kids get older they'll be singing too. It will seem silly to us to go anywhere, to leave, so you'll move in. I can just see you moving in now. You may not want to, but lives are so Goddam long now, sooner or later you will. The way I am it won't be long before there are other black babies . . . we'll have to educate them all ourselves because I'd rather die than let my kids go to public school and learn to appreciate the feelies. I don't know if that's marriage, but that's what will happen if the baby is yours."

"What if it isn't?" asked Abelard.

"Maybe we'll be together for a while. I'm in love with you, you know, because that story you told me about your childhood was so sad it made me cry. I thought I'd forgotten how. You're in love with me, too, I can see, but being in love doesn't last very long. A week, a month, a year, then it will go stale and we'll both start looking again, riding undergrounds alone and looking for someone to pick up. That's what will happen if it isn't."

"I have to be getting back," said George. "Somebody might come into the Tearoom looking for me."

"Goodbye, George," said Little Brother. "We won't miss you."

George strolled away leaving the two anarchists jealously glowering at each other.

"Well," growled Little Brother

to Reva, "are you going with me or staying with Abelard?"

"Why do you have to be so anti-social?" asked Reva, "I thought we might all go somewhere together. I'm too far along to have sex anyway, so there's no reason to be jealous."

Little Brother put the bomb in the car and considered a moment. "But it's him you love?" he muttered.

"I love everybody," said Reva, with a toss of her head.

"Well, perhaps," said Little Brother. He turned to Abelard. "Is that all right with you, comrade? Let's shake hands and call it a truce."

"All right with me. Here, shake."

As they extended their hands to each other, a happy, peaceful smile came over Little Brother's face. It remained there, as fixed as if it had been painted on, as Little Brother took hold of Abelard's thumb and bent it over backwards until it broke with an audible snap.

"He won't fight back," said Little Brother, turning to Reva. "He's a non-violent, pacifistic anarchist." Still smiling, Little Brother brought his elbow up suddenly into Abelard's face, then, in a single efficient gesture, kneed him in the groin and swung the blade of his hand down on Abelard's neck in a perfect rabbit punch.

"This is called passive resistance," explained Little Brother as he straight-armed Abelard's head against the side of the car. As Abelard staggered forward, blood streaming from his nose and mouth, Little Brother tripped him up and threw him flat on his face on the concrete sidewalk, then aimed a vicious kick at his head. Abelard grabbed Little Brother's foot with his good hand and hung on.

"So you're going to fight, eh?" crowed Little Brother. "What will it be? Knives? Guns? Or bombs?" Abelard released the foot. Little Brother took out a switchblade knife, popped it open, and began cleaning his nails. "Well, Reva, you wanted to learn all about anarchism. You have just witnessed a demonstration of the difference between violent and non-violent anarchism. Note that Abelard did not once cry out in pain, even when I broke his thumb, but nevertheless I am standing up and he," he spat in Abelard's face, "is lying down." He folded the knife up and put it back in his pocket. "I hope you two will be very, very happy."

With that, Little Brother climbed into the sky-car, kicked it abruptly into the air, then swung east and was soon out of sight.

"Come on," said Reva, helping Abelard to his feet, "we've got to get you to a hospital."

In about a week the thumb was healed enough so Abelard could

remove the splint and bandages, but he still had to use it with care. Reva and Abelard settled down for a trial run at marriage. The best part of it was the long, long talks together in bed. Sometimes these lasted until the early hours of the morning, and touched on every subject conceivable. They talked about love, and politics, and religion, and children, and astrology, and their childhoods, and history, and music, and every other thing man has ever thought about. Sometimes Reva would get out her guitar and sit cross-legged on the bed, playing it and singing old folksongs like "Stormy Weather," "Stardust," and "White Christmas," for hours. Sometimes they would lie dozing for ten minutes or so between sentences, then start talking again on an entirely different tack.

"Abe," she would say, soft and drowsy.

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you believe in God?"

"I'd hate to think that anyone would make a world like this on purpose," he answered.

"What do you mean?"

"If there is a God, he would have to be a monster, creating only to destroy, giving life only to kill. God made every living thing with a hunger for something. He made the world so that every living thing must kill to live, then be killed in turn. Include me out!" he said, with a gesture of contempt.

"What you say is true, black baby, except the part where you try to include yourself out. You are mad at God because you don't agree with the way he put the world together. You think you might do a better job if you had the chance. Maybe leave death out. Maybe make a few other alterations here and there to make it more to your taste. I think if you understood a little better how the whole thing works, you'd change your mind. Like death, for instance. You don't understand death at all. It isn't so bad. You think it is like losing a game of cards. Man, you don't lose! It is just that every once in a while they reshuffle the cards and deal out a new hand. You think you are a player, but you are really more like a hand of cards. One combination of cards makes a man, another hand of cards makes a cow, another a flower, but they keep using the same cards over and over. You are always dying, but you never really die. Nothing dies. There's nothing to be afraid of. No reason to feel sorry for yourself and give God a bad time."

He raised his hand to stem the torrent of words.

"I don't care what happens to the atoms in my body, Reva. They can turn into snakes, spiders and poison ivy for all I care. That isn't me. That isn't the real me."

"What is the real you?" she asked, tickling his nose.

He thought a moment.

"A mathematical point. The point of consciousness," he said. "The inner eye that can see everything but itself. I speak of *my* body, *my* thoughts, *my* feelings. They are all my belongings, my possessions, but they are not me. I am the owner of these things but separate from them. The Hindus call the 'I' thing the Atman. That Atman eye opens when I am born, slowly at first, without understanding, then watches, watches, watches as my life passes through time. It doesn't miss a thing, Reva. It doesn't miss a thing. Even if I go insane, the Atman eye that is me will go on quietly watching my delusions and hallucinations. Then I die, and the inner eye closes, never to open again. That is death. Don't try to make it pretty. Don't try to pretend it doesn't exist. When that inner eye closes, you're dead, dead, deadly dead as if you had never lived."

She ran her fingers through his kinky steel-wool hair.

"You're top-heavy, Abe," she said. "You're trying to live all in your head and ignore your body. You're trying to make out like one small part of you is the whole works. A woman has a harder time than a man pretending she hasn't got a body. Once a month she gets a little reminder from the body that it is still there, and if she gets pregnant all the thinking in the world won't stop the baby from coming. I know all about that inner eye, baby, but I also know that everything in life that is real is of the body. You eat with your mouth and stomach, you have sex largely with your genitals, you carry a child in your womb. When you are angry or afraid, you do it with your glands. Some of the most intense moments of pleasure come when that Atman eye is temporarily closed. A wild drinking binge that you can't remember in the morning, a dream that is too beautiful to see with that eye, that evaporates in the daylight like a mirage. And actually, honey, you don't know for sure that that inner eye ever closes. Maybe just when you think it is closing, it really opens for the first time. Just when you think you are going to sleep forever, you really wake up as never before. A mathematical point has no physical dimensions . . . it needs no physical body to give it reality. Your Hindu friends thought the Atman, that point of consciousness, just got shuffled and re-dealt like all the rest of the cards in the deck, at least until it reached a state of oneness with God called Nirvana. I ask you, when you die, where do you think that thing goes, that Atman, that mathematical point, that soul-thing? Where does it go?"

"Well, Reva, when you blow out a candle, where does the flame go? I guess they both go about the same place." He laughed.

"You're too much, black baby. You're too much."

She rolled over and gave him up for lost, for the moment.

One day there was a rainstorm and Reva and Abelard went out naked into the children's playground and danced primitive African dances and sang primitive improvised African chants amid the dark skeletons of slides and swings and see-saws as the lightning flashed and the rain poured down. They waded through mudpuddles, splashing and shrieking, their feet sinking up to the ankle in warm mud. Abelard found a slick spot, took a running start, and slid on it, falling headlong at the end of the slick. Reva got into a swing and started swinging, higher and higher into the sheets of rain. Lightning made cracks in the roof of the sky and thunder beat its fists on the floor of the earth and in between the skyscrapers swam in grey and dirty yellow light and the sidewalks were glazed like pottery. Reva got on the Merry-Go-Round and Abelard pushed it, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until Reva's mop of hair stood out horizontally with centrifugal force. Reva hooked her legs around the seat and leaned back on empty space until her head almost touched the ground, laughing like a madwoman. Suddenly a single beam of sunlight broke through the clouds and came down directly onto the little merry-go-round, blindingly bright. Reva, hanging by the crooks of her legs and lying on the air, stared straight up into the turning sky and the savage, unsheathed sun, unblinking, until the clouds covered its face again, turning it first into a moon, then hiding it altogether.

"Abe," yelled Reva, "Stop this thing, will you?"

"What's wrong?"

"The baby is starting to dance, too. I want to go home."

They went home arm in arm, singing "Careless Love" at the top of their voices.

As they slopped up the hallway, covered with mud, one of the other tenants, a dignified old spinster, stared at them as if they were visitors from Mars. When they got into their apartment they went straight to the bathroom, turned on the shower, got into the shower together, and with many a grunt and ticklish giggle, proceeded to wash each other clean.

As the day when the baby was due drew near, Reva became less and less active. She was sick a lot, and had pains . . . particularly in her back. Abelard spent a good deal of time rubbing her back, fixing her meals, reading to her and talking to her. She liked poetry, and though Abelard had never

been much interested in it before, except for the social protest type of poem, he became, in the hours of reading aloud, intoxicated with the written and spoken word. One day, while Reva was taking a nap, he sat down, his head buzzing with the "hipster" poetry of the late twentieth century, and began to scribble a poem of his own. A few lines came easily . . . the tough part was the "filler" lines between the ones supplied him by inspiration. He had written pounds of prose on political subjects before . . . but such writing is mostly a matter of lining up a few well-worn cliches in a slightly different order. The trouble with poetry, real poetry, was that it had to "ring true"—to reflect, if not reality, at least a recognizable delusion. He had rewritten it five times when Reva awoke and asked him what he was doing.

"Oh, nothing," he answered, trying to hide the paper.

"Here, let's see that."

"No, no, it's something private."

"Then, I really *must* see it."

"It's just a sort-of-poem."

"Read it aloud to me."

"No, it's too awful."

"Here, give it to me. I'll read it aloud. Don't worry, I won't expect too much," she said.

Reluctantly he handed it to her. She cleared her throat and in a low, husky voice, began to read.

"To Reva.

"And thus it begins,

Singing and dancing and drinking and laughing and standing,
Suddenly silent, in each other's eyes.
It is the moment of touching.
It is the day of the Revelation of the Body.
It is the month of Obsession, the year of sleep-dancing.
The end of the some questions,
'What is Right and Wrong?'
'Is there a God?'
'If a tree falls with no one to hear it, does it make a sound?'
The beginning of others.
'Do you really love me?'
'What are you thinking?'
'Where are you going?'
'How could you hurt me so much?'

"And thus it begins,

With pleasure, and the pleasure of giving pleasure.
With moist lips, warm thighs, and tongues and hands and bodies,
And words, and silences,
The compulsion to submit, to serve,
The proud examination of the tooth's brand
By the bedlamp.

"And thus, and thus it begins,

With the wonder of this small hand thrust into mine,
So fierce, so commanding,
So timid, so pleading.
It is the hand of a young girl's love,

A young girl,
Still fleeing the phantoms of childhood,
Still trusting to the fortuitous intervention of elves,
Loving small animals and large gestures.
Lovely girl, sweet creature, I would walk a ways with you.
I would protect you and catch your tears in my hands to save.
We will hide together in a little room,
And sleep,
And when you wake you will dress slowly as I watch
As I watch you don the purple vestments and robes of Woman.

"Thus begins—the always beginning—without end."

After she had finished, Reva was silent for some time, staring at the paper. Finally she set it gently on the bedtable and looked at Abelard. Then she smiled, and Abelard sat down on the edge of the bed, took her in his arms, and kissed her. He lay down beside her and she put her head on his shoulder. A train rumbled by, far away. The wind moved the light white curtains at the window. Some children outside sang, "Nya-nya, nya-nya, Peggy's got a boy friend. Peggy's got a boy friend." A rocket scratched the white enamel surface of the sky, one straight hairline dividing the never-darkened heaven into two nearly equal halves. The ghost of the crescent moon lay low near the horizon, tangled in feelies antennae. Abelard kissed Reva's earlobe and she sighed softly, tangling her fingers in his beard.

"You're beginning to see now," said Reva.

"Yes," whispered Abelard.

Then the phone rang.

Abelard reached over and turned it on. The screen glowed milky and vague for a moment, then the face of Little Brother Ivanovitch snapped into focus.

"Comrade!" said Little Brother, with an attempt at a friendly grin.

"What do you want?" growled Abelard in answer.

"Nothing much," said Little Brother. "I just want to borrow your woman for a few hours. All she has to do is appear with me on the speaker's platform at a political meeting. I think it will show that we Nichivist Anarchists are interested in the future if I show up with a pregnant woman."

"You're crazy," said Abelard, "She can't go anywhere now. The baby is due in a few days."

"Never mind," said Reva, then turned to the screen. "Greetings, Comrade. What kind of games do you want to play with me, now? Can't they wait?"

Little Brother shook his head.

"No, the world election is tomorrow. We have only a matter of hours to convince the people not to vote. I need your help, Reva, badly. Our movement has been branded as the Minority in

favor of Death by the Anti-Political Party. Unless we can in some way identify ourselves with Life there will be an Anti-Political landslide. The APP has dug up proof positive that the World President is a dope addict."

"It will take more than my bulging stomach to sway the people," said Reva.

Little Brother nervously tugged at his mustache.

"No, no, Reva. The APP revelations have swapped people just a little too much. There are strong indications that a great number of people will not vote at all out of sheer disgust with all politics. That a crazy party like the APP could gain such power in the first place is strong evidence that people have had just about all they can take of government. If we can bring about a general voters' strike, the whole structure of Government will come down with a crash."

"What's that to me?" asked Reva.

"We've got some time on the feelies in a few hours. How we look means a lot more than what we say on the feelies, you know."

Reva thought a moment.

"How long will I be on?" she asked.

"Just a few minutes."

"Okay, I might just as well. It will do me good to get out."

Abelard was alarmed. "What if . . ." he began.

"You want to come along, Abe?" asked Reva.

"No, and I don't think you should go either."

"Nonsense," said Reva. "You worry too much."

"I'll pick you up in a half an hour," said Little Brother, and the screen went blank. Half an hour later Little Brother arrived, carrying his bomb, as usual, under his arm. For a moment the two anarchists glared at each other; then Abelard turned to Reva and said, "For God's sake, be reasonable. A feelies studio is no place for a woman in your condition."

"What do you know about it?" asked Reva. "Have you ever had a baby? I've had two, and I know what I'm doing."

With that she slipped on her jacket, took Little Brother's arm, and started for the door.

"I'll meet you after the broadcast at Angel Station in London," she shouted over her shoulder. Then the door closed and Abelard was alone with his growing apprehension. Restlessly he wandered around the apartment, nervous fingers toying with his beard, then he sat down beside the bed and drummed a few Anglo-Indian flams on the nighttable. "Obviously," he thought, "it won't do me any good to hang around here. Must be some place I can go to kill some time."

Then he thought of the Tivoli Gardens in Denmark. It was a gi-

gantic amusement park, covering the entire area of what had once been the city of Copenhagen. The Age of Leisure had created an insatiable hunger for amusement that had caused many other amusement parks to devour the cities around them, but the Tivoli was the world's largest and, to Abelard's mind, the best of them all. Without further thought, he left the apartment and headed for the subway.

After the broadcast, Little Brother stormed out of the studio, mumbling curses and obscenities and glaring balefully at everyone in sight. Reva trotted behind him, trying to conceal her amusement.

"They didn't even listen," he snarled, as they went down in the elevator. "They laughed at me, as if I was just some kind of a comic trying to amuse them."

"They only laughed when you threw your script at the audience," Reva reminded him.

"I couldn't stand their goddam polite silence! They were just tolerating me. Just humoring me, as if I was a madman!

The elevator opened and they emerged onto the ground floor, a long corridor lined with small shops and feelies screens showing every imaginable kind of show. A large crowd was gathered before the one showing the Deva Dasi Show. The crowd gazed in rapt admiration as two seemingly double-jointed Hindus illustrated seemingly impossible positions for making love.

"Look at that!" screamed Little Brother. "Just look at that! Are those the mindless sheep, the stupid, dirty-minded, worthless, no-good pigs of a dog that I am devoting my whole life to freeing? All they want is bread and circuses! Some new way of overpopulating the already overpopulated planet! I should just let them sink in their comfortable, smothering mud. They don't care. I am prepared to die for them and they don't even care enough to listen to me without laughing."

Reva took his arm and patted him comfortingly.

"Why don't you come to Collin's Music Hall in London and drown your sorrows in Half and Half with the rest of us anarchists, capitalists, prostitutes, and other semi-extinct dinosaurs?" she asked.

"I might as well, for all they care."

When they boarded the Trans-Atlantic Tube, Little Brother was still in a foul mood. As they went down the corridor to their compartment, a fat old matron temporarily blocked their way. Little Brother screamed, "Pig!" and raised his bomb as if to strike her with it. Reva restrained him and gently guided him onward. She managed to get him settled in the compartment and sat holding his

hand and saying soothing, comforting, and meaningless things to him until the train got under way. Then she left him, carefully closing the door behind her, and made her way to the lavatory. An old man with a bottle of whiskey in his hand was just coming out. Reva recognized him.

"Hello, Sanders," she said, "still riding the trains, eh?"

"That's right," chuckled the old man. Since they put in the free whiskey vending machines ten years ago, I haven't been above ground once. I've been around the world more times in more ways than I can count, and I expect I'll go around it a few hundred times more before I'm done."

She smiled and touched his lips with her finger, silencing him.

"I know Sanders. You told me all about it before, a couple of years ago."

"I don't see why anyone ever bothers to go above ground, Reva. The seats in these tubes are as comfortable as any bed, and you can get anything you want from the machines . . ."

"Look, Sanders, I'll see you around. Okay? I gotta go now."

Sanders reached out a shaking claw of a hand to grab her arm, but Reva stepped back, turned, and had pushed through the door to the lavatory when the first contraction came. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she staggered out of the lavatory and down the corridor to her compartment. When she tried the door, she found it was locked. She knocked, lightly at first, then harder.

"It's Reva!" she shouted. "Let me in.

There was no answer. She pounded again, this time with all her strength.

"Open up, damn you! My contractions have begun! You want me to have pups all over the corridor floor?"

There was no answer.

Reva kicked the door.

"I know you're in there! Open up, you crazy bastard!" she screamed.

The door opened a crack and Little Brother peeped out.

"Go somewhere else to have your lousy baby. I'm busy in here," he growled.

"What are you up to, anyway? Let me in, for God's sake." She threw her full weight against the door and it opened enough for her to see that the seat was strewn with wrapping paper. The box in which Little Brother kept his bomb lay empty on the floor. Wedging her foot in the door she forced her head in far enough so she could see the window. There was the bomb, black and sinister, stuck to the window with some sort of suction disks.

"You put that thing away," she said. "You might hurt somebody with it."

"No, I will not put it away. I'll

show them I mean business. I'll show them I am not a harmless crackpot. The time has come for some Propaganda of the Act."

"Look, you make propaganda some other time. I'm making a baby now, and it won't wait."

"Even *you* don't believe I'm serious! Even *you* don't believe I have the guts to give my life for freedom!" he shouted.

"You aren't the only one on this train. You can give your life for freedom if you want to, but I need my life. I am a mother and I've got kids to watch out for."

"It is for your kids that I am doing this. Yes, and for all the other kids in the world today, and in all the centuries to come."

Suddenly he released his hold on the door and Reva fell inward. While she was still off balance, he gave her a terrific shove that landed her flat on her bottom in the corridor, then slammed and locked the door.

Reva sat staring at the door a moment, then pulled herself to her feet and began to run. An old folksong beat time for her steps.

"Run, sinnerman, where will you run to . . ."

She came to an open compartment door. Inside, Sanders was just tipping up the bottle. The bald top of his head glistened in the indirect lighting, the white hair at the back hung down his neck as he tilted his head back, trying to squeeze the last drop.

"Hello," said Reva, stepping in.

Sanders jumped to his feet.

"Hello, Reva," he said. "Sit down and talk a bit."

"Hello," she repeated tonelessly, taking his outstretched hand.

"What's wrong?" His watery bloodshot eyes widened.

"Hello," she repeated softly, "hello, hello, hello."

Somewhere in her mind a door began to open and a tired voice said, "Well, here it finally is. Hello, death!"

There was a dull, deep thud that sent a shudder through the whole train. "No," whispered Reva, throwing her arms around Sanders. "No!" She kissed his toothless mouth, drawing the stink of his alcoholic breath into her lungs until she could hold no more. With a long weary sigh the air left the train through the flowerlike hole in its side, pouring into the vacuum of the tunnel in swirling, glittering clouds of snow crystals. Inside, compartment doors bulged and burst open, and the passengers, like deep-sea fish brought too quickly to the surface, exploded, spattering the luxurious walls and upholstery with blood and flesh and bits of sticky cloth. The blood froze before it had a chance to run, and the train rushed on at a thousand miles an hour in absolute silence. The United Nations Ham movie cast a fantastic multi-colored light into the compartment containing what

had once been an old man and what had once been a young woman. There was another being in the compartment, lying half in and half out of the torn stomach of the woman. Enough remained of it so that at least you could see its skin was dark, very dark, and it was a boy.

The Trans-Atlantic Tube arrived in London exactly on time.

Abelard waited at Angel Station, growing more and more restless and worried as the hours rolled by. He picked up some algae candy at the vending machines, but he couldn't seem to swallow it. For a while he would sit on the platform, watching the trains come and go and the people hurry about almost as if they had something important to do. Then he would go upstairs and loaf around on the street level. The window of a nearby house was open, and Abelard could hear the feelies playing inside. They were reporting the returns of the world elections.

Abelard listened with half an ear, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. He listened more for the time announcements than for the election returns; the time announcements that came and kept on coming while Abelard waited.

The Election results were no surprise.

It was a landslide victory for the Anti-Political Party.

There was a lot of cheering as the feelies focused on one city after another, a few minor bigwigs spoke briefly, then . . . "and now we take you to the World Capital at Antarctica for the acceptance speech of Gerald Davis, president of the Anti-Political Party and now President of the World!"

"Thank you, thank you," came a trained feelies voice, deep and convincing. "Thank you for the applause and thank you for your votes. I think you all realize that this has been not just another election, but an election to end, literally to end, all elections. For the first time in history a group of men has come into power for the sole purpose of putting an end to power. The behavior of my predecessor in this office has clearly demonstrated what wise men have always known, that is—power tends to corrupt, and absolute power to corrupt absolutely. I and my party are pledged to a unique platform . . . a program for our own removal from office. Yes, we are going to abdicate and there will be, we hope, no successors to our offices, ever again."

"Where is that bitch?" wondered Abelard. "What happened to her? Do you suppose she ran off with Little Brother? Maybe the baby was born, and it was white. Then she'll stay with Little Brother. Then she'll kiss him and play his filthy perverted games . . .

and love him. Then she might never see me again!"

"My first act in office," said the President of the World, "will be the dissolution of the army and security police. They have long since ceased to have any real reason for existence. The few regulatory functions still exercised by the police will be taken over by automatic machines. My second act in office will be to abandon the money system. In an age when automation provides plenty for all, free, money is only the worthless plaything of people who want to live in the past."

"What does it matter," thought Abelard, "who is the biological father of Reva's child? If it wasn't mine, I'd still love it. I'd still bring it up just as if it were my own."

"No more cops, courts, jails and taxes," said the President of the World. "No more armed bodies of men, no more monopoly on the use of force, no more coercion of man by man, no more tyranny of the majority over the minorities. Today marks the beginning of a new era . . . the era of freedom! Mankind has conquered nature, overthrown the tyrant of economic necessity! Now mankind overthrows the last tyrant of all, the tyrant of government! The world that men have dreamed of since the dawn of time at last is here, a world of peace, and unlimited plenty, and unlimited freedom . . . the last barrier to happiness is destroyed!"

"That crazy bitch! How can she do this to me?" whispered Abelard, sitting down on the curb and holding his head in his hands. "I love her, I love her! How can she just wander away and never come back? Wander away and never find her way home . . ."

"The last barrier to Happiness is destroyed, my friends, and I, your elected President, have only one command for you. Seize it!"

Abelard reached into the gutter and picked up a rock and hurled it through the window with a crash of breaking glass.

"She's not coming," he whispered. "She's not coming, ever." A head appeared at the window.

"Hurrah for freedom!" shouted the head.

Abelard wove drunkenly down the steps into the subway.

The sky shone a blank and shadowless white, and continued to shine night and day throughout his long and vacant life.

*The truth about Calvin W. "Biff" Demmon (as distinct from the fake "biography" which his curious sense of humor impelled him to submit for THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING IMPORTANT [F&SF, March 1963]) may now be told. He is twenty years old and six feet tall, is the proprietor of the high-quality Demmon dog, has a beard, smokes cigars, attends Oakland (Cal.) City College, has published a variety of amateur magazines such as FUN WEEKLY, *SKOAN*, CHEESE SANDWICH, CHICKEN WAGON, FIG NEWTON, and THE WONDERFUL SINGING RABBIT OF GLENDALE DRIVE (we kid you not); is fond of buttered lima beans. We predict that Calvin W. "Biff" Demmon will become the Calvin W. "Biff" Demmon of our time, as George Ade and Robert Benchley were (respectively) the George Ade and Robert Benchley of* their *times. Mr. Demmon is an authority on genies, and his story for today deals with one named*

FRED

by Calvin W. Demmon

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS was a Genie named Fred. Fred lived in an old Seven-Up Bottle. "This house isn't worth two cents," he would often mutter on a wild Friday evening, and then, as if to prove it, he would take the bottle to the Corner Grocery Store.

"I'm sorry, Son," the stupid old man in there would say. "This bottle is Cracked and Chipped. I can't give you two cents for it, nor even one cent nor an old Abba-Zabba bar." Then he would laugh quietly and pinch Fred's cheek. Fred hated that, but he couldn't do anything about it because Genies have this Moral Code which says if (this is a quote) somebody pinches your cheek you can't do anything about it.

Well, one day Fred decided he would fix up his little Seven-Up Bottle. "I'll show that stupid old man," he said, so he began. First he went to the Library and learned a bunch of Spells out of an old Freddy-the-Pig book. Then he visited a certain dusty old alchemist on 32nd Street in down-

town Boise, Idaho, and this dusty old alchemist gave him some dusty old powders and pills and potions. ("Powders, Pills, and Potions," it said in the d.o. alchemist's window, because it Sure Sounded Nice.) Then Fred took his little Seven-Up bottle out behind a Service Station, drew a big Star around it, and went to work. He cast Spell upon Spell, and he made orange and blue fires with the powders, and he took the pills Internally. Nobody knows for sure what he did with the potions. If he had any sense he threw them away, but he didn't have any sense.

After about four hours of this, good old Fred smiled, wiped his brow, and got a Big Glint of Success in his left eye. He went proudly back to the Corner Grocery.

"I have brought a bottle for return of my two-cent deposit," said Fred, in his clumsy Genie Way.

The little old man in there looked at the bottle and sneered. "I'm sorry, Son," he said. "I can't give you two cents for this bottle, nor even one cent nor an Abba-Zabba Bar. It has a fireplace and a couch and a little sunken bathtub in it." Then he smiled crookedly and pinched Fred's cheek.

Fred was very sad, and, cursing softly, he drained himself off into a Vick's Inhaler.

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot: LXIV

In 2856, the Members of the newly formed Time-Travellers Club sent Ferdinand Feghoot off to investigate the hazards they might expect to encounter in the pursuit of their hobby.

"Now take care," warned Dame Electra MacClinch, the Club's first Temporary President. "Try not to get lost, and be *sure* to get back here promptly next Thursday."

The Members gave Feghoot three rousing cheers, and, stepping through the)(in the wall, he immediately vanished.

When he returned, after seventeen years, his reception was very much colder. Alerted by the time-shuttle's signal, the Membership had assembled, and Dame Electra was regarding him with a frosty gray eye.

He was wearing a kilt, and he had Robert Burns with him. Each had an arm round a pretty but slightly over-ripe woman in the dress of the late 18th Century, and they had obviously been having a wonderful time.

Feghoot introduced the great poet; then with a chuckle he presented Nell Trott and Meg Lively.

"I have heard of this Burns person," sniffed Dame Electra. "But what are these—*creatures?*"

"Hoot, lass—they're famous!" laughed Ferdinand Feghoot. "Hae ye no hearrd o' the pair o' doxies of time travel?"

—GRENDEL BRIARTON *(with thanks to Romina Grobis)*

In which our Contributing Science Editor observes that "there are more things to be counted in this universe than material objects," and forthwith proceeds to reveal to the said universe the Asimovian T-numbers—a new concept in . . . in . . . well, in T-numbers.

T-FORMATION

by Isaac Asimov

I HAVE BEEN ACCUSED OF HAVING A MAD PASSION FOR LARGE NUMbers and this is perfectly true. I wouldn't dream of denying it. However, may I point out that I am not the only one?

For instance, in a book entitled *Mathematics and the Imagination* (published in 1940), the authors, Edward Kasner and James Newman, introduced a number called the "googol" which is good and large and which was promptly taken up by writers of books and articles on popular mathematics.

Personally, I think it is an awful name, but the young child of one of the authors invented it, and what could a proud father do? Thus, we are afflicted forever with that baby-talk number.

The googol was defined as the number 1 followed by a hundred zeroes, and so here (unless I have miscounted or the Noble Printer has goofed) is the googol, written out in full:

10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,
000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,
000,000,000,000,000.

Now this is a pretty clumsy way of writing a googol, but it fits in

with our system of numeration, which is based on the number 10. To write large numbers we simply multiply 10's, so that a hundred is ten times ten and is written 100; a thousand is ten times ten times ten and is written 1,000 and so on. The number of 0's in the number is equal to the number of tens being multiplied, so that the googol, with a hundred zeros following the 1, is equal to a hundred tens multiplied together. This can also be written as 10^{100}. And since 100 is ten times ten or 10^2, the googol can even be written as 10^{10^2}.

Certainly, this form of exponential notation (the little figure in the upper right of such a number is an "exponent") is very convenient, and any book on popular math will define a googol as 10^{100}. However, to anyone who loves large numbers, the googol is only the beginning and even this shortened version of writing large numbers isn't simple enough.*

So I have made up my own system for writing large numbers and I am going to use this article as a chance to explain it. (Freeze, everyone! No one's leaving till I'm through.)

The trouble, it seems to me, is that we are using the number 10 to build upon. That was good enough for cave-men, I suppose, but we moderns are terribly sophisticated and we know lots better numbers than that.

For instance, the annual budget of the United States of America is in the neighborhood, now, of $100,000,000,000 (a hundred billion dollars). That means 1,000,000,000,000 (one trillion) dimes.

Why don't we, then, use the number, one trillion, as a base? To be sure, we can't visualize a trillion, but why should that stop us? We can't even visualize fifty-three. At least if someone were to show us a group of objects and tell us there are fifty-three of them altogether, we couldn't tell whether he were right or wrong without counting them. That makes a trillion no less unreal than fifty-three, for we have to count both numbers and both are equally countable. To be sure, it would take us much longer to count one trillion than to count fifty-three but the principle is the same and I, as anyone will tell you, am a man of principle.

The important thing is to associate a number with something physical that can be grasped and this we have done. The number 1,000,000,000,000 is roughly equal to the number of dimes taken from your

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*The proper name for the googol, before I forget, is "ten duotrigintillion" but I dare say, gloomily, that that will never replace "googol."

pocket and mine (mostly mine, I sometimes sullenly think) each year by kindly, jovial Uncle Sam to build missiles and otherwise run the government and the country.

Then, once we have it firmly fixed in our mind as to what a trillion is, it takes very little effort of imagination to see what a trillion trillion is; a trillion trillion trillion and so on. In order to keep from drowning in a stutter of trillions, let's use an abbreviated system that, as far as I know, is original with me.*

Let's call a trillion, T-1; a trillion trillion T-2; a trillion trillion trillion T-3 and form large numbers in this fashion. (And there's the "T-formation" of the title! Surely you didn't expect football?)

Shall we see how these numbers can be put to use? I have already said that T-1 is the number of dimes it takes to run the United States for one year. In that case, T-2 would represent the number of dimes it would take to run the United States for a trillion years. Since this length of time is undoubtedly longer than the United States will endure (if I may be permitted this unpatriotic sentiment) and, in all likelihood, longer than the planet Earth will endure, we see that we have run out of financial applications of the Asimovian (ahem!) T-numbers long before we have even reached T-2.

Let's try something else. The mass of any object is proportional to its content of protons and neutrons which, together, may be referred to as "nucleons." Now T-1 nucleons make up a quantity of mass far too small to see in even the best optical microscope and even T-2 nucleons make up only 1⅔ grams of mass, which, for you non-metrics, is about 1/16 of an ounce.

Now we've got room, it would seem, to move way up the T-scale. How massive, for instance, are T-3 nucleons? Since T-3 is a trillion times as large as T-2, T-3 nucleons have a mass of 1.67 trillion grams or a little under two million tons. Maybe there's not as much room as we thought.

In fact the T-numbers build up with breath-taking speed. T-4 nucleons equals the mass of all the earth's ocean, and T-5 nucleons equals the mass of a thousand Solar systems. If we insist on continuing upward, T-6 nucleons equals the mass of 10,000 galaxies the size of ours, and T-7 nucleons are far, far more massive than the entire known universe.

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*Actually, Archimedes set up a system of numbers based on the myriad, and spoke of a myriad myriad, a myriad myriad myriad and so on. But a myriad is only 10,000 and I'm using 1,000,000,000,000, so I don't consider Archimedes to be affecting my originality. Besides, he only beat me out by less than twenty-two centuries.

Nucleons are not the only subatomic particles there are, of course, but even if we throw in electrons, mesons, neutrinos and all the other paraphernalia of subatomic structure, we cannot reach T-7. In short, there are far less than T-7 subatomic particles of all sorts in the visible universe.

Clearly, the system of T-numbers is a powerful method of expressing large numbers. How does it work for the googol? Well, consider the method of converting ordinary exponential numbers into T-numbers and vice versa. T-1 is equal to a trillion, or 10^{12}; T-2 is equal to a trillion trillion or 10^{24}, and so on. Well, then, you need only divide an exponent by 12 to have the numerical portion of a T-number; and you need only multiply the numerical portion of a T-number by 12 to get a ten-based exponent.

If a googol is 10^{100}, then divide 100 by 12, and you see at once that it can be expressed as T-8½. Notice that T-8½ is larger than T-7 and T-7 is in turn far larger than the number of subatomic particles in the known Universe. It would take a billion trillion universes, like our own to contain a googol of subatomic particles.

What then is the good of a googol, if it is too large to be useful in counting even the smallest material objects spread through the largest known volume.

I could answer: For its own sheer, abstract beauty—

But then you would all throw rocks at me. Instead, then, let me say that there are more things to be counted in this universe than material objects.

For instance, consider an ordinary deck of playing cards. In order to play, you shuffle the deck, the cards fall into a certain order and you deal a game. Into how many different orders can the deck be shuffled? (Since it is impossible to have more essentially different game-situations than there are orders-of-cards in a shuffled deck, this is a question that should interest your friendly neighborhood poker-player.)

The answer is easily found (if you know where to look, and I do) and comes out to 80,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, or 8×10^{67}. In T-numbers this is something like T-5⅔. With an ordinary deck of cards, then, we can count arrangements and reach a value equal to that of the number of subatomic particles in a galaxy, more or less.

If, instead of 52 cards, we played with 70 cards (and this is not unreasonable; canasta, I understand, uses 108 cards) then the number of different orders after shuffling, just tops the googol mark.

So when it comes to analyzing card games (let alone chess, economics and nuclear war) numbers like the googol and beyond are met with.

Mathematicians, in fact, are interested in many varieties of numbers (with and without practical applications) in which vastnesses far, far beyond the googol, are quickly reached.

Consider Leonardo Fibonacci, for instance, the most accomplished mathematician of the Middle Ages. (He was born in Pisa so he is often called Leonardo of Pisa.) About 1200, when Fibonacci was in his prime, Pisa was a great commercial city, engaged in commerce with the Moors in north Africa. Leonardo had a chance to visit that region and pick up a Moorish education.

The Moslem world had by that time learned of a new system of numeration from the Hindus. Fibonacci picked it up and in a book, *Liber Abaci,* published in 1202, introduced these "Arabic numbers" and passed them on to a Europe still suffering under the barbarism of the Roman numerals. (Since Arabic numerals are only about a trillion times as useful as Roman numerals, it took a couple of centuries to convince European merchants to make the change.)

In this same book, Fibonacci introduces the following problem: "How many rabbits can be produced from a single pair in a year if every month each pair begets a new pair, which from the second month on become productive, and no deaths occur?" (It is also assume that each pair consists of a male and female and that rabbits have no objection to incest.)

In the first month, we begin with a pair of immature rabbits, and in the second month, we still have one pair, but now they are mature. By the third month, they have produced a new pair, so there are two pairs, one mature, one immature. By the fourth month, the immature pair has become mature and the first pair has produced another imature pair, so there are three pairs, two mature and one immature.

You can go on if you wish, reasoning out how many pairs of rabbits there will be each month, but I will give you the series of numbers right now and save you the trouble. It is:

1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144

At the end of the year, you see, there would be 144 pairs of rabbits and that is the answer to Fibonacci's problem.

The series of numbers evolved out of the problem is the "Fibonacci series" and the individual numbers of the series are the "Fibonacci numbers." If you look at the series, you will see that each number (from the third member on) is the sum of the two preceding numbers.

This means we needn't stop the series at the twelfth Fibonacci number (F_{12}). We can construct F_{13} easily enough by adding F_{11} and F_{12}. Since 89 and 144 are 233, that is F_{13}. Adding 144 and 233 gives us 377 or F_{14}. We can continue with F_{15} equal to 610, F_{16} equal to 987 and so on for as far as we care to go. Simple arithmetic, nothing more than addition, will give us all the Fibonacci numbers we want.

To be sure, the process gets tedious after a while as the Fibonacci numbers stretch into more and more digits and the chances of arithmetical error increase. One arithmetical error anywhere in the series, if uncorrected, throws off all the later members of the series.

But why should anyone want to carry the Fibonacci sequence on and on and on into large numbers? Well, the series has its applications. It is connected with cumulative growth as the rabbit problem shows and, as a matter of fact, the distribution of leaves spirally about a lengthening stem, the scales distributed about a pine-cone, the seeds distributed in the sunflower center, all have an arrangement related to the Fibonacci series. The series is also related to the "golden section" which is important to art and esthetics as well as to mathematics.

But beyond all that, there are always people who are fascinated by large numbers. (I can't explain the fascination but believe me it exists.) And if fascination falls short of working away night after night with pen and ink, it is possible, these days, to program a computer to do the work, and get large numbers that it would be impractical to try to work out in the old-fashioned way.

The October, 1962 issue of *Recreational Mathematics Magazine** lists the first 571 Fibonacci numbers as worked out on an IBM 7090 computer. The fifty-fifth Fibonacci number passes the trillion mark, so that we can say that F_{55} is greater than T-1.

From that point on, every interval of 55 or so Fibonacci numbers (the interval slowly lengthens) passes another T-number. Indeed F_{481} is larger than a googol. It is equal to almost one and a half googols, in fact.

Those multiplying rabbits, in other words, will quickly surpass any conceivable device to encourage their multiplication. They will outrun any food supply that can be dreamed up, any room that can be imagined. There might be only 144 at the end of a year, but there would be nearly 50,000 at the end of two years, 15,000,000 at the end of three years and so on. In thirty years, there would be more rabbits

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**This is a fascinating little periodical which I heartily recommend to any nut congruent to myself.*

than there are subatomic particles in the known universe, and in forty years there would be more than a googol of rabbits.

To be sure, human beings do not multiply as quickly as Fibonacci's rabbits, and old human beings do die. Nevertheless, the principle remains. What those rabbits can do in a few years, we can do in a few centuries or millennia. Soon enough. Think of that when you tend to minimize the population explosion.

For the fun of it, I would like to Write F_{571}, which is the largest number given in the article. (Just this once, Stern Editor. There will be larger numbers later and I will not write them out!) Anyway, F_{571} is: 96041200 61892255382394288336092486502610491741187706781682226478902901437830847886419258908418525433163764618300 8074629. This vast number is not quite equal to T-10.

For another example of large numbers, consider the primes. These are numbers like 7,641, and 5,237, which can be divided evenly only by themselves and 1. They have no other factors. Well, you might suppose that as one goes higher and higher in the scale of numbers, the primes gradually peter out because there would be more and more smaller numbers to serve as possible factors.

This, however, does not happen, and even the ancient Greeks knew that. Euclid was able to prove quite simply that if all the primes are listed up to a "largest prime", it is always possible to construct a still larger number which is either prime itself or has a prime factor that is larger than the "largest prime." It follows then there is no such thing as a "largest prime" and the number of primes is infinite.

Well, even if we can't work out a largest prime, there is an allied problem. What is the largest prime we know! It would be pleasant to point to a large number and say: This is a prime. There are an infinite number of larger primes, but we don't know which numbers they are. This is the largest number we *know* to be a prime.

Once that is done, you see, then some venturesome amateur mathematician may find a still larger prime.

Finding a really large prime is by no means easy. Earlier, for instance, I said that 5,237 is prime. Suppose you doubted that, how would you check me? The only practical way is to try all the prime numbers smaller than the square root of 5,237 and see which, if any, are factors. This is tedious but possible for 5,237. It is simply impractical for really large numbers—except for computers.

Mathematicians have sought formulas, therefore, that would construct primes. It might not give them every prime in the book, so that

it could not be used to test a given number for prime-hood. However, it could construct primes of any desired size, and after that the task of finding a record-high prime would become trivial and could be abandoned.

However, such a formula has never been found. About 1600, a French friar named Marin Mersenne proposed a formula of partial value which would occasionally, but not always, produce a prime. This formula is $2^p - 1$, where p is itself a prime number. (You understand, I hope that 2^p represents a number formed by multiplying p two's together, so that 2^8 is 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 or 256.)

Mersenne maintained that the formula would produced primes when p was equal to 2, 3, 5, 7, 13, 17, 19, 31, 67, 127, or 257. This can be tested for the lower numbers easily enough. For instance, if p equals 3, then the formula becomes $2^3 - 1$ or 7, which is indeed prime. If p equals 7, then $2^7 - 1$ equals 127, which is prime. You can check the equation for any of the other values of p you care to.

The numbers obtained by substituting prime numbers for p in Mersenne's equation are called "Mersenne numbers" and if the number happens to be prime it is a "Mersenne prime." They are symbolized by the capital letter M and the value of p. Thus M_3 equals 7; M_7 equals 127 and so on.

I don't know what system Mersenne used to decide what primes would yield Mersenne primes in his equation, but whatever it was, it was wrong. The Mersenne numbers M_2, M_3, M_5, M_7, M_{13}, M_{17}, M_{19}, M_{31} and M_{127} are indeed primes so that Mersenne had put his finger on no less than nine Mersenne primes. However, M_{67} and M_{257}, which Mersenne said were primes, proved on painstaking examination to be no primes at all. On the other hand, M_{61}, M_{89} and M_{107}, which Mersenne did not list as primes are primes and this makes a total of 12 Mersenne primes.

In recent years, thanks to computer work, eight more Mersenne primes have been located (according to the April 1962 issue of *Recreational Mathematics*). These are M_{521}, M_{607}, M_{1279}, M_{2203}, M_{2281}, M_{3217}, M_{4253}, and M_{4423}.

The smallest of these newly-discovered Mersenne primes, M_{521}, is obtained by working out the formula $2^{521} - 1$. You take 521 two's, multiply them together, and subtract one. The result is far, far higher than a googol. In fact, it is higher than T-13.

Not to stretch out the suspense, the largest known Mersenne prime, M_{4423}, and I believe, the largest prime known at present, has 1,332

digits and is therefore just under T-111. The googol, in comparison to that, is a trifle so small that there is no reasonable way to describe its smallness.

The Greeks played many games with numbers, and one of them was to add up the factors of particular integers. For instance, the factors of 12 (not counting the number itself) are 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6. Each of these numbers, but no others, will go evenly into 12. The sum of these factors is 16, which is greater than the number 12 itself, so that 12 is an "abundant number."

The factors of 10 on the other hand, are 1, 2, and 5, which yield a sum of 8. This is less than the number itself so that 10 is a "deficient number." (All primes are obviously badly deficient.)

But consider 6. Its factors are 1, 2, and 3 and this adds up to 6. When the factors add up to the number itself, that number is a "perfect number."

Nothing has ever come of the perfect numbers in two thousand years, but the Greeks were fascinated by them, and those of them who were mystically inclined revered them. For instance, it could be argued (once Greek culture had penetrated Judeo-Christianity) that God had created the world in six days because six is a perfect number. (Its factors are the first three numbers, and not only is their sum six, but their product is also six, and God couldn't be expected to resist all that.)

I don't know whether the mystics also made a point over the fact that the lunar month is just a trifle over 28 days long, since 28, with factors of 1, 2, 4, 7, and 14 (which add up to 28) is another perfect number. Alas, the days of the lunar month are actually 29½ and the mystics may have been puzzled over this slipshod arrangement on the part of the Creator.

But how many of these wonderful perfect numbers are there? Considering that by the time you reach 28, you have run into two of them, you might think there were many. However, they are rare indeed; far rarer than almost any other well-known kind of number. The third perfect number is 496, and the fourth is 8,128, and throughout ancient and medieval times, those were the only perfect numbers known.

The fifth perfect number was not discovered until about 1460 (the name of the discoverer is not known) and it is 33,550,336. In modern times, thanks to the help of the computer, more and more perfect numbers have been discovered and the total now is twenty. The twentieth and largest of these is a number with 2,663 digits, and this is almost qual to T-222.

But in a way, I have been unfair to Kasner and Newman. I have said they invented the googol and I then went on to show that it was easy to deal with numbers far higher than the googol. However, I should also add they invented another number, far, far larger than the googol. This second number is the "googolplex" which is defined as equal to 10^{googol}. The exponent, then, is a 1 followed by a hundred zeroes, and I could write that, but I won't. Instead, I'll say that a googolplex can be written as: $10^{10^{100}}$ or even $10^{10^{10^2}}$

The googol itself can be written out easily. I did it at the beginning of the article and it only took up a few lines. Even the largest number previously mentioned in this article can be written out with ease. The largest perfect number, if written out in full, would take up only a little more than a page of this magazine.

The googolplex, however, cannot be written out—literally *cannot*. It is a 1 followed by a googol zeros and this magazine will not hold as many as a googol zeros no matter how small, within reason, those zeros are printed. In fact, you could not write the number on the entire surface of the earth, if you made each zero no larger than an atom. In fact, if you represented each zero by a nucleon, there wouldn't be enough nucleons in the entire known universe or in a trillion like it to supply you with sufficient zeroes.

You can see then that the googolplex is incomparably, incomparably larger than anything I have yet dealt with. —And yet I can represent it in T-numbers without much trouble.

Consider! The T-numbers go up through the digits, T-1, T-2, T-3 and so on and eventually reach T-1,000,000,000,000. (This is a number equivalent to saying "a trillion trillion trillion trillion . . ." and continuing until you have repeated the word, trillion, a trillion times. It will take you umpty-ump lifetimes to do it, but the principle remains.) Since we have decided to let a trillion be written as T-1, the number T-1,000,000,000,000 can be written T-(T-1).

Remember that we must multiply the numerical part of the T-number by 12 to get a ten-bassed exponent. Therefore T-(T-1) is equal to $10^{12,000,000,000,000}$, which is a little higher than $10^{10^{13}}$.

In the same way, we can calculate that T-(T-2) is more than $10^{10^{25}}$. and if we continue we finally find that T-(T-8) is nearly a googolplex. As for T-(T-9) that is far larger than a googolplex; in fact, it is rather larger than a billion googolplexes.

One more item and I am through.

In a book called *The Lore of Large Numbers* by Philip J. Davis, a

number called "Skewes' number" is given. Who (or what) Skewes may be, my library does not tell me. However, the number is described as "reputed to be the largest number that has occurred in a mathematical proof." It is given as: $10^{10^{10^{34}}}$

Since the googolplex is only $10^{10^{10^2}}$, Skewes' number is incomparably the greater of the two?

And how can Skewes number be put into T-formation?

Well, at this point, even I rebel. I'm not going to do it.

I will leave it to you, oh, Gentle Reader, and I will tell you this much as a hint. It seems to me to be obviously greater than T-[T-(T-1)].

From there on in, the track is yours and the road to madness is unobstructed. Full speed ahead, all of you. As for me, I shall hang back and stay sane; or, at least, as sane as I ever am, which isn't much.

Ubi Sunt?

From the *Washington Post*, Feb. 27, 1963: "Mariner II has found that the planet Venus has a life-depriving surface temperature of 800 degrees Fahrenheit and is covered by cold dense clouds in the planet's upper atmosphere."

Gone, gone the webfoot people in the fen,
And rain that bleached the air all days but one,
And traders cheating great-eyed, scaleskin men.
Fled are the folk who dreamed an unseen sun
Deduced and deified from a lonely lamp;
Men driven forth by flopping alien things,
Dined on by sentient creepers in the swamp.
Gone, gone blondes lost in Bogs Where Something Sings
And saved at last by tall men in puttees,
And gone the naked dancers, proud, blue-skinned;
And gone the tideless, phosphorescent seas,
Waveless and still, forsaken of the wind.
And, when the Russian rocket reaches Mars,
Will Bradbury be exiled to the stars?

—R. H. and KATHLEEN P. REIS

GLORY ROAD

by Robert A. Heinlein

(Second of three parts)

SYNOPSIS: My name's Oscar Gordon and I'm a soldier by trade. Both the name and the trade were forced on me. This is a pretty loused-up world, in my opinion, and I know of a better one.

I was taking it easy at a French nudist resort, L'Ile du Levant, when I met this incredible babe, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen or hope to see—

You see, I had just been paid off by the Army, having been drafted into it by a mistake—mine. I had been beating the draft as a semi-pro athlete in college when suddenly football was de-emphasized and I lost a pension as "a dependent of deceased veteran" by turning twenty-one. Broke, I notified my draft board, intending to buck for the Air Force Academy.

So I wound up as a private in Southeast Asia. After much too long a time I was wounded badly enough to be sent home for discharge, at Wiesbaden, because my stepfather and my mother were there. On the way, by military transport via Suez, I bought an Irish Sweepstake's ticket, then won several more of them at poker. But when I got to Germany my family had been sent to Alaska. So I was killing a little time as a civilian while waiting to see if a lucky fluke would win me enough Sweepstake's money to let me stay and go to school in Europe.

That's when I met this Helen of Troy beauty!

I am so dazzled by her that I don't even ask her her name—but she quizzed me a lot. Then she swam away and I lost her.

The next day I searched the island for her—no luck. But the Paris edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* listed one of my tickets as having drawn a horse—thousands of dollars if I grab it at once. So I must go to Nice to take care of it, much as I want to stay and look for her.

My Sweepstake's ticket turns out to be counterfeit.

I was about to go back to L'Ile du Levant when my attention was forced on a personal ad: "ARE YOU A COWARD? We badly need a brave man—high pay, glorious adventure, great danger—" with an exact description of *me* (save for the minor point that I was born with an exact sense of direction). So some idiot is playing games!—so I go to the address in the ad to see what the joke is.

There I met a little, old, pink gnome of a man who turned me over to a "doctor"—who turned out to be my Helen-of-Troy girl.

She gave me a physical examina-

tion, changed my name to "Oscar" and let me call her "Star"—and hypnotised me and took me . . . somewhere.

I don't care where, it is a wonderful world—beautiful, uncrowded, no taxicabs. I've got a job as her "champion," complete with sword and bow, and the old gnome, Rufo, is my groom. They can take their traffic lights and withholding taxes and stuff it!

My first job is to kill an unkillable giant ogre, Igli. This I did by feeding him to himself, feet first, until he was gone. After that we descended a great cliff into the valley of Nevia, fought our way through the Horned Ghosts and the Coldwater Gang, lost all of our baggage and most of our weapons in a swamp, and at last reached the country manor of the local squire, Milord Doral 't Giuk Dorali. Old Jocko was so impressed by my wondrous exploits that he offered me "Table, and Roof, and Bed." I accepted, not quite sure what he meant.

After a magnificent drunken feast Mrs. Jocko and two of her daughters escorted me to bed—and were about to climb in with me. With as much drunken courtesy as I could manage, I told 'em, "No, thanks."

The next morning we left there in a great hurry with Star in a terrible rage. I had a bad hangover and no breakfast. Since Star wasn't speaking, I told Rufo about "The Three Bares" who tried to climb into my bed. Instead of laughing he was terrified—and galloped away to tell Star.

When Star learned what had happened, her anger up to that time was mere pique; she started in to give me the worst tongue lashing I have ever had. But I chopped her off short and blasted her ears back.

We then all turned back to return to the House of the Doral.

Rufo was extremely frightened and told me why. I had scorned the Doral's hospitality after having formally accepted it—so the Doral is now honorbound to kill all of us.

Star explained this in more detail —and in the course of it we each admitted our love for the other. I agreed to try to repair the wrong I had done the Doral. Star thought that it was just barely possible, if she could get in a word or two first, that she might be able to persuade him to spare our lives.

I kissed her and then, swords sheathed and bows unstrung, we rode proudly into the target area.

X

THREE DAYS LATER WE RODE out again.

This time breakfast was sumptuous. This time musicians lined our exit. This time the Doral rode with us.

This time Rufo reeled to his mount, each arm around a wench, a bottle in each hand, then, after busses from a dozen more, was lifted into his seat and belted in the reclining position. He fell asleep, snoring before we set out.

I was kissed goodbye more times than I could count and by some who had no reason to do it so thoroughly—for I was only an apprentice hero, still learning the trade.

It's not a bad trade, despite long hours, occupational hazards, and utter lack of security; it has fringe benefits, with many openings and rapid advancement for a man with push and willingness to learn. The Doral seemed pleased with me.

At breakfast he had sung my prowess up to date in a thousand intricate lines. But I was sober and did not let his praises impress me with my own greatness; I knew better. Obviously a little bird had reported to him regularly—but that bird was a liar. John Henry the Steel-Drivin' Man couldn't have done what Jocko's ode said I did.

But I took it with my heroic features noble and impassive, then I stood up and gave them "Casey at the Bat," putting heart and soul into "Mighty Casey has struck OUT!"

Star gave it a free interpretation. I had (so she sang) praised the ladies of Doral, the ideas being ones associated with Madame Pompadour, Nell Gwyn, Theodora, Ninon de l'Enclos, and Rangy Lil. She didn't name these famous ladies; instead she was specific, in Nevian eulogy that would have startled François Villon.

So I had to come up with an encore. I gave them "Reilly's Daughter," then "Jabberwocky," with gestures.

Star had interpreted me in spirit; she had said what I would have said had I been capable of extemporizing poetry. Late on the second day I had chanced on Star in the steam room of the manor's baths. For an hour we lay wrapped in sheets on adjacent slabs, sweating it out and restoring the tissues. Presently I blurted out to her how surprised—and delighted—I was. I did it sheepishly but Star was one to whom I dared bare my soul.

She had listened gravely. When I ran down, she said quietly, "My Hero, as you know, I do not know America. But from what Rufo tells me your culture is unique, among all the Universes."

"Well, I realize that the U.S.A. is not sophisticated in such things, not the way France is."

" 'France!' " She shrugged, beautifully. " 'Latins are lousy lovers.' I heard that somewhere, I testify that it is true. Oscar, so far as I know, your culture is the only semi-civilized one in which love is not recognized as the highest art and given the serious study it deserves."

"You mean the way they treat it here. Whew! 'Much too good for the common people!' "

"No, I do *not* mean the way it is treated here." She spoke in English. "Much as I love our friends

here, this is a barbarous culture and their arts are barbaric. Oh, good art of its sort, very good; their approach is honest. But—if we live through this, after our troubles are over—I want you to travel among the Universes. You'll see what I mean." She got up, folding her sheet into a toga. "I'm glad you are pleased, my Hero."

I lay there a while longer, thinking about what she had said. The "highest art"—and back home we didn't even study it, much less make any attempt to teach it. Ballet takes years and years. Nor do they hire you to sing at the Met just because you have a loud voice.

Why should "love" be classed as an "instinct"?

Certainly, the appetite for sex is an instinct—but did another appetite make every glutton a gourmet, every fry cook a Cordon Bleu?

I walked out of the steam room whistling "The Best Things in Life Are Free"—then chopped it off in sudden sorrow for all my poor, unhappy compatriots cheated of their birthright by the most mammoth hoax in history.

A mile out the Doral bade us goodbye, embracing me, kissing Star and mussing her hair; then he and his escort drew swords and remained at salute until we passed over the next rise. Star and I rode knee to knee while Rufo snored behind us.

I looked at her and her mouth twitched. She caught my eye and said demurely, "Good morning, milord."

"Good morning, milady. You slept well?"

"Very well, milord. And you?"

"The same, thank you."

"So? 'What was the strange thing the dog did in the night?' "

" 'The dog did nothing in the night, that was the strange thing,' " I answered with a straight face.

"Really? So gay a dog? Then who was that knight I last saw with a lady?"

" 'Twasn't night, 'twas brillig."

"And your vorpal blade went snicker-snack! My beamish boy!"

"Don't try to pin your jabberwocking on *me,* you frolicsome wench," I said severely. "I've got friends, I have—I can prove an alibi. Besides, 'my strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure.' "

"And the line before that one. Yes, I know; your friends told me about it, milord." Suddenly she grinned and slapped me on the thigh and started bellowing the chorus of "Reilly's Daughter." Vita Brevis snorted; Ars Longa pricked up her ears and looked around reprovingly.

"Stop it," I said. "You're shocking the horses."

"They aren't horses and you can't shock them. Have you seen how *they* do it, milord? In spite of all those legs? First—"

"Hold your tongue! Ars Longa is a lady, even if you aren't."

"I warned you I was a bitch. First she sidles up—"

"I've seen it. Muri thought it would amuse me. Instead it gave me an inferiority complex that lasted all afternoon."

"I venture to disbelieve that it was *all* afternoon, milord Hero. Let's sing about Reilly then. You lead, I'll harmonize."

"Well— Not too loud, we'll wake Rufo."

"Not him, he's embalmed."

"Then you'll wake me, which is worse. Star darling, when and where was Rufo an undertaker? And how did he get from that into this business? Did they run him out of town?"

She looked puzzled. "Undertaker? Rufo? Not Rufo."

"He was most circumstantial."

"So? Milord, Rufo has many faults. But telling the truth is not one of them. Moreover, our people do not have undertakers."

"You don't? Then what do you do with leftover carcasses? Can't leave them cluttering the parlor. Untidy."

"I think so, too, but our people do just that: keep them in the parlor. For a few years at least. An overly sentimental custom but we are a sentimental people. Even so, it can be overdone. One of my great aunts kept all her former husbands in her bed chamber—a dreadful clutter and boring, too, because she talked about them, repeating herself and exaggerating. I quit going to see her."

"Well. Did she dust them?"

"Oh, yes. She was a fussy housekeeper."

"Uh— How many were there?"

"Seven or eight, I never counted."

"I see. Star? Is there black widow blood in your family?"

"What? Oh! But, darling, there is black widow blood in every woman." She dimpled, reached over and patted my knee. "But Auntie didn't kill them. Believe me, my Hero, the women in my family are much too fond of men to waste them. No, Auntie just hated to let them go. I think that is foolish. Look forward not back."

"And let the dead past bury its dead.' Look, if your people keep dead bodies around the house, you must have undertakers. Embalmers at least. Or doesn't the air get thick?"

"Embalming? Oh, no! Just place a stasis on them once you're sure they are dead. Or dying. Any school boy can do that." She added, "Perhaps I wronged Rufo. He has spent much time on your Earth—he likes the place, it fascinates him—and he may have tried undertaking. But seems to me an occupation too honest and straightforward to attract him."

"You never did tell me what your people eventually do with a cadaver."

"Not bury it. That would shock them silly." Star shivered. "Even myself, and I've traveled the Universes, learned to be indifferent to almost any custom."

"But what?"

"Much what you did to Igli. Apply a geometrical option and get rid of it."

"Oh. Star, where did Igli go?"

"I couldn't guess, milord. I had no chance to calculate it. Perhaps the ones who made him know. But I think they were even more taken by surprise than I was."

"I guess I'm dense, Star. You call it geometry; Jocko referred to me as a 'mathematician.' But I did what was forced on me by circumstances; I didn't understand it."

"Forced on Igli, you should say, milord Hero. What happens when you place an insupportable strain on a mass, such that it cannot remain where it is? While leaving it nowhere to go? This is a schoolboy problem in metaphysical geometry and the oldest proto-paradox, the one about the irresistible force and the immovable body. The mass implodes. It is squeezed out of its own world into some other. This is often the way the people of a universe discover the Universes—but usually as disastrously as you forced it on Igli; it may take millenia before they control it. It may hover around the fringes as 'magic' for a long time, sometimes working, sometimes failing, sometimes backfiring on the magician."

"And you call this 'mathematics'?"

"How else?"

"I'd call it magic."

"Yes, surely. As I told Jocko, you have a natural genius. You could be a great warlock."

I shrugged uncomfortably. "I don't believe in magic."

"Nor do I," she answered, "the way you put it. I believe in what *is*."

"That's what I mean, Star. I don't believe in hocus-pocus. What happened to Igli—I mean, 'what appeared to happen to Igli'—could not have happened because it would violate the law of conservation of mass-energy. There must be some other explanation."

She was politely silent.

So I brought to bear the sturdy common sense of ignorance and prejudice. "Look, Star, I'm not going to believe the impossible simply because I was there. A natural law is a natural law. You have to admit that."

We rode a few rods before she answered, "May it please milord Hero, the world is not what we wish it to be. It is what it is. No, I have over-assumed. Perhaps it is indeed what we wish it to be. Either way, it is that it *is*. *Le voilà!* Behold it, self demonstrating. Das Ding an sich. Bite it. It *is*. Ai-je raison? Do I speak truly?"

"That's what I was saying! The universe is what it is and can't be changed by jiggery-pokery. It

works by exact rules, like a machine." (I hesitated, remembering a car we had had that was a hypochondriac. It would "fall sick", then "get well" as soon as a mechanic tried to touch it.) I went on firmly, "Natural law never takes a holiday. The invariability of natural law is the cornerstone of science."

"So it is."

"Well?" I demanded.

"So much the worse for science."

"But—" I shut up and rode in huffy silence.

Presently a slender hand touched my forearm, caressed it. "Such a strong sword arm," she said softly. "Milord Hero, may I explain?"

"Talk ahead," I said. "If you can sell me, you can convert the Pope to Mormonism. I'm stubborn."

"Would I have picked you out of hundreds of billions to be my champion were you not?"

" 'Hundreds of billions?' You mean millions, don't you?"

"Hear me, milord. Indulge me. Let us be Socratic. I'll frame the trick questions and you make the stupid answers—and we'll learn who shaved the barber. Then it will be your turn and I'll be the silly stooge. Okay?"

"All right, put a nickel in.'

"Very well. Question: Are the customs at house Doral the customs you used at home?"

"What? You know they aren't. I've never been so flabbergasted since the time the preacher's daughter took me up into the steeple to show me the Holy Ghost." I chuckled sheepishly. "I'd be blushing yet but I've burned out my fuses."

"Yet the basic difference between Nevian customs and yours lies in only one postulate. Milord, there are worlds in which males kill females as soon as eggs are laid—and others in which females eat males even as they are being fructified—like that black widow you made cousin to me."

"I didn't mean that, Star."

"I was not offended, my love. An insult is like a drink; it affects one only if accepted. And pride is too heavy baggage for my journey; I have none. Oscar, would you find such worlds stranger than this one?"

"You're talking about spiders or some such. Not people."

"I speak of people, the dominant race of each its world. Highly civilized."

"Ugh!"

"You will not say 'ugh' when you see them. They are so different from us that their home life cannot matter to us. Contrariwise, this planet is very like your Earth —yet your customs would shock old Jocko out of song. Darling, your world has a custom unique in the Universes. That is, the Twenty Universes known to me, out of thousands or millions or googols

of universes. In the known Twenty Universes only Earth has this astounding custom."

"Do you mean 'War'?"

"Oh, no! Most worlds have warfare. This planet Nevia is one of the few where killing is retail, rather than wholesale. Here there be Heroes, killing is done with passion. This is a world of love and slaughter, both with gay abandon. No, I mean something more shocking. Can you guess?"

"Uh . . . television commercials?"

"Close in spirit, but wide of the mark. You have an expression 'the oldest profession.' Here—and in all other known worlds—it isn't even the youngest. Nobody has heard of it and wouldn't believe it if he did. We few who visit Earth don't talk about it. Not that it would matter; most people don't believe travelers' tales."

"Star, are you telling me that there is *no* prostitution elsewhere in the universe?"

"The Universes, my darling. None."

"You know," I said thoughtfully, "that's going to be a shock to my first sergeant. None at all?"

"I mean," she said bluntly, "that whoring seems to have been invented by Earth people and no others—and the idea would shock old Jocko into impotence. He's a straitlaced moralist."

"I'll be damned! We must be a bunch of slobs."

"I did not mean to offend, Oscar; I was reciting facts. But this oddity of Earth is not odd in its own context. Any commodity is certain to be sold—bought, sold, leased, rented, bartered, traded, discounted, price-stabilized, inflated, bootlegged, and legislated—and a woman's 'commodity' as it was called on Earth in franker days is no exception. The only wonder is the wild notion of thinking of it as a commodity. Why, it so surprised me that once I even— Never mind. Anything can be made a commodity. Someday I will show you cultures living in spaces, not on planets—nor on fundaments of any sort; not all universes have planets—cultures where the breath of life is sold like a kilo of butter in Provence. Other places so crowded that the privilege of staying alive is subject to tax—and delinquents are killed out of hand by the Department of Eternal Revenue and neighbors not only do not interfere, they are pleased."

"Good God! Why?"

"They solved death, milord, and most of them won't emigrate despite endless roomier planets. But we were speaking of Earth. Not only is whoring unknown elsewhere, but its permutations are unknown—dower, bridal price, alimony, separate maintenance, all the variations that color all Earth's institutions—every custom related even remotely to the in-

credible notion that what all women have an endless supply of is nevertheless merchandise, to be hoarded and auctioned."

Ars Longa gave a snort of disgust. No, I don't think she understood. She understands some Nevian but Star spoke English; Nevian lacks the vocabulary.

"Even your secondary customs," she went on, "are shaped by this unique institution. Clothing—you've noticed that there is no real difference here in how the two sexes dress. I'm in tights this morning and you are in shorts but had it been the other way around no one would have noticed."

"The hell they wouldn't! Your tights wouldn't fit me."

"They stretch. And body shyness, which is an aspect of sex-specialized clothing. Here nakedness is as unnoteworthy as on that pretty little island where I found you. All hairless peoples sometimes wear clothing and all peoples no matter how hirsute wear ornaments—but nakedness taboo is found *only* where flesh is merchandise to be packaged or displayed . . . that is to say, on Earth. It parallels 'Don't pinch the grapefruit' and putting false bottoms in berry boxes. If something is never haggled over, there is no need to make a mystery of it."

"So if we get rid of clothes we get rid of prostitution?"

"Heavens, no! You've got it backwards." She frowned. "I don't see how Earth could ever get rid of whoring; it's too much a part of everything you do."

"Star, you've got your facts wrong. There is almost no prostitution in America."

She looked startled. "Really? But— Isn't 'alimony' an American word? And 'gold digger'? And 'coming-out party'?"

"Yes, but prostitution has almost died out. Hell, I wouldn't know how to go about finding a whorehouse even in an Army town. I'm not saying that you don't wind up in the hay. But it's not commercialized. Star, even with an American girl who is well-known to be an easy make-out, if you offered her five bucks—or twenty—it's ten to one she would slap your face."

"Then how is it done?"

"You're nice to her instead. Take her to dinner, maybe to a show. Buy her flowers, girls are suckers for flowers. Then approach the subject politely."

"Oscar, doesn't this dinner and show, and possibly flowers, cost more than five dollars? Or even twenty? I understood that American prices were as high as French prices."

"Well, yes, but you can't just tip your hat and expect a girl to throw herself on her back."

"I rest the case. All I was trying to show was that customs can be wildly different in different worlds."

"That's true, even on Earth. But—"

"Please, milord. I won't argue the virtue of American women, nor was I criticizing. Had I been reared in America I think I would want at least an emerald bracelet rather than dinner and a show. But I was leading up to the subject of 'natural law.' Is it not the invariability of natural law an unproved assumption? Even on Earth?"

"Well— You haven't stated it fairly. It's an assumption, I suppose. But there has never been a case in which it failed to stand up."

"No black swans? Could it not be that an observer who saw an exception preferred not to believe his eyes? Just as you do not want to believe that Igli ate himself even though you, my Hero, forced him to? Never mind. Let's leave Socrates to his Xanthippe. Natural law may be invariable throughout a universe—and seems to be, in rigid universes. But it is certain that natural laws vary from universe to universe—and believe this you *must,* milord, else neither of us will live long!"

I considered it. Damn it, where *had* Igli gone? "Most unsettling."

"No more unsettling, once you get used to it, than shifting languages and customs as you shift countries. How many chemical elements are there on Earth?"

"Uh, ninety-two and a bunch of Johnny-Come-Latelies. A hundred and six or seven."

"Much the same here. Nevertheless a chemist from Earth would suffer some shocks. The elements aren't quite the same, nor do they behave quite the same way. H-bombs won't work here and dynamite won't explode."

I said sharply, "Now wait! Are you telling me that electrons and protons aren't the same here, to get down to basics?"

She shrugged. "Perhaps, perhaps not. What is an electron but a mathematical concept? Have you tasted one lately? Or put salt on the tail of a wavicle? Does it matter?"

"It damn' well would matter. A man can starve as dead from lack of trace elements as from lack of bread."

"True. In some universes we humans must carry food if we visit them—which we sometimes must, if only to change trains. But here, and in each of the universes and countless planets where we humans live, you need not worry; local food will nourish you. Of course, if you lived here many years, then went back to Earth and died soon after and an autopsy were done with fussiest microanalysis, the analyst might not believe his results. But your stomach wouldn't care."

I thought about this, my belly stuffed with wonderful food and the air around me sweet and good

—certainly my body did not care if there were indeed the differences Star spoke of.

Then I recalled one aspect of life in which little differences cause big differences. I asked Star about it.

She looked blandly innocent. "Do you care, milord? You will be long gone before it matters to Doral. I thought your purpose these three days was simply to help me in my problem? With pleasure in your work, I realize—you threw yourself into the spirit of the occasion."

"Damn it, quit pulling my leg! I did it to help you. But a man can't help wondering."

She slapped my thigh and laughed. "Oh, my very darling! Stop wondering; human races throughout the Universes can crossbreed. Some crosses fruit but seldom and some mule out. But this is not one of them. You will live on here, even if you never return. You're not sterile; that was one of many things I checked when I examined your beautiful body in Nice. One is never sure how the dice will roll, but—I think the Doral will not be disappointed."

She leaned toward me. "Would you give your physician data more accurate than that which Jocko sang? I might offer a statistical probability. Or even a Sight."

"No, I would not! Nosy."

"It is a long nose, isn't it? As you wish, milord. In a less personal vein the fact of crossbreeding among humans of different universes—and some animals such as dogs and cats—is a most interesting question. The only certainty is that human beings flourish only in those universes having chemistries so similar that elements that make up deoxyribonucleic acids are so alike as not to matter. As for the rest, every scholar has his theory. Some hold to a teleologic explanation, asserting that Man evolves alike in all essential particulars in every universe that can support him because of Divine Plan—or through blind necessity, depending on whether the scholar takes his religion straight or chases it with soda.

"Some think that we evolved just once—or were created, as may be—and leaked across into other universes. Then they fight over which universe was the home of the race."

"How can there be any argument?" I objected. "Earth has fossil evidence covering the evolution of man. Other planets either have it or not, and that should settle it."

"Are you sure, milord? I thought that, on Earth, man's family tree has as many dotted lines as there are bastards in European royal lines."

I shut up, I had simply read some popular books. Perhaps she

was right; a race that could not agree as to who did what to whom in a war only twenty years back probably didn't know what Alley Oop did to the upstairs maid a million years ago, when the evidence was only scattered bones. Hadn't there been hoaxes? The Piltdown Man, or some such?

Star went on, "Whatever the truth, there *are* leakages between worlds. On your own planet disappearances run to hundreds of thousands and not all are absconders or wife-deserters; see any police department's files. One usual place is the battle field. The strain becomes too great and a man slides through a hole he didn't know was there and winds up 'missing in action.' Sometimes—not often—a man is seen to disappear. One of your American writers, Bierce or Pierce, got interested and collected such cases. He collected so many that he was collected, too. And your Earth experiences reverse leakage, the 'Kaspar Hausers,' persons from nowhere, speaking no known language, and never able to account for themselves."

"Wait a minute? Why just people?"

"I didn't say 'just people.' Have you never heard of rains of frogs? Of stones? Of blood? Who questions a stray cat's origin? Are all flying saucers optical illusions? I promise you they are not; some are poor lost astronauts trying to find their way home. My people use space travel very little, as faster-than-light is the readiest way to lose yourself among the universes. We prefer the safer method of metaphysical geometries—or 'magic' in the vulgar speech."

Star looked thoughtful. "Milord, your Earth may be the home of mankind. Some scholars think so."

"Why?"

"It touches so many other worlds. It's the top of the list as a transfer point. If its people render it unfit for life—unlikely, but possible—it will disrupt traffic of a dozen Universes. Earth has had its fairy rings, and Gates, and Bifrost Bridges for ages; that one we used in Nice was there before the Romans came."

"Star, how can you talk about points on Earth 'touching' other planets—for centuries on end? The Earth moves around the Sun at twenty miles a second or such, and spins on its axis, not to mention other motions that add up to an involved curve at unthinkable speed. So how can it 'touch' other worlds?"

Again we rode in silence. At last Star said, "My Hero, how long did it take you to learn calculus?"

"Why, I haven't learned it. I've studied it a couple of years."

"Can you tell me how a particle can be a wave?"

"What? Star, that's quantum mechanics, not calculus. I could

give an explanation but it wouldn't mean anything; I don't have the math. An engineer doesn't need it."

"It would be simplest," she said diffidently, "to answer your question by saying 'Magic' just as you answered mine with 'quantum mechanics.' But you don't like that word, so all I can say is that after you study higher geometries, metaphysical and conjectural as well as topological and judicial—if you care to make such study—I will gladly answer. But you won't need to ask."

(Ever been told: "Wait till you grow up, dear; then you will understand"? As a kid I didn't like it from grownups; I liked it still less from a girl I was in love with when I was fully grown.)

Star didn't let me sulk; she shifted the talk. "Some crossbreedings are neither from accidental slippages nor planned travel. You've heard of incubi and succubi?"

"Oh, sure. But I never bother my head with myths."

"Not myths, darling, no matter how often the legend has been used to explain embarrassing situations. Witches and warlocks are not always saints and some acquire a taste for rape. A person who has learned to open Gates can indulge such vice; he—or she—can sneak up on a sleeping person—maid, chaste wife, virgin boy—work his will and be long gone before cock crow." She shuddered. "Sin at its nastiest. If we catch them, we kill them. I've caught a few, I killed them. Sin at its worst, even if the victim learns to like it." She shuddered again.

"Star, what is your definition of 'sin'?"

"Can there be more than one? Sin is cruelty and injustice, all else is peccadillo. Oh, a sense of sin comes from violating the customs of your tribe. But breaking custom is not sin even when it feels so; sin is wronging another person."

"How about 'sinning against God'?" I persisted.

She looked at me sharply. "So again we shave the barber? First, milord, tell me what you mean by 'God.' "

"I just wanted to see if you would walk into it."

"I haven't walked into that one in a mort of years. I'd as lief thrust with a bent wrist, or walk a pentacle in clothes. Speaking of pentacles, my Hero, our destination is not what it was three days ago. Now we go to a Gate I had not expected to use. More dangerous but it can't be helped."

"My fault! I'm sorry, Star."

"*My* fault, milord. But not all loss. When we lost our luggage I was more worried than I dared show—even though I was never easy about carrying firearms through a world where they may not be used. But our foldbox car-

ried much more than firearms, things we are vulnerable without. The time you spent in soothing the hurt to the Doral's ladies I spent—in part—in wheedling the Doral for a new kit, almost everything heart could wish but firearms. Not all loss."

"We are going to another world now?"

"Not later than tomorrow dawn, if we live."

"Damn it, Star, both you and Rufo talk as if each breath might be our last."

"As it might be."

"You're not expecting an ambush now; we're still on Doral land. But Rufo is as full of dire forebodings as a cheap melodrama. And you are almost as bad."

"I'm sorry. Rufo does fret—but he is a good man at your back when trouble starts. As for me, I have been trying to be fair, milord, to let you know what to expect."

"Instead you confuse me. Don't you think it's time you put your cards face up?"

She looked troubled. "And if the Hanging Man is the first card turned?"

"I don't give a hoot! I can face trouble without fainting—"

"I know you can, my champion."

"Thanks. —but not knowing makes me edgy. So talk."

"I will answer any question, milord Oscar. I have always been willing to."

"But you know that I don't know what questions to ask. Maybe a carrier pigeon doesn't need to know what the war is about —but I feel like a sparrow in a badminton game. So start from the beginning."

"As you say, milord. About seven thousand years ago—" Star stopped. "Oscar, do you want to know—*now*—all the interplay of politics of a myriad worlds and twenty universes over millenia in arriving at the present crisis? I'll try if you say, but just to outline it would take more time than remains until we *must* pass through that Gate. You are my true championg my life hangs on your courage and skill. Do you want the politics behind my present helpless, almost hopeless predicament —save for you! Or shall I concentrate on the tactical situation?"

(Damn it! I did want the whole story.) "Let's stick to the tactical situation. For now."

"I promise," she said solemnly, "that if we live through it, you shall have every detail. The situation is this: I had intended us to cross Nevia by barge, then through the mountains to reach a Gate beyond the Eternal Peaks. That route is less risky but long.

'But now we must hurry. We will turn off the road late this afternoon and pass through some wild country, and country still worse after dark. The Gate there we must reach before dawn; with

luck we may sleep. I hope so, because this Gate takes us to another world at a much more dangerous exit.

"Once there, in that world—Hokesh it is called, or Karth—in Karth-Hokesh we shall be close, too close, to a tall tower, mile high, and, if we win to it, our troubles start. In it is the Never-Born, the Eater of Souls—"

"Star, are you trying to scare me?"

"I would rather you were frightened now, if such is possible, than have you surprised later. My thought, milord, had been to advise you of each danger as we reached it, so that you could concentrate on one at a time. But you overruled me."

"Maybe you were right. Suppose you give me details on each as we come to it, just the outline now. So I'm to fight the Eater of Souls, am I? The name doesn't scare me; if he tries to eat *my* soul, he'll throw up. What do I fight him with? Spit?"

"That is one way," she said seriously, "but, with luck, we won't fight him—it—at all. We want what it guards."

"And what is that?"

"The Egg of the Phoenix."

"The Phoenix doesn't lay eggs."

"I know, milord. That makes it uniquely valuable."

"But—"

She hurried on. "That is its name. It is a small object, somewhat larger than an ostrich egg and black. If I do not capture it, many bad things will happen. Among them is a small one: I will die. I mention that because it may not seem small to you—my darling!—and it is easier to tell you that one truth than it is to explain the issues."

"Okay. We steal the Egg. Then what?"

"Then we go home. To my home. After which you may return to yours. Or remain in mine. Or go where you wish, through Twenty Universes and myriad worlds. Under any choice, whatever treasure you fancy is yours; you will have earned it and more . . . as well as my heartful thanks, milord Hero, and anything you ask of me."

(The biggest blank check ever written— If I could cash it.) "Star, you don't seem to think we will live through it."

She took a deep breath. "Not likely, milord. I tell you truth. My blunder has forced on us a most desperate alternative."

"I see. Star, will you marry me? Today?"

Then I said, "Easy there! Don't fall!" She hadn't been in danger of falling; the seat belt held her. But she sagged against it. I leaned over and put my arm around her shoulders. "Nothing to cry about. Just give me a Yes or a No—and I fight for you anyway. Oh, I forgot. I love you. Anyhow I think it's

love. A funny, fluttery feeling whenever I look at you or think about you—which is mostly."

"I love you, milord," she said huskily. "I have loved you since I first saw you. Yes, a 'funny, fluttery feeling' as if everything inside me were about to melt down."

"Well, not quite that," I admitted. "But it's probably opposite polarity for the same thing. Fluttery, anyhow. Chills and lightnings. How do we get married around here?"

"But, milord—my love—you always astound me. I knew you loved me. I hoped that you would tell me before—well, in time. Let me hear it once. I did not expect you to offer to *marry* me!"

"Why not? I'm a man, you're a woman. It's customary."

"But—oh, my love, I told you! It isn't necessary to marry me. By your rules . . . I'm a bitch."

"Bitch, witch, Sing Along with Mitch! What the hell, honey? That was *your* word, not mine. You have about convinced me that the rules I was taught are barbarous and yours are the straight goods. Better blow your nose—here, want my hanky?"

Star wiped her eyes and blew her nose but instead of the yes-darling I wanted to hear she sat up straight and did not smile. She said formally, "Milord Hero, had you not best sample the wine before you buy the barrel?"

I pretended not to understand.

"Please, milord love," she insisted. "I mean it. There's a grassy bit on your side of the road, just ahead. You can lead me to it this moment and willingly I will go."

I sat high and pretended to peer. "Looks like crab grass. Scratchy."

"Then p- p- pick your own grass! Milord . . . I am willing, and eager, and not uncomely—but you will learn that I am a Sunday painter compared with artists you will someday meet. I am a working woman. I haven't been free to give the matter the dedicated study it deserves. Believe me! No, *try* me. You can't know that you want to marry me."

"So you're a cold and clumsy wench, eh?"

"Well . . . I didn't say *that*. I'm not entirely unskilled—and I do have enthusiasm."

"Yes, like your auntie with the your family, so you said. Let it stand that I want to marry you in spite of your obvious faults."

"But—"

"Star, you talk too much."

"Yes, milord," she said meekly.

"We're getting married. How do we do it? Is the local lord also justice of the peace? If he is, there will be no droit du seigneur; we haven't time for frivolities."

"Each squire is the local justice," Star agreed thoughtfully, "and does perform marriages, although most Nevians don't bother. But— Well, yes, he would expect

droit du seigneur and, as you pointed out, we haven't time to waste."

"Nor is that my idea of a honeymoon. Star—look at me. I don't expect to keep you in a cage; I know you weren't raised that way. But we won't look up the squire. What's the local brand of preacher? A celibate brand, by choice."

"But the squire is the priest, too. Not that religion is an engrossing matter in Nevia; fertility rites are all they bother with. Milord love, the simplest way is to jump over your sword."

"Is that a marriage ceremony where you come from, Star?"

"No, it's from your world:

'Leap rogue, and jump whore,
'And married be forevermore—"

"Mmm— I don't care for the marriage lines. I may be a rogue but I know what you think of whores. What other chances are there?"

"Let me see. There's a rumormonger in a village we pass through soon after lunch. They sometimes marry townies who want it known far and wide; the service includes spreading the news."

"What sort of service?"

"I don't know. And I don't care, milord love. Married we will be!"

"That's the spirit! We won't stop for lunch."

"No, milord," she said firmly, "if wife I am to be, I shall be a good wife and not permit you to skip meals."

"Henpecking already. I think I'll beat you."

"As you will, milord. But you must eat, you are going to need your strength—"

"I certainly will!"

"—for fighting. For now I am ten times as anxious that we both live through it. Here is a place for lunch." She turned Vita Brevis off the road; Ars Longa followed. Star looked back over her shoulder and dimpled. "Have I told you today that you are beautiful . . . my love!"

XI

RUFO'S LONGHORSE FOLLOWED us onto the grassy verge Star picked for picnicking. He was still limp as a wet sock and snoring. I would have let him sleep but Star was shaking him.

He came awake fast, reaching for his sword and shouting, "A moi! M'aidez! Les vaches!' Fortunately some friend had stored his sword and belt out of reach on the baggage rack aft.

Then he shook his head and said, "How many were there?"

"Down from there, old friend," Star said cheerfully. "We've stopped to eat."

" 'Eat'!" Rufo gulped and shuddered. "Please, milady. No obscenity." He fumbled at his seat belt and fell out of his saddle; I steadied him.

Star was searching through her pouch; she pulled out a vial and offered it to Rufo. He shied back. "Milady!"

"Shall I hold your nose?" she said sweetly.

"I'll be all right. Just give me a moment . . . and the hair of the dog."

"Certainly you'll be all right. Shall I ask milord Oscar to pin your arms?"

Rufo glanced at me appealingly; Star opened the little bottle. It fizzed and fumes rolled out and down. *"Now!"*

Rufo shuddered, held his nose, tossed it down.

I won't say smoke shot out of his ears. But he flapped like torn canvas in a gale and horrible noises came out.

Then he came into focus as suddenly as a TV picture. He appeared heavier and inches taller and had firmed out. His skin was a rosy glow instead of death pallor. "Thank you, milady," he said cheerfully, his voice resonant and virile. "Someday I hope to return the favor."

"When the Greeks reckon time by the kalends," she agreed. Rufo led the longhorses aside and fed them, opening the foldbox and digging out haunches of bloody meat. Ars Longa ate a hundredweight and Vita Brevis and Mors Profunda even more; on the road these beasts need a high-protein diet. That done, he whistled as he set up table and chairs for Star and myself.

"Sugar Pie," I said to Star, "what's in that pick-me-up?"

"An old family recipe:

'Eye of newt and toe of frog,
'Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
'Adder's fork and blindworm's sting,
'Lizard's leg and howlet's wing—' "

"Shakespeare!" I said. "Macbeth."

" 'Cool it with a baboon's blood —' No, Will got it from me, milord love. That's the way with writers; they'll steal anything, file off the serial numbers, and claim it for their own. I got it from my aunt—another aunt—who was a professor of internal medicine. The rhyme is a mnemonic for the real ingredients which are much more complicated—never can tell when you'll need a hangover cure. I compounded it last night, knowing that Rufo, for the sake of our skins, would need to be at his sharpest today—two doses, in fact, in case you needed one. But you surprised me, my love; you break out with nobility at the oddest times."

"A family weakness. I can't help it."

"Luncheon is served, milady."

I offered Star my arm. Hot foods were hot, cold ones chilled; this new foldbox, in Lincoln green embossed with the Doral

chop, had equipment that the lost box lacked. Everything was delicious and the wines were superb.

Rufo ate heartily from his serving board while keeping an eye on our needs. He had come over to pour the wine for the salad when I broke the news. "Rufo old comrade, milady Star and I are getting married today. I want you to be the best man and help prop me up."

He dropped the bottle.

Then he was busy wiping me and mopping the table. When at last he spoke, it was to Star. "Milady," he said tightly, "I have put up with much, uncomplaining, for reasons I need not state. But this is going too far. I won't let—'

"Hold your tongue!"

"Yes," I agreed, "hold it while I cut it out. Will you have it fried? Or boiled?"

Rufo looked at me and breathed heavily. Then he left abruptly, withdrawing beyond the serving board. Star said softly. "Milord love, I am sorry."

"What twisted *his* tail?" I said wonderingly. Then I thought of the obvious. "Star! Is Rufo jealous?"

She looked astounded, started to laugh and chopped it off. "No, no, darling! It's not that at all. Rufo— Well, Rufo has his foibles but he is utterly dependable where it counts. And we need him. Ignore it. Please, milord."

"As you say. It would take more than that to make me unhappy today."

Rufo came back, face impassive, and finished serving. He repacked without speaking and we hit the road.

The road skirted the village green; we left Rufo there and sought out the rumormonger. His shop, a crooked lane away, was easy to spot; an apprentice was beating a drum in front of it and shouting teasers of gossip to a crowd of locals. We pushed through and went inside.

The master rumormonger was reading something in each hand with a third scroll propped against his feet on a desk. He looked, dropped feet to floor, jumped up and made a leg while waving us to seats. "Come in, come in, my gentles!" he sang out. "You do me great honor, my day is made! And yet if I may say so you have come to the right place whatever your problem whatever your need you have only to speak good news bad news every sort but sad news reputations restored events embellished history rewritten great deeds sung and all work guaranteed by the oldest established news agency in all Nevia news from all worlds all universes propaganda planted or uprooted offset or rechanneled saisfaction guaranteed honesty is the best policy but the client is always right don't tell me I know I know I have spies in every kitchen ears in every bedroom the Hero

Gordon without a doubt and your fame needs no heralds milord but honored am I that you should seek me out a biography perhaps to match your matchless deeds complete with old nurse who recalls in her thin and ancient and oh so persuasive voice the signs and portents at your birth—"

Star chopped him off. "We want to get married."

His mouth shut, he looked sharply at Star's waistline and almost bought a punch in the nose. "It is a pleasure to do business with clients who know their own minds. And I must add that I heartily endorse such a public-spirited project. All this modern bundling and canoodling and scuttling without even three cheers or a by-your-leave sends taxes up and profits down that's logic. I only wish I had time to get married myself as I've told my wife many's the time. Now as to plans, if I may make a modest suggestion—"

"We want to be married by the customs of Earth."

"Ah, yes, certainly." He turned to a cabinet near his desk, spun dials. After a bit he said, "Your pardon, gentles, but my head is crammed with a billion facts, large and small, and—that name? Does it start with one 'R' or two?"

Star moved around, inspected the dials, made a setting.

The rumormonger blinked. "*That* universe? We seldom have a call for it. I've often wished I had time to travel but business business business—*LIBRARY!*". .

"Yes, Master?" a voice answered.

"The planet Earth, Marriage Customs of—that's a capital 'Urr' and a soft theta." He added a five-group serial number. "Snap it up!"

In very short time an apprentice came running with a thin scroll. "Librarian says careful how you handle it, Master. Very brittle, he says. He says—"

"Shut up. Your pardon, gentles." He inserted the scroll in a reader and began to scan.

His eyes bugged out and he sat forward. "Unbeliev—" Then he muttered, "Amazing! Whatever made them think of *that!*" For several minutes he appeared to forget we were there, simply giving vent to: "Astounding! Fantastic!" and like expressions.

I tapped his elbow. "We're in a hurry."

"Eh? Yes, yes, milord Hero Gordon—milady." Reluctantly he left the scanner, fitted his palms together, and said, "You've come to the right place. Not another rumormonger in all Nevia could handle a project this size. Now my thought is—just a rough idea, talking off the top of my head—for the procession we'll need to call in the surrounding countryside although for the charivari we could make do with just towns-

people if you want to keep it modest in accordance with your reputation for dignified simplicity—say one day for the procession and a nominal two nights of charivari with guaranteed noise levels—"

"Hold it."

"Milord? I'm not going to make a profit on this; it will be a work of art, a labor of love—just expenses plus a little something for my overhead. It's my professional judgment, too, that a Samoan preceremony would be more sincere, more touching really, than the optional Zulu rite. For a touch of comedy relief—at no extra charge; one of my file clerks just happens to be seven months along, she'd be glad to run down the aisle and interrupt the ceremony—and of course there is the matter of witnesses to the consummation, how many for each of you, but that needn't be settled this week; we have the street decorations to think of first, and—"

I took her arm. "We're leaving."

"Yes, milord," Star agreed.

He chased after us, shouting about broken contracts. I put hand to sword and showed six inches of blade; his squawks shut off.

Rufo seemed to be all over his mad; he greeted us civilly, even cheerfully. We mounted and left. We had been riding south a mile or so when I said, "Star darling —"

"Milord love?"

"That 'jumping over the sword' —that really is a marriage ceremony?"

"A very old one, my darling. I think it dates back to the Crusades."

"I've thought of an updated wording:

'Jump rogue, and princess leap'
'My wife art thou and mine to keep!'

—would that suit you?"

"Yes, yes!"

"For the second line you say:

'—thy wife I vow and thine to keep'.

Got it?"

Star gave a gasp. "Yes, my love!"

We left Rufo with the long-horses, giving no explanation, and climbed a little wooded hill. All of Nevia is beautiful, with never a beer can nor a dirty Kleenex to mar its Eden loveliness, but here we found an outdoor temple, a smooth grassy place surrounded by arching trees, an enchanted sanctuary.

I drew my sword and glanced along it, feeling its exquisite balance while noting again the faint ripples left by feather-soft hammer blows of some master swordsmith. I tossed it and caught it by the forte. "Read the motto, Star."

She traced it out. " 'Dum vivimus, vivamus!'—'While we live, let us *live!*' Yes, my love, yes!" She kissed it and handed it back; I placed it on the ground.

"Know your lines?" I asked.

"Graved in my heart."

I took her hand in mine. "Jump high. One . . . two . . . three!"

XII

WHEN I LED MY BRIDE BACK down that blessed hill, arm around her waist, Rufo helped us mount without comment. But he could hardly miss that Star now addressed me as: "Milord husband." He mounted and tailed in, a respectful distance out of earshot.

We rode hand in hand for at least an hour. Whenever I glanced at her, she was smiling; whenever she caught my eye, the smile grew dimples. Once I asked, "How soon must we keep lookout?"

"Not until we leave the road, milord husband."

That held us another mile. At last she said timidly, "Milord husband?"

"Yes, wife?"

"Do you still think that I am 'a cold and clumsy wench'?"

"Mmm . . ." I answered thoughtfully, "'cold'—no, I couldn't honestly say you were cold. But 'clumsy'—Well, compared with an artist like Muri, let us say—"

"Milord husband!"

"Yes? I was saying—"

"Are you honing for a kick in the belly?"

"Would you kick me in the belly?"

She was slow in answering and her voice was very low. "No, milord husband. Never."

"I'm pleased to hear it. But if you did, what would happen?"

"You—You would spank me. With my own sword. But not with your sword. Please, never with *your* sword . . . my husband."

"Not with your sword, either. With my hand. Hard. First I would spank you. And then—"

"And then what?"

I told her. "But don't give me cause. According to plans I have to fight later. And don't interrupt me in the future."

"Yes, milord husband."

"Very well. Now let's assign Muri an arbitrary score of ten. On that scale you would rate—Let me think."

"Three or four, perhaps? Or even five?"

"Quiet. I make it about a thousand. Yes, a thousand, give or take a point. I haven't a slide rule."

"Oh, what a beast you are, my darling! Lean close and kiss me—and just wait till I tell Muri."

"You'll say nothing to Muri, my bride, or you will be paddled. Quit fishing for compliments. You know what you are, you sword-jumping wench."

"And what am I?"

"My princess."

"Oh."

"And a mink with its tail on fire—and you know it."

"Is that good? I've studied

American idiom most carefully but sometimes I am not sure."

"It's supposed to be tops. A figure of speech, I've never known a mink that well. Now get your mind on other matters, or you may be a widow on your bridal day. Dragons, you say?"

"Not until after nightfall, milord husband—and they aren't really dragons."

"As you described them, the difference could matter only to another dragon. Eight feet high at the shoulders, a few tons each, and teeth as long as my forearm —all they need is to breathe flame."

"Oh, but they do! Didn't I say?"

I sighed. "No, you did not."

"They don't exactly *breathe* fire. That would kill them. They hold their breaths while flaming. It's swamp gas—methane—from the digestive tract. It's a controlled belch, with a hypergolic effect from an enzyme secreted between the first and second rows of teeth. The gas bursts into flame on the way out."

"I don't care how they do it; they're flamethrowers. Well? How do you expect me to handle them?"

"I had hoped that you would have ideas. You see," she added apologetically, "I hadn't planned on it, I didn't expect us to come this way."

"Well—Wife, let's go back to that village. Set up in competition with our friend the rumormonger —I'll bet we could out-gabble him."

"Milord husband!"

"Never mind. If you want me to kill dragons every Wednesday and Saturday, I'll be on call. This flaming methane—Do they spout it from both ends?"

"Oh, just the front end. How could it be both?"

"Easy. See next year's model. Now quiet; I'm thinking over a tactic. I'll need Rufo. I suppose he has killed dragons before?"

"I don't know that a man has ever killed one, milord husband."

"So? My princess, I'm flattered by the confidence you place in me. Or is it desperation? Don't answer, I don't want to know. Keep quiet and let me think."

At the next farm house Rufo was sent in to arrange returning the longhorses. They were ours, gifts from the Doral, but we had to send them home as they could not live where we were going—Muri had promised me that she would keep an eye on Ars Longa and exercise her. Rufo came back with a bumpkin mounted on a heavy draft animal, bareback—he kept shifting nimbly between second and third pairs of legs to spare the animal's back and controlled it by voice.

When we dismounted, retrieved our bows and quivers, and prepared to hoof it, Rufo came up. "Boss, Manure Foot craves to meet

the hero and touch his sword. Brush him off?"

Rank hath its duties as well as its privileges. "Fetch him."

The lad, overgrown and fuzz on his chin, approached eagerly, stumbling over his feet, then made a leg so long he almost fell. "Straighten up, son," I said. "What's your name?"

"Pug, milord Hero," he answered shrilly. ("Pug" will do. The Nevian meaning was as rugged as Jocko's jokes.)

"A stout name. What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"A hero, milord! Like yourself."

I thought of telling him about those rocks on the Glory Road. But he would find them soon enough if ever he tramped it—and either not mind, or turn back and forget the silly business. I nodded approvingly and assured him that there was always room at the top in the Hero business for a lad with spirit—and that the lower the start, the greater the glory . . . so work hard and study hard and wait his opportunity. Keep his guard up but always speak to strange ladies; adventure would come his way. Then I let him touch my sword—but not take it in hand. The Lady Vivamus is *mine* and I'd rather share my toothbrush.

Once, when I was young, I was presented to a Congressman. He had handed me the same fatherly guff I was now plagiarizing. Like prayer, it can't do any harm and might do some good, and I found that I was sincere when I said it and no doubt the Congressman was, too. Oh, possibly some harm, as the youngster might get himself killed on the first mile of that road. But that is better than siting over the fire in your old age, sucking your gums and thinking about the chances you missed and the gals you didn't tumble. Isn't it?

I decided that the occasion seemed so important to Pug that it should be marked, so I groped in my pouch and found a U.S. quarter. "What's the rest of your name, Pug?"

"Just 'Pug,' milord. Of house Lerdki, of course."

"Now you will have three names because I am giving you one of mine." I had one I didn't need, Oscar Gordon suited me fine. Not "Flash" as that name was never acknowledged by me. Not my Army nickname; I wouldn't write that one on the wall of a latrine. "Easy" was the name I could spare. I had always used "E. C. Gordon" rather than "Evelyn Cyril Gordon" and in school my name had shifted from "E. C." to "Easy" because of my style of broken-field running—I never ran harder nor dodged more than the occasion demanded.

"By authority vested in me by Headquarters United States Army Southeast Asia Command I, the

Hero Oscar, ordain that you shall be known henceforth as Lerdki 't Pug Easy. Wear it proudly."

I gave him the quarter and showed him George Washington on the obverse. "This is the father of my house, a greater hero than I will ever be. He stood tall and proud, spoke the truth, and fought for the right as he saw it, against fearful odds. Try to be like him. And here—" I turned it over. "—is the chop of my house, the house he founded. The bird stands for courage, freedom, and ideals soaring high." (I didn't tell him that the American Eagle eats carrion, never tackles anything its own size, and will soon be extinct—it *does* stand for those ideals. A symbol means what you put into it.)

Pug Easy nodded violently and tears started to flow. I had not presented him to my bride; I didn't know that she would wish to meet him. But she stepped forward and said gently, "Pug Easy, remember the words of milord Hero. Treasure them and they will last you all your life."

The kid dropped to his knees. Star touched his hair and said, "Stand, Lerdki 't Pug Easy. Stand tall."

I said goodbye to Ars Longa, told her to be a good girl and I would be back someday. Pug Easy headed back with longhorses tailed up and we set out into the woods, arrows nocked and Rufo eyes-behind. There was a sign where we left the yellow brick road; freely translated it read: "All Hope Abandon, Ye Who Enter Here."

(A literal translation is reminiscent of Yellowstone Park: "Warning—the varmints in these woods are *not* tame. Travelers are warned to stay on the road, as their remains will not be returned to their kin. The Lerdki, His Chop")

Presently Star said, "Milord husband—"

"Yes, pretty foots?" I didn't look at her; I was watching my side and a bit of hers, and keeping an eye overhead as well, as we could be bombed here—something like blood kites but smaller and goes for the eyes.

"My Hero, you are truly noble and you have your wife most proud."

"Huh? How?" I had my mind on targets—two kinds on the ground here: a rat big enough to eat cats and willing to eat people, and a wild hog about the same size and not a ham sandwich on him anyplace, all rawhide and bad temper. The hogs were easier targets, I had been told, because they charge straight at you. But don't miss. And have your sword loosened, you won't nock a second shaft.

"That lad, Pug Easy. What you did for him."

"Him? I fed him the old malarkey. Cost nothing."

"It was a kingly deed, milord husband."

"Oh, nonsense, diddycums. He expected big talk from a hero, so I did."

"Oscar my beloved, may a loyal wife point it out to her husband when he speaks nonsense of himself? I have known many heroes and some were such oafs that one would feed them at the back door if their deeds did not claim a place at the table. I have known few men who were noble, for nobility is scarcer far than heroism. But true nobility can always be recognized . . . even in one as belligerently shy about showing it as you are. The lad expected it, so you gave it to him—but noblesse oblige is an emotion felt only by those who are noble."

"Well, maybe. Star, you are talking too much again. Don't you think these varmints have ears?"

"Your pardon, milord. They have such good ears that they hear footsteps through the ground long before they hear voices. Let me have the last word, today being my bridal day. If you are—no, when you are gallant to some beauty, let us say Letva—or Muri, damn her lovely eyes!—I do not count it as nobility; it must be assumed to spring from a much commoner emotion than noblesse oblige. But when you speak to a country lout with pig sty on his feet, garlic on his breath, the stink of sweat all over him, and pimples on his face —speak gently and make *him* feel for the time as noble as you are and let him hope one day to be your equal . . . I know it is not because you hope to tumble him."

"Oh, I don't know. Boys that age are considered a treat in some circles. Give him a bath, perfume him, curl his hair—"

"Milord husband, is it permitted for me to *think* about kicking you in the belly?"

"Can't be court-martialed for thinking, that's the one thing they can't take away from you. Okay, I prefer girls; I'm a square and can't help it. What's this about Muri's eyes? Long legs, are you jealous?"

I could hear dimples even though I couldn't stop to see them. "Only on my wedding day, milord husband; the other days are yours. If I catch you in sportiveness, I shall either not see it, or congratulate you, as may be."

"I don't expect you'll catch me."

"And I trust you'll not catch *me,* milord rogue," she answered serenely.

She did get the last word, for just then Rufo's bowstring went *Fwung!* He called out, "Got 'im!" and then we were very busy. Hogs so ugly they made razorbacks look like Poland-Chinas—I got one by arrow, down his slobbering throat, then fed steel to his brother a frozen second later. Star got a fair hit at hers but it deflected on bone and kept coming and I kicked it in the shoulder as I was still trying to free my blade from its cousin. Steel between its ribs quieted it

and Star coolly nocked another shaft and let fly while I was killing it. She got one more with her sword, leaning the point in like a matador at the moment of truth, dancing aside as it still came on, dead and unwilling to admit it.

The fight was over. Old Rufo had got three unassisted and a nasty goring; I had a scratch and my bride was unhurt, which I made sure of as soon as things were quiet. Then I mounted guard while our surgeon took care of Rufo, after which she dressed my lesser cut.

"How about it, Rufo?" I asked. "Can you walk?"

"Boss, I won't stay in this forest if I have to crawl. Let's mush. Anyhow," he added, nodding at the worthless pork around us, "we won't be bothered by rats right away."

I rotated the formation, placing Rufo and Star ahead with his good leg on the outside and myself taking rear guard, where I should have been all along. Rear guard is slightly safer than point under most conditions but these weren't most conditions. I had let my blind need to protect personally my bride affect my judgement.

Having taken the hot spot I then went almost cross-eyed trying not only to see behind but ahead as well, so that I could close fast if Star—yes, and Rufo—got into trouble. Luckily we had a breathing spell in which I sobered down and took to heart the oldest lesson on patrol: you *can't* do the other man's job. Then I gave all my attention to our rear. Rufo, old as he was and wounded, would not die without slaughtering an honor guard to escort him to tell in style —and Star was no fainting heroine. I would bet long odds on her against anyone her own weight, name your weapon or bare-handed, and I pity the man who ever tried to rape her; he's probably still searching for his cojones.

Hogs didn't bother us again but as evening approached we began to see and oftener to hear those giant rats; they paced us, usually out of sight; they never attacked berserk the way the hogs had; they looked for the best of it, as rats always do.

Rats give me the horrors. Once when I was a kid, my Dad dead and Mother not yet remarried, we were flat broke and living in an attic in a condemned building. You could hear rats in the walls and twice rats ran over me in my sleep.

I still wake up screaming.

It doesn't improve a rat to blow it up to the size of a coyote. These were real rats, even to the whiskers, and shaped like rats save that their legs and pads were too large —perhaps the cube-square law on animal proportions works anywhere.

We didn't waste an arrow on one unless it was a fair shot and

we zigzagged to take advantage of such openness as the forest had—which increased the hazard from above. However, the forest was so dense that attacks from the sky weren't our first worry.

I got one rat that tailed too closely and just missed another. We had to spend an arrow whenever they got bold; it caused the others to be more cautious. And once, while Rufo was drawing a bow on one and Star was ready with her sword to back him up, one of those vicious little hawks dived on Rufo.

Star cut him out of the air at the bottom of his stoop. Rufo hadn't even seen it; he was busy nailing brother rat.

We didn't have to worry about underbrush; this forest was parklike, trees and grass, no dense undergrowth. Not too bad, that stretch, except that we began to run out of arrows. I was fretting about that when I noticed something. "Hey, up ahead! You're off course. Cut to the right." Star had set course for me when we left the road but it was up to me to hold it; her bump of direction was erratic and Rufo's no better.

"Sorry, milord leader," Star called back.

I closed in. "Rufo, how's the leg?" There was sweat on his forehead.

Instead of answering me he said, "Milady, it will be dark soon."

"I know," she answered calmly, "so time for a bite of supper. Milord husband, that great flat rock up ahead seems a nice place."

I thought she had slipped her gears, and so did Rufo, but for another reason. "But, milady, we are far behind schedule."

"And much later we shall be unless I attend to your leg again."

"Better you leave me behind," he muttered.

"Better you keep quiet until your advice is asked," I told him. "I wouldn't leave a Horned Ghost to be eaten by rats. Star, how do we do this?"

The great flat rock sticking up like a skull in the trees ahead was the upper surface of a limestone boulder with its base buried. I stood guard in its center with Rufo seated beside me while Star set out wards at cardinal and semicardinal points. I didn't get to see what she did because my eyes had to be peeled for anything beyond her, shaft nocked and reach to knock it down or scare it off, while Rufo watched the other side. However Star told me later that the wards weren't even faintly "magic" but were within reach of Earth technology once some bright boy got the idea—an "electrified fence" without the fence, as radio is a telephone without wires, an analogy that won't hold up.

But it was well that I kept honest lookout instead of trying to puzzle out how she set up that

charmed circle, as she was attacked by the only rat we met that had no sense. He came straight at her, my arrow past her ear warned her, and she finished him off by sword. It was a very old male, missing teeth and white whiskers and likely weak in his mind. He was as large as a wolf, and with two death wounds still a red-eyed, mangy fury.

Once the last ward was placed Star told me that I could stop worring about the sky; the wards roofed as well as fenced the circle. As Rufo said, if *She* says it, that settles it. Rufo had partly unfolded the foldbox while he watched; I got out her surgical case, more arrows for all of us, and food. No nonsense about manservant and gentlefolk, we ate together, sitting or sprawling and with Rufo lying flat to give his leg a chance while Star served him, sometimes popping food into his mouth in Nevian hospitality. She had worked a long time on his leg while I held a light and handed her things. She packed the wound with a pale jelly before sealing a dressing over it. If it hurt, Rufo didn't mention it.

While we ate it grew dark and the invisible fence began to be lined with eyes, glowing back at us with the light we ate by, and almost as numerous as the crowd the morning Igli ate himself. Most of them I judged to be rats. One group kept to themselves with a break in the circle on each side; I decided these must be hogs; the eyes were higher off the ground.

"Milady love," I said, "will those wards hold all night?"

"Yes, milord husband."

"They had better. It is too dark for arrows and I can't see us hacking our way through that mob. I'm afraid you must revise your schedule again."

"I can't, milord Hero. But forget those beasts. Now we fly."

Rufo groaned. "I was afraid so. You know it makes me seasick."

"Poor Rufo," Star said softly. "Never fear, old friend, I have a surprise for you. Against such chance as this, I bought dramamine in Cannes—you know, the drug that saved the Normandy invasion back on Earth. Or perhaps you don't know."

Rufo answered, " 'Know'? I was *in* that invasion, milady—and I'm allergic to dramamine; I fed fish all the way to Omaha Beach. Worst night I've ever had—why, I'd rather be *here!*"

"Rufo," I asked, "were you really at Omaha Beach?"

"Hell, yes, Boss. I did all of Eisenhower's thinking."

"But why? It wasn't your fight."

"You might ask yourself why you're in this fight, Boss. In my case it was French babes. Earthy and uninhibited and always cheerful about it and willing to learn. I remember one little mademoiselle from Armentéires—" (He pro-

nounced it correctly.) "—who hadn't been—"

Star interrupted. "While you two pursue your bachelor reminiscences, I'll get the flight gear ready." She got up and went to the foldbox.

"Go ahead, Rufo," I said, wondering how far he would stretch this one.

"No," he said sullenly. "*She* wouldn't like it. I can tell. Boss, you've had the damnedest effect on *Her*. More ladylike by the minute and that isn't like *Her* at all. First thing you know *She* will subscribe to 'Vogue' and then there's no telling how far it will go. I don't understand it, it can't be your looks. No offense meant."

"And none taken. Well, tell me another time. If you can remember it."

"I'll never forget her. But, Boss, seasickness isn't the half of it. You think these woods are infested. Well, the ones we are coming to —wobbly in the knees, at least I will be—those woods have dragons."

"I know."

"So She told you? But you have to see it to believe it. The woods are full of 'em. More than there are Doyles in Boston. Big ones, little ones, and the two-ton teenage size, hungry all the time. *You* may fancy being eaten by a dragon; I don't. It's humiliating. And final. They ought to spray the place with dragonbane, that's what they ought to do. There ought to be a law."

Star had returned. "No, there should not be a law," she said firmly. "Rufo, don't sound off about things you don't understand. Disturbing the ecological balance is the worst mistake any government can make."

Rufo shut up, muttering. I said, "My true love, what use is a dragon? Riddle me that."

"I've never cast a balance sheet on Nevia, it's not my responsibility. But I can suggest the imbalances that might follow any attempt to get rid of dragons—which the Nevians could do; you've seen that their technology is not to be sneered at. These rats and hogs destroy crops. Rats help to keep the hogs down by eating piglets. But rats are even worse than hogs, on food crops. The dragons graze through these very woods in the daytime—dragons are diurnal, rats are nocturnal and go into their holes in the heat of the day. The dragons and hogs keep the underbrush cropped back and the dragons keep the lower limbs trimmed off. But dragons also enjoy a tasty rat, so whenever one locates a rat hole, it gives it a shot of flame, not always killing adults as they dig two holes for each nest, but certainly killing any babies—and then the dragon digs in and has his favorite snack. There is a long-standing agreement, amounting to a treaty, that

as long as the dragons stay in their own territory and keep the rats in check, humans will not bother them."

"But why not kill the rats, and then clean up the dragons?"

"And let the hogs run wild? Please, milord husband, I don't know all the answers in this case; I simply know that disturbing a natural balance is a matter to be approached with fear and trembling—and a very versatile computer. The Nevians seem content not to bother the dragons."

"Apparently we're going to bother them. Will that break the treaty?"

"It's not really a treaty, it's folk wisdom with the Nevians, and a conditioned reflex—or possibly instinct—with the dragons. And we aren't going to bother dragons if we can help it. Have you discussed tactics with Rufo? There won't be time when we get there."

So I discussed how to kill dragons with Rufo, while Star listened and finished her preparations. "All right," Rufo said glumly, "it beats sitting tight, like an oyster on the half shell waiting to be eaten. More dignified. I'm a better archer than you are—or at least as good—so I'll take the hind end, as I'm not too agile tonight."

"Be ready to switch jobs fast if he swings around."

"*You* be ready, Boss. I'll be ready for the best of reasons—my favorite skin."

Star was ready and Rufo had packed and reslung the foldbox while we conferred. She placed round garters above each knee of each of us, then had us sit on the rock facing our destination. "That oak arrow, Rufo."

"Star, isn't this out of the Albertus Magnus book?"

"Similar," she said. "My formula is more reliable and the ingredients I use on the garters don't spoil. If you please, milord husband, I must concentrate on my witchery. Place the arrow so that it points at the cave."

I did so. "Is that precise?" she asked.

"If the map you showed me is correct, it is. That's aimed just the way I've been aiming since we left the road."

"How far away is the Forest of Dragons?"

"Uh, look, my love, as long as we're going by air why don't we go straight to the cave and skip the dragons?"

She said patiently, "I wish we could. But that forest is so dense at the top that we can't drop straight down at the cave, no elbow room. And the things that live in those trees, high up, are worse than dragons. They grow —"

"Please!" said Rufo. "I'm airsick already and we're not off the ground."

"Later, Oscar, if you still want to know. In any case we daren't risk

encountering them—and won't; they stay up higher than the dragons can reach, they must. How far to the forest?"

"Mm, eight and a half miles, by that map and how far we've come—and not more than two beyond that to the Cave of the Gate."

"All right. Arms tight around my waist, both of you, and as much body contact as possible; it's got to work on all of us equally." Rufo and I settled each an arm in a hug about her and clasped hands across her tummy. "That's good. Hang on tight." Star wrote figures on the rock beside the arrow.

It sailed away into the night with us after it.

I don't see how to avoid calling this magic, as I can't see any way to build Buck Rogers' belts into elastic garters. Oh, if you like, Star hypnotized us, then used psi powers to teleport us eight and a half miles. "Psi" is a better word than "magic"; monosyllables are stronger than polysyllables—see Winston Churchill's speeches. I don't understand either word, any more than I can explain why I never get lost. I just think it's preposterous that other people can.

When I fly in dreams, I use two styles: one is a swan dive and I swoop and swirl and cut didos; the other is sitting Turk fashion like the Little Lame Prince and sailing along by sheer force of personality.

The latter is how we did it, like sailing in a glider with no glider. It was a fine night for flying (all nights in Nevia are fine; it rains just before dawn in the rainy season, they tell me) and the greater moon silvered the ground below us. The woods opened up and became clumps of trees; the forest we were heading for showed black against the distance, much higher and enormously more imposing than the pretty woods behind us. Far off to the left I could glimpse fields of house Lerdki.

We had been in the air about two minutes when Rufo said, "Pa'don me!" and turned his head away. He doesn't have a weak stomach; he didn't get a drop on us. It arched like a fountain. That was the only incident of a perfect flight.

Just before we reached the tall trees Star said crisply, "Amech!" We checked like a heli and settled straight down to a three-fanny landing. The arrow rested on the ground in front of us, again dead. Rufo returned it to his quiver. "How do you feel?" I asked. "And how's your leg?"

He gulped. "Leg's all right. Ground's going up and down."

"Hush!" Star whispered. "He'll be all right. But hush, for your lives!"

We set out moments later, myself leading with drawn sword, Star behind me, and Rufo dogging her, an arrow nocked and ready.

The change from moonlight to deep shadow was blinding and I

crept along, feeling for tree trunks and praying that no dragon would be in the path my bump of direction led. Certainly I knew that the dragons slept at night, but I place no faith in dragons. Maybe the bachelors stood watches, the way bachelor baboons do. I wanted to surrender that place of honor to St. George and take a spot farther back.

Once my nose stopped me, a whiff of ancient musk. I waited and slowly became aware of a shape the size of a real estate office—a dragon, sleeping with its head on its tail. I led them around it, making no noise and hoping that my heart wasn't as loud as it sounded.

My eyes were doing better now, reaching out for every stray moonbeam that trickled down—and something else developed. The ground was mossy and barely phosphorescent the way a rotten log sometimes is. Not much. Oh very little. But it was the way a darkroom light, almost nothing when you go inside, later is plenty of light. I could see trees now and the ground—and dragons.

I had thought earlier, "Oh, what's a dozen or so dragons in a big forest? Chances are we won't see one, any more than you catch sight of deer most days in deer country."

The man who gets the all-night parking concession in that forest will make a fortune if he figures out a way to make dragons pay up. We never were out of sight of one after we could see.

Of course these aren't dragons. No, they are uglier. They are saurians, more like *tyrannosaurus rex* than anything else—big hind quarters and heavy hind legs, heavy tail, and smaller front legs that they use either in walking or to grasp their prey. The head is mostly teeth. They are omnivores whereas I understand that *t. rex* ate only meat. This is no help; the dragons eat meat when they can get it, they prefer it. Furthermore, these not-so-fake dragons have evolved that charming trick of burning their own sewer gas. But no evolutionary quirk can be considered odd if you use *the* way octopi make love as a comparison.

Once, far off to the left, an enormous jet lighted up, with a grunting bellow like a very old alligator. The light stayed on several seconds, then died away. Don't ask me—two males arguing over a female, maybe. We kept going, but I slowed after the light went out, as even that much was enough to affect our eyes until our night sight recovered.

I'm allergic to dragons—literally, not just scared silly. Allergic the way poor old Rufo is to dramamine but more the way cat fur affects some people.

My eyes were watering as soon as we were in that forest, then my sinuses started to clog up and be-

fore we had gone half a mile I was using my left fist to rub my upper lip as hard as I could, trying to kill a sneeze with pain. At last I couldn't make it and jammed fingers up my nostrils and bit my lips and the contained explosion almost burst my eardrums. It happened as we were skirting the south end of a truck-and-trailer-size job; I stopped dead and they stopped and we waited. It didn't wake up.

When I started up, my beloved closed on me, grasped my arm; I stopped again. She reached into her pouch, silently found something, rubbed it on my nose and up my nostrils, then with a gentle push signed that we could move on.

First my nose burned cold, as with Vick's salve, then it felt numb, and presently it began to clear.

After more than an hour of this age-long spooky sneak through tall trees and giant shapes, I thought we were going to win "home free." The Cave of the Gate should be not more than a hundred yards ahead and I could see the rise in ground where the entrance would be—and only one dragon in our way and that not in direct line.

I hurried.

There was this little fellow, no bigger than a wallaby and about the same shape, aside from baby teeth four inches long. Maybe he was so young he had to wake to potty in the night, I don't know. All I know is that I passed close to a tree he was behind and stepped on his tail, and he *squealed*!

He had every right to. But that's when it hit the fan. The adult dragon between us and the cave woke up at once. Not a big one—say about forty feet, including the tail.

Good old Rufo went into action as if he had had endless time to rehearse, dashing around to the brute's south end, arrow nocked and bow bent, ready to loose in a hurry. "Get its tail up!" he called out.

I ran to the front end and tried to antagonize the beast by shouting and waving my sword while wondering how far that flamethrower could throw. There are only four places to put an arrow into a Nevian dragon; the rest is armored like a rhino only heavier. Those four are his mouth (when open), his eyes (a difficult shot; they are little and piggish), and that spot right under his tail where almost any animal is vulnerable. I had figured that an arrow placed in that tender area should add mightily to that "itching, burning" sensation featured in small ads in the backs of newspapers, the ones that say "Avoid Surgery!"

My notion was that, if the dragon, not too bright, was unbearably annoyed at both ends at once, his coordination should go all to hell and we could peck away at him un-

til he was useless, or until he got sick of it and ran. But I had to get his tail up, to let Rufo get in a shot. These creatures, satchel-heavy like old *t. rex*, charge head up and front legs up and balance this by lifting the tail.

The dragon was weaving its head back and forth and I was trying to weave the other way, so as not to be lined up if it turned on the flame—when suddenly I got my first blast of methane, whiffing it before it lighted, and retreated so fast that I backed into that baby I had stepped on before, went clear over it, landed on my shoulders and rolled, and that saved me. Those flames shoot out about twenty feet. The grown-up dragon had reared up and still could have fried me, but the baby was in the way. It chopped off the flame—but Rufo yelled, "Bull's Eye!"

The reason that I backed away in time was halitosis. It says here that "pure methane is a colorless, odorless gas." This G.I.-tract methane wasn't pure; it was so loaded with homemade ketones and aldehydes that it made an unlimed outhouse smell like Shalimar.

I figure that Star's giving me that salve to open up my nose saved my life. When my nose clamps down I can't even smell my upper lip.

The action didn't stop while I figured this out; I did all my thinking either before or after, not during. Shortly after Rufo shot it in the bull's eye, the beast got a look of utter indignation, opened its mouth again without flaming and tried to reach its fanny with both hands. It couldn't—forelegs too short—but it tried. I had returned sword in a hurry once I saw the length of that flame jet and had grabbed my bow. I had time to get one arrow into its mouth, left tonsil maybe.

This message got through faster. With a scream of rage that shook the ground it started for me, belching flame—and Rufo yelled, "A wart seven!"

I was too busy to congratulate him; those critters are fast for their size. But I'm fast, too, and had more incentive. A thing that big can't change course very fast, but it can swing its head and with it the flame. I got my pants scorched and moved still faster.

Star carefully put an arrow into the other tonsil, right where the flame came out, while I was dodging. Then the poor thing tried so hard to turn *both* ways at *both* of us that it got tangled in its feet and fell over, a small earthquake. Rufo sank another arrow in its tender behind, and Star loosed one that passed through its tongue and stuck on the fletching, not damaging it but annoying it dreadfully.

It pulled itself into a ball, got to its feet, reared up and tried to flame me again. I could tell it didn't like me.

And the flame went out.

This was something I had hoped for. A proper dragon, with castles and captive princesses, has as much fire as it needs, like six-shooters in TV oaters. But these creatures fermented their own methane and couldn't have too big a reserve tank nor under too high pressure— I hoped. If we could nag one into using all its ammo fast, there was bound to be a lag before it recharged.

Meanwhile Rufo and Star were giving it no peace with the pincushion routine. It made a real effort to light up again while I was traversing rapidly, trying to keep that squealing baby dragon between me and the big one, and it behaved like an almost dry Ronson; the flame flickered and caught, shot out a pitiful six feet and went out. But it tried so hard to get me with that last flicker that it fell over again.

I took a chance that it would be sluggy for a second or two like a man who's been tackled hard, ran in and stuck my sword in its right eye.

It gave one mighty convulsion and quit.

(A lucky poke. They say dinosaurs that big have brains the size of chestnuts. Let's credit this beast with one the size of a cantalope— but it's still luck if you thrust through an eye socket and get the brain right off. Nothing we had done up to then was more than mosquito bites. But it died from that one poke. St. Michael *and* St. George guided my blade.)

And Rufo yelled, "Boss! Git fer home!"

A drag race of dragons was closing on us. It felt like that drill in basic where you have to dig a fox hole, then let a tank pass over you.

'This way!" I yelled. "Rufe! This way, not that! *Star!*" Rufo skidded to a stop, we got headed the same way and I saw the mouth of the cave, black as sin and inviting as a mother's arms. Star hung back; I shoved her in and Rufo stumbled after her and I turned to face more dragons for my lady love.

But she was yelling, "Milord! Oscar! Inside, you idiot! *I must set the wards!*"

So I got inside fast and she did, and I never did chew her out for calling her husband an idiot.

XIII

THE LITTLEST DRAGON followed us to the cave, not belligerently (although I don't trust anything with teeth that size) but more, I think, the way a baby duck follows anyone who leads. It tried to come in after us, drew back suddenly as its snout touched the invisible curtain, like a kitten hit by a static spark. Then it hung around outside, making whelping noises.

I began to wonder whether or not Star's wards could stop flame. I found out as an old dragon arrived right after that, shoved his

head into the opening, jerked it back indignantly just as the kid had, then eyed us and switched on his flamethrower.

No, the wards don't stop flame.

We were far enough inside that we didn't get singed but smoke and stink and heat were ghastly and just as deadly if it went on long.

An arrow whoofed past my ear and that dragon gave up interest in us. He was replaced by another who wasn't convinced. Rufo, or possibly Star, convinced him before he had time to light his torch. The air cleared; from somewhere inside there was an outward draft."

Meanwhile Star had made a light and the dragons were holding an indignation meeting. I glanced behind me—a narrow, low passage that dropped and turned. I stopped paying attention to Star and Rufo and the inside of the cave; another committee was calling.

I got the chairman in his soft palate before he could belch. The vice chairman took over and got in a brief remark about fifteen feet long before he, too, changed his mind. The committee backed off and bellowed bad advice at each other.

The baby dragon hung around all during this. When the adults withdrew he again came to the door, just short of where he had burned his nose. "Koo-werp?" he said plaintively. "Koo-werp? Keet!" Plainly he wanted to come in.

Star touched my arm. "If milord husband pleases, we are ready."

"Keet!"

"Right away," I agreed, then yelled, "Beat it, kid! Back to your mama."

Rufo stuck his head alongside mine. "Probably can't. Likely that was its mama we ruined."

I didn't answer as it made sense; the adult dragon we had finished off had come awake instantly when I stepped on the kid's tail. This sounds like mother love, if dragons go in for mother love—I wouldn't know.

But it's a hell of a note when you can't even kill a dragon and feel light-hearted afterwards.

We meandered back into that hill, ducking stalactites and stepping around stalagmites while Rufo led with a torch. We arrived in a domed chamber with a floor glazed smooth by unknown years of calcified deposit. It had stalactites in soft pastel shades near the walls and a lovely, almost symmetrical chandelier from the center but no stalagmite under it. Star and Rufo had stuck lumps of the luminiscent putty which is the common night light in Nevia at a dozen points around the room; it bathed the room in a soft light and pointed up the stalactites.

Among them Rufo showed me webs. "Those spinners are harmless," he said. "Just big and ugly. They don't even bite like a spider. But—mind your step!" He pulled

me back. "These things are poisonous even to touch. Blindworms. That's what took us so long. Had to be sure the place was clean before warding it. But now that *She* is setting wards at the entrances I'll give it one more check."

The so-called blindworms were translucent, iridescent things the size of large rattlesnakes and slimy-soft like angle worms; I was glad they were dead. Rufo speared them on his sword, a grisly shishkebab, and carried them out through the entrance we had come in.

He was back quickly and Star finished warding. "That's better," he said with a sigh as he started cleaning his blade. "Don't want their perfume around the house. They rot pretty fast and puts me in mind of green hides. Or copra. Did I ever tell you about the time I shipped as a cook out of Sydney? We had a second mate aboard who never bathed and kept a penguin in his stateroom. Female, of course. This bird was no more cleanly than he was and it used to—"

"Rufo," said Star, "will you help with the baggage?"

"Coming, milady."

We got our food, sleeping mats, more arrows, things that Star needed for her witching or whatever, and canteens to fill with water, also from the foldbox. Star had warned me earlier that Karth-Hokesh was a place where the local chemistry was not compatible with human life; everything we ate or drank we must fetch with us.

I eyed those one-liter canteens with disfavor. "Baby girl, I think we are cutting rations too fine."

She shook her head. "We won't need more, truly."

"Lindbergh flew the Atlantic on just a peanut butter sandwich," Rufo put in. "But I urged him to take more."

"How do you know we won't need more?" I persisted. "Water especially."

"I'm filling mine with brandy," Rufo said. "You divvy with me, I'll divvy with you."

"Milord love, water is heavy. If we try to hang everything on us against any emergency, like the White Knight, we'll be too weighted down to fight. I'm going to have to strain to usher through three people, weapons, and a minimum of clothing. Living bodies are easiest; I can borrow power from you both. Once-living materials are next; you've noticed, I think, that our clothing is wool, our bows of wood, and strings are of gut. Things never living are hardest, steel especially, yet we must have swords and, if we still had firearms, I would strain to the limit to get them through, for now we need them. However, milord Hero, I am simply informing you. You must decide—and I feel sure I can handle, oh, even half a hundredweight more of dead things if necessary. If you will select what your genius tells you."

"My genius has gone fishing. But, Star my love, there is a simple answer. Take everything."

"Milord?"

"Jocko set us out with half a ton of food, looks like, and enough wine to float a loan, and a little water. Plus a wide variety of Nevia's best tools for killing, stabbing, and mayhem. Even armor. And more things. In that foldbox is enough to survive a siege, without eating or drinking anything from Karth-Hokesh. The beauty of it is that it weighs only about fifteen pounds, packed—not the fifty pounds you said you could swing up straining. I'll strap it on my own back and won't notice it. It won't slow me down; it may armor me against a swing at my back. Suits?"

Star's expression would have fitted a mother whose child has just caught onto the Stork hoax and is wondering how to tackle an awkward subject. "Milord husband, the mass is much too great. I doubt if any witch or warlock could move it unassisted."

"But folded up?"

"It does not change it, milord; the mass is still there—still more dangerously there. Think of a powerful spring, wound very tight and small, thus storing much energy. It takes enormous power to put a foldbox through a transition in its compacted form, or it explodes."

I recalled a mud volcano that had drenched us and quit arguing. "All right, I'm wrong. But one question—If the mass is there always, why does it weigh so little when folded?"

Star got the same troubled expression. "Your pardon, milord, but we do not share the language—the mathematical language—that would permit me to answer. As yet, I mean; I promise you chance to study if you wish. As a tag, think of it as a tame space-warp. Or think of the mass being so extremely far away—in a new direction—from the sides of the foldbox that local gravitatiion hardly matters."

(I remembered a time when my grandmother had asked me to explain television to her—the guts, not the funny pictures. There are things which cannot be taught in ten easy lessons, nor popularized for the masses; they take years of skull sweat. This is treason in an age when ignorance has come into its own and one man's opinion is as good as another's. But there it is. As Star says, the world is what it is—and doesn't forgive ignorance.)

But I was still curious. "Star, is there any way to tell me why some things go through easier than others? Wood easier than iron, for example?"

She looked rueful. "No, because I don't know myself. Magic is not science, it is a collection of ways to do things—ways that work but often we don't know why."

"Much like engineering. Design by theory, then beef it up anyhow."

"Yes, milord husband. A magician is a rule-of-thumb engineer."

"And," put in Rufo, "a philosopher is a scientist with no thumbs. I'm a philosopher. Best of all professions."

Star ignored him and got out a sketch block, showed me what she knew of the great tower from which we must steal the Egg of the Phoenix. This block appeared to be a big cube of Plexiglas; it looked like it, felt like it, and took thumb prints like it.

But she had a long pointer which sank into it as if the block were air. With its tip she could sketch in three dimensions; it left a thin glowing line wherever she wanted it—a 3-dimensional blackboard.

This wasn't magic; it was advanced technology—and it will beat the hell out of our methods of engineering drawing when we learn how, especially for complex assemblies such as aviation engines and UHF circuitry—even better than exploded isometric with transparent overlays. The block was about thirty inches on a side and the sketch inside could be looked at from any angle—even turned over and studied from underneath.

The Mile-High Tower was not a spire but a massy block, somewhat like those stepped-back buildings in New York, but enormously larger.

Its interior was a maze.

"Milord champion," Star said apologetically, "when we left Nice there was in our baggage a finished sketch of the Tower. Now I must work from memory. However I had studied the sketch so very long that I believe I can get relations right even if proportions suffer. I feel sure of the true paths, the paths that lead to the Egg. It is possible that false paths and dead ends will not be as complete; I did not study them as hard."

"Can't see that it matters," I assured her. "If I know the true paths, any I don't know are false ones. Which we won't use. Except to hide in, in a pinch."

She drew the true paths in glowing red, false ones in green—and there was a lot more green than red. The critter who designed that tower had a twisty mind. What appeared to be the main entrance went in, up, branched and converged, passed close to the Chamber of the Egg—then went back down by a devious route and dumped you out, like P. T. Barnum's "This Way to the Egress."

Other routes went inside and lost you in mazes that could not be solved by follow-the-left-wall. If you did, you'd starve. Even routes marked in red were very complex. Unless you knew where the Egg was guarded, you could enter correctly and still spend this year and

next January in fruitless search.

"Star, have you been in the Tower?"

"No, milord. I have been in Karth-Hokesh. But far back in the Grotto Hills. I've seen the Tower only from great distance."

"Somebody must have been in it. Surely your—opponents—didn't send you a map."

She said soberly, "Milord, sixty-three brave men have died getting the information I now offer you."

(So now we try for sixty-four!) I said, "Is there any way to study just the red paths?"

"Certainly, milord." She touched a control, green lines faded. The red paths started each from one of three openings, one "door" and two "windows."

I pointed to the lowest level. "This is the only one of thirty or forty doors that leads to the Egg?"

"That is true."

"Then just inside that door they'll be waiting to clobber us."

"That would seem likely, milord."

"Hmmm . . ." I turned to Rufo. "Rufe, got any long, strong, light-weight line in that plunder?"

"I've got some Jocko uses for hoisting. About like heavy fishing line, breaking strength around fifteen hundred pounds."

"Good boy!"

"Figured you might want it. A thousand yards enough?"

"Yes. Anything lighter than that?"

"Some silk trout line."

In an hour we had made all preparations I could think of and that maze was as firmly in my head as the alphabet. "Star hon, we're ready to roll. Want to whomp up your spell?"

"No, milord."

"Why not? 'Twere best done quickly"

"Because I can't, my darling. These Gates are not true gates; there is always a matter of timing. This one will be ready to open, for a few minutes, about seven hours from now, then cannot be opened again for several weeks."

I had a sour thought. "If the buckos we are after know this, they'll hit us as we come out."

"I hope not, milord champion. They should be watching for us to appear from the Grotto Hills, as they know we have a Gate somewhere in those hills—and indeed that is the Gate I planned to use. But this Gate, even if they know of it, is so badly located—for us—that I do not think they would expect us to dare it."

"You cheer me up more all the time. Have you thought of anything to tell me about what to expect? Tanks? Cavalry? Big green giants with hairy ears?"

She looked troubled. "Anything I say would mislead you, milord. We can assume that their troops will be constructs rather than truly living creatures . . . which means they can be anything. Also,

anything may be illusion. I told you about the gravity?"

"I don't think so."

"Forgive me, I'm tried and my mind isn't sharp. The gravity varies, sometimes erratically. A level stretch will seem to be downhill, then quickly uphill. Other things . . . any of which may be illusion."

Rufo said, "Boss, if it moves, shoot it. If it speaks, cut its throat. That spoils most illusions. You don't need a program; there'll be just us—and all the others. So when in doubt, kill it. No sweat."

I grinned at him. "No sweat. Okay, we'll worry when we get there. So let's quit talking."

"Yes, milord husband," Star seconded. "We had best get several hours sleep."

Something in her voice had changed. I looked at her and she was subtly different, too. She seemed smaller, softer, more feminine and compliant than the Amazon who had fired arrows into a beast a hundred times her weight less than two hours before.

"A good idea," I said slowly and looked around. While Star had been sketching the mazes of the Tower, Rufo had repacked what we couldn't take and—I now noticed—put one sleeping pad on one side of the cave and the other two side by side as far from the first as possible.

I silently questioned her by glancing at Rufo and shrugging.

Her answering glance said neither Yes nor No. Instead she called out, "Rufo, go to bed and give that leg a chance. Don't lie on it. Either belly down or face the wall."

For the first time Rufo showed his disapproval of what we had done. He answered abruptly, not what Star said but what she may have implied: "You couldn't *hire* me to look!"

Star said to me in a voice so low I barely heard it, "Forgive him, milord husband. He is an old man, he has his quirks. Once he is in bed I will take down the lights."

I whispered, "Star my beloved, it still isn't my idea of how to run a honeymoon."

She searched my eyes. "This is your will, milord love?"

"Yes. The recipe calls for a jug of wine and a loaf of bread. Not a word about a chaperon. I'm sorry."

She put a slender hand against my chest, looked up at me. "I am glad, milord."

"You are?" I didn't see why she had to say so.

"Yes. We both need sleep. Against the morrow. That your strong sword arm may grant us many morrows."

I felt better and smiled down at her. "Okay, my princess. But I doubt if I'll sleep."

"Ah, but you will!"

"Want to bet?"

"Hear me out, milord darling. Tomorrow . . . after you have won . . . we go quickly to my

home. No more waitings, no more troubles. I would that you knew the language of my home, so that you will not feel a stranger. I want it to be *your* home, at once. So? Will milord husband dispose himself for bed? Lie back and let me give him a language lesson? You will sleep, you know that you will."

"Well . . . it's a fine idea. But you need sleep even more than I do."

"Your pardon, milord, but not so. Four hours sleep puts spring in my step and a song on my lips."

"Well—"

Five minutes later I was stretched out, staring into the most beautiful eyes in any world and listening to her beloved voice speak softly in a language strange to me—

XIV

RUFO WAS SHAKING MY SHOULder. "Breakfast, Boss!" He shoved a sandwich into my hand and a pot of beer into the other. "That's enough to fight on and lunch is packed. I've laid out fresh clothes and your weapons and I'll dress you as soon as you finish. But snap it up. We're on in a few minutes." He was already dressed and belted.

I yawned and took a bite of sandwich (anchovies, ham and mayonnaise, with something that wasn't quite tomato and lettuce)—and looked around. The place beside me was empty but Star seemed to have just gotten up; she was not dressed. She was on her knees in the center of the room, drawing some large design on the floor.

"Morning, chatterbox," I said. "Pentacle?"

"Mmm—" she answered, not looking up.

I went over and watched her work. Whatever it was, it was not based on a five-cornered star. It had three major centers, was very intricate, had notations here and there—I recognized neither language nor script—and the only sense I could abstract from it was what appeared to be a hypercube seen face on. "Had breakfast, hon?"

"I fast this morning."

"You're skinny now. Is that a tesseract?"

"Stop it!"

Then she pushed back her hair, looked up, and smiled ruefully. "I'm sorry, darling. The witch is a bitch, that's certain. But please don't look over my shoulder. I'm having to do this by memory; I lost my books in the marsh—and it's difficult. And no questions now, please, please. You might shake my confidence—and I *must* be utterly confident."

I made a leg. "Your pardon, milady."

"Don't be formal with me, darling. Love me anyhow and give me a quick kiss—then let me be."

So I leaned over and gave her a

high caloric kiss, with mayonnaise, and let her be. I dressed while I finished the sandwich and beer, then sought out a natural alcove just short of the wards in the passage, one which had been designated the men's room. When I came back Rufo was waiting with my sword belt. "Boss, you'd be late for your own hanging."

"I hope so."

A few moments later we were standing on that diagram, Star on pitcher's mound with Rufo and myself at first and third bases. He and I were much hung about, myself with two canteens and Star's sword belt (on its last notch) as well as my own, Rufo with Star's bow slung and with two quivers, plus her medic's kit and lunch. We each had longbow strung and tucked under left arm; we each had drawn sword. Star's tights were under my belt behind in an untidy tail, her jacket was crumpled under Rufo's belt, while her buskins and hat were crammed into pockets—etc. We looked like a rummage sale.

But this did leave Rufo's left hand and mine free. We faced outward with swords at ready, reached behind us and Star clasped us each firmly by hand. She stood in the exact center, feet apart and planted solidly and was wearing that required professionally of witches when engaged in heavy work, i.e., not even a bobby pin. She looked magnificent, hair shaggy, eyes shining, and face flushed, and I was sorry to turn my back.

"Ready, my gallants?" she demanded, excitement in her voice.

"Ready," I confirmed.

"Ave, Imperatrix, nos morituri te—"

"Stop that, Rufo! *Silence!*" She began to chant in a language unknown to me. The back of my neck prickled.

She stopped, squeezed our hands much harder, and shouted, *"Now!"*

Sudden as a slammed door, I find I'm a Booth Tarkington hero in a Mickey Spillane situation.

I don't have time to moan. Here is this *thing* in front of me, about to chop me down, so I run my blade through his guts and yank it free while he makes up his mind which way to fall; then I dose his buddy the same way. Another one is squatting and trying to get a shot at my legs past the legs of his squad mates. I'm as busy as a one-armed beaver with paper hangers and hardly notice a yank at my belt as Star recovers her sword.

Then I do notice as she kills the hostile who wants to shoot me. Star is everywhere at once, naked as a frog and twice as lively. There was a dropped-elevator sensation at transition, and suddenly reduced gravitation could have been bothersome had we time to indulge it.

Star makes use of it. After stabbing the laddie who tries to shoot

me, she sails over my head and the head of a new nuisance, poking him in the neck as she passes and he isn't a nuisance any longer.

I think she helps Rufo, but I can't stop to look. I hear his grunts behind me and that tells me that he is still handing out more than he's catching.

Suddenly he yells, *"Down!"* and something hits the back of my knees and I go down—land properly limp and am about to roll to my feet when I realize Rufo is the cause. He is belly down by me and shooting what has to be a gun at a moving target out across the plain, himself behind the dead body of one of our playmates.

Star is down, too, but not fighting. Something has poked a hole through her right arm between elbow and shoulder.

Nothing else seemed to be alive around me, but there were targets four to five hundred feet away and opening rapidly. I saw one fall, heard *Zzzzt*, smelled burning flesh near me. One of those guns was lying across a body to my left; I grabbed it and tried to figure it out. There was a shoulder brace and a tube which should be a barrel; nothing else looked familiar.

"Like this, my Hero." Star squirmed to me, dragging her wounded arm and leaving a trail of blood. "Place it like a rifle and sight it so. There is a stud under your left thumb. Press it. That's all —no windage, no elevation."

And no recoil, as I found when I tracked one of the running figures with the sights and pressed the stud. There was a spurt of smoke and down he went. "Death ray," or Laser beam, or whatever—line it up, press the stud, and anyone on the far end quit the party with a hole burned in him.

I got a couple more, working right to left, and by then Rufo had done me out of targets. Nothing moved, so far as I could see, anywhere.

Rufo looked around. "Better stay down, Boss." He rolled to Star, opened her medic's kit at his own belt, and put a rough and hasty compress on her arm.

Then he turned to me. "How bad are you hurt, Boss?"

"Me? Not a scratch."

"What's that on your tunic? Ketchup? Someday somebody is going to offer you a pinch of snuff. Let's see it."

I let him open my jacket. Somebody, using a sawtooth edge, had opened a hole in me on my left side below the ribs. I had not noticed it and hadn't felt it—until I saw it and then it hurt and I felt queasy. I strongly disapprove of violence done to me. While Rufo dressed it, I looked around to avoid looking at it.

We had killed about a dozen of them right around us, plus maybe half that many who had fled—and had shot all who fled, I think.

How? How can a 60-lb. dog armed only with teeth take on, knock down, and hold prisoner an armed man? Ans: By all-out attack.

I think we arrived as they were changing the guard at that spot known to be a Gate—and had we arrived even with swords sheathed we would have been cut down. As it was, we killed a slew before most of them knew a fight was on. They were routed, demoralized, and we slaughtered the rest, including those who tried to bug out. Karate and many serious forms of combat (boxing isn't serious, nor anything with rules)—all these work that same way: go-for-broke, all-out attack with no wind up. These are not so much skills as an attitude.

I had time to examine our late foes; one was faced toward me with his belly open. "Iglis" I would call them, but of the economy model. No beauty and no belly buttons and not much brain—presumably constructed to do one thing: fight, and try to stay alive. Which describes us, too—but we did it faster.

Looking at them upset my stomach, so I looked at the sky. No improvement—it wasn't decent sky and wouldn't come into focus. It crawled and the colors were wrong, as jarring as some abstract paintings. I looked back at our victims, who seemed almost wholesome compared with that "sky."

While Rufo was doctoring me, Star squirmed into her tights and put on her buskins. "Is it all right for me to sit up to get into my jacket?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Maybe they'll think we're dead." Rufo and I helped her finish dressing without any of us rising up above the barricade of flesh. I'm sure we hurt her arm but all she said was, "Sling my sword left-handed. What now, Oscar?"

"Where are the garters?"

"Got 'em. But I'm not sure they will work. This is a very odd place."

"Confidence," I told her. "That's what you told me a few minutes ago. Put your little mind to work *believing* you can do it." We ranged ourselves and our plunder, now enhanced by three "rifles" plus sidearms of the same sort, then laid out the oaken arrow for the top of the Mile-High Tower. It dominated one whole side of the scene, more a mountain than a building, black and monstrous.

"Ready?" asked Star. "Now you two believe, too!" She scrawled with her finger in the sand. "Go!"

We went. Once in the air, I realized what a naked target we were—but we were a target on the ground, too, for anyone up on that tower, and worse if we had hoofed it. "Faster!" I yelled in Star's ear. "Make us go faster!"

We did. Air shrilled past our ears and we bucked and dipped and sideslipped as we passed over

those gravitational changes Star had warned me about—and perhaps that saved us; we made an evasive target. However, if we got all of that guard party, it was possible that no one in the Tower knew we had arrived.

The ground below was grey-black desert surrounded by a mountain ringwall like a lunar crater and the Tower filled the place of a central peak. I risked another look at the sky and tried to figure it out. No sun. No stars. No black sky nor blue—light came from all over and the "sky" was ribbons and boiling shapes and shadow holes of all colors.

"What in God's name kind of planet is this?" I demanded.

"It's not a planet," she yelled back. "It's a *place,* in a different sort of universe. It's not fit to live in."

"Somebody lives here." I indicated the Tower.

"No, no, nobody lives here. That was built just to guard the Egg."

The monstrousness of that idea didn't soak in right then. I suddenly recalled that we didn't dare eat or drink here—and started wondering how we could breathe the air if the chemistry was that poisonous. My chest felt tight and started to burn. So I asked Star and Rufo moaned. (He rated a moan or two; he hadn't thrown up. I don't think he had.)

"Oh, at least twelve hours," she said. "Forget it. No importance."

Whereupon my chest really hurt and I moaned, too.

We were dumped on top of the Tower right after that; Star barely got out "Amech!" in time to keep us from zooming past.

The top was flat, seemed to be black glass, was about two hundred yards square—and there wasn't a fiddlewinking thing to fasten a line to. I had counted on at least a ventilator stack.

The Egg of the Phoenix was about a hundred yards straight down. I had had two plans in mind if we ever reached the Tower. There were three openings (out of hundreds) which led to true paths to the Egg—and to the Never-Born, the Eater of Souls, the M.P. guarding it. One was at ground level and I never considered it. A second was a couple of hundred feet off the ground and I had given that serious thought: loose an arrow with a messenger line so that the line passed over any projection above that hole; use that to get the strong line up, then go up the line—no trick for any crack Alpinist, which I wasn't but Rufo was.

But the great Tower turned out to have no projections, real modern simplicity of design—carried too far.

The third plan was, if we could reach the top, to let ourselves down by a line to the third non-fake entrance, almost on level with the

Egg. So here we were, all set—and no place to hitch.

Second thoughts are wonderful thoughts—why hadn't I had Star drive us straight into that hole in the wall?

Well, it would take very fine sighting of that silly arrow; we might hit the wrong pigeon hole. But the important reason was that I hadn't thought of it.

Star was sitting and nursing her wounded arm. I said, "Honey, can you fly us, slow and easy, down a couple of setbacks and into that hole we want?"

She looked up with drawn face. "No."

"Well. Too bad."

"I hate to tell you—but I burned out the garters on that speed run. They won't be any good until I can recharge them. Not things I can get here. Green mugwort, blood of a hare—things like that."

"Boss," said Rufo, "how about using the whole top of the Tower as a hitching post?"

"How do you mean?"

"We've got lots of line."

It was a workable notion—walk the line around the top while somebody else held the bitter end, then tie it and go down what hung over. We did it—and finished up with only a hundred feet too little of line out of a thousand yards.

Star watched us. When I was forced to admit that a hundred feet short was as bad as no line at all, she said thoughtfully, "I wonder if Aaron's Rod would help?"

"Sure, if it was stuck in the top of this overgrown ping-pong table. What's Aaron's Rod?"

'It makes stiff things limp and limp things stiff. No, no, not *that.* Well, that, too, but what I mean is to lay this line across the roof with about ten feet hanging over the far side. Then make that end and the crossing part of the line steel hard—sort of a hook."

"Can you do it?"

"I don't know. It's from The Key of Solomon and it's an incantation. It depends on whether I can remember it—and on whether such things work in this universe."

"Confidence, confidence!"

"I can't even think how it starts. Darling, can you hypnotize? Rufo can't—or at least not me."

"I don't know a thing about it."

"Do just the way I do with you for a language lesson. Look me in the eye, talk softly, anl tell me to remember the words. Perhaps you had better lay out the line first."

We did so and I used a hundred feet instead of ten for the bill of the hook, on the more-is-better principle. Star lay back and I started talking to her, softly (and without conviction) but over and over again.

Star closed her eyes and appeared to sleep. Suddenly she started to mumble in tongues.

"Hey, Boss! Damn thing is hard as rock and stiff as a life sentence!"

I told Star to wake up and we slid down to the setback below as fast as we could, praying that it wouldn't go limp on us. We didn't shift the line; I simply had Star cause more of it to starch up, then I went on down, made certain that I had the right opening, three rows down and fourteen over, then Star slid down and I caught her in my arms; Rufo lowered the baggage, weapons mostly, and followed. We were in the Tower and had been on the planet—correction: the "place"—we had been in the place called Karth-Hokesh not more than forty minutes.

I stopped, got the building matched in my mind with the sketch block map, fixed the direction and location of the Egg, and the true "red line" route to it.

Okay, go on in a few hundred yards, snag the Egg of the Phoenix and *go!* My chest stopped hurting.

XV

"BOSS," SAID RUFO, "LOOK OUT over the plain."

"At what?"

"At nothing," he answered. "Those bodies are gone. You sure as hell ought to be able to see them, against black sand and not even a bush to break the view."

I didn't look. "That's the moose's problem, damn it! We've got work to do. Star, can you shoot left-handed? One of these pistol things?"

"Certainly, milord."

"You stay ten feet behind me and shoot anything that moves. Rufo, you follow Star, bow ready and an arrow nocked. Try for anything you see. Sling one of those guns—make a sling out of a bit of line." I frowned. "We'll have to abandon most of this. Star, you can't bend a bow, so leave it behind, pretty as it is, and your quiver. Rufo can sling my quiver with his; we use the same arrows. I hate to abandon my bow, it suits me so. But I must. Damn."

"I'll carry it, my Hero."

"No, any clutter we can't use must be junked." I unhooked my canteen, drank deeply, passed it over. "You two finish it and throw it away."

While Rufo drank, Star slung my bow. "Milord husband? It weighs nothing this way and doesn't hamper my shooting arm. So?"

"Well—If it gets in your way, cut the string and forget it. Now drink your fill and we go." I peered down the corridor we were in—fifteen feet wide and the same high, lighted from nowhere, and curving away to the right, which matched the picture in my mind. "Ready? Stay closed up. If we can't slice it, shoot it, or shaft it, we'll salute it." I drew sword and we set out, quick march.

Why my sword, rather than one of those "death ray" guns? Star was carrying one of those and knew

more about one than I did. I didn't even know how to tell if one was charged, nor had I judgment in how long to press the button. She could shoot, her bowmanship proved that, and she was at least as cool in a fight as Rufo or myself.

I had disposed weapons and troops as well as I knew how. Rufo, behind with a stock of arrows, could use them if needed and his position gave him time to shift to either sword or Buck-Rogers "rifle" if his judgment said to—and I didn't need to advise him; he would.

So I was backed up by long-range weapons ancient and ultra-modern in the hands of people who knew how to use them and temperament to match—the latter being the more important. (Do you know how many men in a platoon actually *shoot* in combat? Maybe six. More likely three. The rest freeze up.)

Still, why didn't I sheathe my sword and carry one of those wonder weapons?

A properly balanced sword is the most versatile weapon for close quarters ever devised. Pistols and guns are all offense, no defense; close on him fast and a man with a gun can't shoot, he has to stop you before you reach him. Close on a man carrying a blade and you'll be spitted like a roast pigeon—unless you have a blade and can use it better than he can.

A sword never jams, never has to be reloaded, is always ready. Its worst shortcoming is that it takes great skill and patient, loving practice to gain that skill; it can't be taught to raw recruits in weeks, nor even months.

But most of all (and this was the real reason) to grasp the Lady Vivamus and feel her eagerness to bite gave me courage in a spot where I was scared spitless.

They (whoever "they" were) could shoot us from ambush, gas us, bobbytrap us, many things. But they could do those things even if I carried one of those strange guns. Sword in hand, I was relaxed and unafraid—and that made my tiny "command" more nearly safe. If a C.O. needs to carry a rabbit's foot, he should—and the grip of that sweet sword was bigger medicine than all the rabbits' feet in Kansas.

The corridor stretched ahead, no break, no sound, no threat. Soon the opening to the outside could no longer be seen. The great Tower felt empty but not dead; it was alive the way a museum is alive at night, with crowding presence and ancient evil. I gripped my sword tightly, then consciously relaxed and flexed my fingers.

We came to a sharp left turn. I stopped short. "Star, this wasn't on your sketch."

She didn't answer. I persisted, "Well, it wasn't. Was it?"

"I am not sure, milord."

"Well, *I* am. Hmm—"

"Boss," said Rufo, "are you dead sure we entered by the right pigeon hole?"

"I'm certain. I may be wrong but I'm not uncertain—and if I'm wrong, we're dead pigeons anyhow. Mmm—Rufo, take your bow, put your hat on it, stick it out where a man would look around that corner if he was standing—and time it as I do look out, but lower down." I got on my belly.

"Ready . . . *now!*" I sneaked a look six inches above the floor while Rufo tried to draw fire.

Nothing in sight, just bare corridor, straight now.

"Okay, follow me!" We hurried around the corner.

I stopped after a few paces. "What the hell?"

"Something wrong, Boss?"

"Plenty." I turned and sniffed. "Wrong as can be. The Egg is up that way," I said, pointing, "maybe two hundred yards—by the sketch block map."

"Is that bad?"

"I'm not sure. Because it was that same direction and angle, off on the left, *before* we turned that corner. So now it ought to be on the right."

Rufo said, "Look, Boss, why don't we just follow the passageways you memorized? Yoy may not remember every little—"

"Shut up. Watch ahead, down the corridor. Star, stand there in the corner and watch me. I'm going to try something."

They placed themselves, Rufo "eyes ahead" and Star where she could see both ways, at the right angle bend. I went back into the first reach of corridor, then returned. Just short of the bend I closed my eyes and kept on.

I stopped after another dozen steps and opened my eyes. "That proves it," I said to Rufo.

"Proves what?"

"There isn't any bend in the corridor." I pointed to the bend.

Rufo looked worried. "Boss, how do you feel?" He tried to touch my cheek.

I pulled back. "I'm not feverish. Come with me, both of you." I led them back around that right angle some fifty feet and stopped. "Rufo, loose an arrow at that wall ahead of us at the bend. Lob it so that it hits the wall about ten feet up."

Rufo sighed but did so. The arrow rose true, disappeared in the wall. Rufo shrugged. "Must be pretty soft up there. You've lost us an arrow, Boss."

"Maybe. Places and follow me." We took that corner again and here was the spent arrow on the floor somewhat farther along than the distance from loosing to bend. I let Rufo pick it up; he looked closely at the Doral chop by the fletching, returned it to quiver. He said nothing. We kept going.

We came to a place where steps led downward—but where the sketch in my head called for steps leading up. "Mind the first step,"

I called back. "Feel for it and don't fall."

The steps felt normal, four steps leading downward—with the exception that my bump of direction told me that we were *climbing,* and our destination changed angle and distance accordingly. I closed my eyes for a quick test and found that I was indeed climbing, only my eyes were deceived. It was like one of those "crooked houses" in amusement parks, in which a "level" floor is anything but level—like that but cubed.

I quit questioning the accuracy of Star's sketch and tracked its trace in my head regardless of what my eyes told me. When the passageway branched four ways while my memory showed only a simple branching, one being a dead end, I unhesitatingly closed my eyes and followed my nose—and the Egg stayed where it should stay, in my mind.

But the Egg did not necessarily get closer with each twist and turn save in the sense that a straight line is not the shortest distance between two points—is it ever? The path was as twisted as guts in a belly; the architect had used a pretzel for a straight edge. Worse yet, another time when we were climbing "up" stairs—at a piece level by the sketch—a gravitational anomaly caught us with a full turn and we were suddenly sliding down the ceiling.

No harm done save that it twisted again as we hit bottom and dumped us from ceiling to floor. With both eyes peeled I helped Rufo gather up arrows and off we set again. We were getting close to the lair of the Never-Born—and the Egg.

Passageways began to be narrow and rocky, the false twists tight and hard to negotiate—the the light began to fail.

That wasn't the worst. I'm not afraid of dark nor of tight places; it takes a department store elevator on Dollar Day to give me claustrophobia. But I began to hear rats.

Rats, lots of rats, running and squeaking in the walls around us, under us, over us. I started to sweat and was sorry I had taken that big drink of water. Darkness and closeness got worst, until we were crawling through a rough tunnel in rock, then inching along on our bellies in total darkness as if tunneling out of Chateau d'If . . . and rats brushed past us now, squeaking and chittering.

No, I didn't scream. Star was behind me and she didn't scream and she didn't complain about her wounded arm—so I couldn't scream. She patted me on the foot each time she inched forward, to tell me that she was all right and to report that Rufo was okay, too. We didn't waste strength on talk.

I saw a faint something, two ghosts of light ahead, and stopped and stared and blinked and stared again. Then I whispered to Star,

"I see something. Stay put, while I move up and see what it is. Hear me?"

"Yes, milord Hero."

"Tell Rufo."

Then I did the only really brave thing I have ever done in my life: I inched forward. Bravery is going on anyhow when you are so terrified your sphincters won't hold and you can't breathe and your heart threatens to stop, and that is an exact description for that moment of E. C. Gordon, ex-PFC and hero by trade. I was fairly certain what those two faint lights were and the closer I got the more certain I was—I could smell the damned thing and place its outlines.

A rat. Not the common rat that lives in city dumps and sometimes gnaws babies, but a giant rat, big enough to block that rat hole but enough smaller than I am to have room to maneuver in attacking me —room I didn't have at all. The best I could do was to wriggle forward with my sword in front of me and try to keep the point aimed so that I would catch him with it, make him eat steel—because if he dodged past that point I would have nothing but bare hands and no room to use them. He would be at my face.

I gulped sour vomit and inched forward. His eyes seemed to drop a little as if he were crouching to charge.

(to be concluded next month)

BOOKS

LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE, **Patrick Moore** and **Francis Jackson**, Norton, $3.95

In order to produce an address on Chinese Metaphysics, the person in *Pickwick Papers* read the encyclopedia on China and on Metaphysics, and combined them. Rather more logical is the collaboration of two British scientists—Jackson, a bacteriologist; and Moore, as astronomer—to discuss the question, perhaps *the* Question in SF, of Life on Other Planets. So—off we go on Life, off we go on Planets. The latter is easier, it seems, of definition. There is some danger of a roundabout: whether Something—but *what*, we do not know—may exist in another place—but *where*, we do not know. Does it all boil down to the matter of the Primal Soup? If "life" on earth was touched off by a shot of electricity, if similar ingredients cooked (or are now cooking) elsewhere—if "life" developed (or is developing) according to inevitable laws needing no such "fortuitous concourse of the atoms" as old Huxley spoke of—Until we know, we are in large measure speculating on the color of bulls on an unknown island—assuming there be bulls on the island—assuming the island exists. The "observable universe," the authors tell us, contains suns to the number of 100,000 million times 1000 million: ". . . it is surely the height of conceit to suppose that our Sun is unique in being attended by an inhabited planet." They call it conceit; some would call it optimism. This is a scientific-type science book, devoid alike of popularized sensationalism and lively prose. Most interesting to me were two findings by USSR people: astronomer Kozyrev "observed an outbreak in the large [lunar] crater Alphonsus and [took] spectograms which revealed gaseous emission. There can be no doubt as to the reality of this disturbance[. . .] The balance of evidence now indicates that the Moon is not completely inert." And astrobotanist Tikhov compared "the spectra of sub-Arctic and high Alpine plants" with the spectrum of the Martian dark areas and found "a close similarity." Hmm. Venus? "If . . . there is a good deal of

oxygen . . . many-celled organisms, and even animal life of a sort may exist." If. May. "Exobiology" seems drawn to the hypothesis of "biopoesis"—which seems to be abiogenesis, moved to the remote past or distant planets, where proof or disproof is equally impossible. A valuable conjecture made by Jackson/Moore is one of time sequence: Given multitudes of planets all "working" with life (or, "life"), what are the chances that they started at the same time or went at the same rate? Precious damn few—and, thus, so are and so must be the chances of our finding a fellow-civilization elsewhere in the universe. For the time being and then some, one will have to make do with lichens on Mars. "We shall have to leave unanswered," the authors say, "the problem of the origin of the universe, a subject on which our ignorance is complete." Being free, I abide not their question, and conclude with the words of another Briton: *"The very stars sing, as they shine,/ 'The hand that made us is divine.'"*

THE MOON MEN, THE MONSTER MEN, A FIGHTING MAN OF MARS, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Canaveral Press, $2.75

It may have escaped the attention of a few six-year-old children that there has been a great revival of interest in the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, the chief reason being that his estate allowed copyright on many of his earlier books to lapse, in consequence of which they passed into the public domain—in consequence of *which,* several publishers are busily issuing the same. *Why* the estate committed this blooper, although of interest to me, is not known to me. The books had been out of print for years and were fetching big prices on the free, or second-hand, market. I select for review the three named above simply because they are the only ones sent me.

It has been said—correctly, I think—that Burroughs was a school of writing all to himself. His works undoubtedly owe much to Rider Haggard, but, unlike Haggard, he had never been in Africa: hence his mind was unencumbered with facts, and his vision unclouded by experience. None of these three are Tarzan books (I should guess they antedate them; Canaveral Press doesn't give the dates, unfortunately); however, as nearly as I can recall over the quarter-century since I last delved for jewels in Opar, they have a number of things in common with them: such as a style lush and old-fashioned and at times almost unbearably clumsy, a rich inventiveness—less so in THE MONSTER MEN, which is merely *Frankenstein* set in Borneo—and a galloping narrative

whose action never flags. THE MOON MEN deals with the Moonish conquerors' takeover of Earth and the generations-long attempt to overthrow them. A FIGHTING MAN OF MARS is the story of the poor but gallant Tan Hadron of Hastor, Padwar in the 91st Umak, and his adventurous quest for the lovely and naughty Sanoma Tora, daughter of Tor Hatan, his rich and cowardly Otan—or C. O., to drop the gobbeldygook. The books are doubly interesting for the covers and illustrations of Mahlon Blaine, admittedly not to all tastes, but the same can be said for the J. Allen St. John illustrations of the original Burroughs books. Blaine is very stylized, but his drawings may one day be more valuable than the texts.

I lack the space or equipment for a critical essay on E.R.B., but no one should fail to have read him, warts and all. Hark! Is that the angry squeal of a thoat?—or the cry of a hunting banth in the hills? Slave, my harness and my sword!

THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH, Walter Tevis, Gold Medal, 40¢

This doesn't live up to the promise of Mr. Tevis's brilliant story about the boy and the whale (FAR FROM HOME, F&SF, Dec. 1958), but, then, few books could. For most of its length it is a familiar—though a competently-written—account of Superior Alien Posing As Earthman. The ending is a poignant surprise. Too bad less worked-over motif wasn't selected. Maybe next time, Mr. T.?

WHALES, E. J. Slijper, Basic Books, $12.00.

The subtitle of this beautiful book, well and copiously illustrated is The Biology of the Cetaceans. If Arthur C. Clarke's prediction (in *The Deep Range*) comes true, that mankind in the future will "farm" whales, it will be because of men like Slijper—as well as men like Clarke. No cut and dried text is this, though abundantly supplied with charts and figures; it is also full of fascination for the layman. Whales—and other cetaceans such as dolphins—are pretty damned fascinating. May I pluck you a few plums from this rich pudding? Whaling has been practiced at least 4000 years. The age of a whale can be told by the wax-plugs in its "ears." The grimly glamorous "Greenland whaling" of the past was actually done off "East Greenland," or Spitzbergen, which isn't Greenland at all. The testes of whales are located behind their kidneys; those of the blue whale are 2½ feet long and may weigh 100 lbs. "Whales are probably among the healthiest of living creatures;" they "live under opti-

mum biological conditions, i.e. they are not seriously threatened by enemies [except Man], by parasites, by serious diseases, or by climactic effect, and . . . they have adequate supplies of food." Still, they don't live as long as legend says. They *are* attacked by swordfish—as legend says. The Great Yankee Sparm Whale Boom was over by 1860, but New Bedford gamely kept at it till 1925. Sexually—in anatomy and habit—whales are closer to bulls, rams, stags and billy-goats than to other animals. Their young must be alert and capable from the instant of birth, else they would drown. Whales' milk is sometimes *pink!* and tastes like "fish, liver, Milk of Magnesia, and oil"; it is not expected to find its way onto the market immediately. Commercially, cetaceans supply great quantities of food, could supply more if processing was less wasteful. Whalers instead just try to kill more whales. Norway wants whaling reduced, Japan and Russia are extending it. The Atlantic grey whale is extinct, the Greenland almost so, the Pacific grey whale is making a comeback. When Species A is protected, whalers kill more of Species B—which eventually needs protection, too. Whales may be on the way out, anyway, even if the harpoons don't exterminate them: Baleen whales have been growing much larger, and "we know from the entire history of the animal kingdom that the emergence of giant forms is a certain sign of the approaching end." And the pilot whale or dolphin, Pelorus Jack, did actually guide ships through Frenchman's Pass in New Zealand every day for 32 years until (despite a special government order) he was shot at—and vanished forever from the eyes of man.

YOU WILL NEVER BE THE SAME, **Cordwainer Smith**, Regency, 50¢

A collection of eight stories by a well-known SF writer, one of which (*Alpha Ralpha Boulevard*) appeared here, the others in other SF magazines. Despite a mysterious note from the publishers, "Cordwainer Smith" is *not* a pseudonym of Robert Silverberg.

—Avram Davidson

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*It has been too long since TP Caravan's funny, clever prose appeared here, and we are happy to say that there is M*O*R*E* yet to come. Whee! Read on.*

THE CENSORS: A SAD ALLEGORY

By TP Caravan

IT WAS DONE! IT WAS DONE! Eight drops of green liquid glittered in the test tube. It was Professor Mangus' life work: he had spent sixty-three years distilling those eight drops.

His voice was quivering with excitement as he called the Boston Evening Purist. "Tell your science editor," he croaked, "that I have created a serum that will create immortality. Immortality for the world!"

Soon three small men, all dressed in grey, entered his laboratory. One of them knocked the professor down and sat on him. One of them tore up the only copy of the formula. One of them poured the serum down a convenient rat hole.

"Let that be a lesson to you," they told him.

"But why! Why! Now the secret of immortality is lost forever."

They stared at him coldly. "Immortality? You must speak more clearly. We understood you to say immorality."

They walked out, closing the door behind them.

And that is the end of this story.

. . . . .

But down in the rat hole there lived a rat. A story about him would be a long story. Very long.

Originally, we were going to make some reference to Tiresias in prefacing this story, but there have been complaints about too much esoteric razzmatazz in these introductions. Also, we don't know if the author intended any such allusion (not that this has stopped us before or will again). So instead we refer you to your encyclopedia—but only after *you have read the story. The author lives in Los Angeles, has a nice beard, has appeared often in the slicks and paperbacks, and is the husband of the beautiful Trina, one of the lovelier photographic models of our time. Paul Jay Robbins says of himself: "I've straddled the literary line with one foot wearing the open-toe sock of Beat poet and the other foot editorially and dissolutely planted in the pumpkin pie of six girlie books. Am now concerned with trying to reach a less negative and esoteric audience than the Beat and a more perceptive and mature one than girlie book readers . . . I am twenty-six, have held the traditional diversity and multiplicity of jobs, have steadily written through them. I am in love with my wife and my cat, I detest advertising and armies, I am wondering about our national idiocy and what I am going to write next." What he has written about here is a hen-pecked man who tried using the rules of another system to beat this one. You know the kind.*

SWEETS TO THE SWEET

by Paul Jay Robbins

HOWARD JACOBS COULD EASILY have been just another blob of fodder in the disinterested jaws of his times. He was middle-aged, -classed, and -plump, wedged securely between the bulwarks of corporate structures, centered in the cross-hairs of countless time plans. In a word, wispy; a wispy build, manner, and significance. In the final word, average.

Except for his hobby.

Most men like Howard have a hobby—a cursory attack against their human situation. Some collect things in orderly piles and pages: stamps, rocks, coins, women. This compulsion deters, for a

time, the consideration of their insecurities.

Other men make things: bookshelf sarcophagi for unread Club selections, doggies and horsies carved from soap, planes too delicate to fly, women too distasteful to keep. This sort proudly flaunt their products at their occasional haunts of waste and loss, and hope for the best.

Yet another sort jogs off to the country during seasonal weekends, jolly and juiced, to blast the bejeezus out of rabbits or ducks. Or women. This sort double-barrels his frustration into the easy calm of Nature, giving her whatfor, so-what, and other such virile retorts—while Nature, being tolerant, waits.

You know—a bustling civilization, no time for reveries or the nonsense of dissimilitude, marching crisply and materially forward . . . you know the kind.

However, Howard's hobby was Something Else.

Although it was the obvious denominator of all avocations and their intentions, his tight-collar confreres would have stood in stuttered aghast if they'd known of it. For he indulged, intensely and perversely, on the sly and the q.t. and Sundays, in the Dark Art. Magick. Howard Jacobs was a part-time warlock.

Beyond this, he was commendably proper. After a desperate and desultory day at the Office, he would flow upstream in whichever car his block's pool had come around to that week. He would rub shoulders with five fellow synonyms, passing commuter conversation around like a tray of crackers. He would enter his unbought house, an aseptic chunk of suburban similarity with but a number to separate it from his neighbors', and answer his wife's pucker with a peck.

He had steadily done this, give or take a number or a peck, for fifteen years. His grooved participation in society, aside from his avocation, was unruffled and oblivious. His only other impropriety was his attitude towards his wife.

Men like Howard usually regard their marital lot with the same sort of automatism which habituates them to a particular brand of cigaret—their allegiances are uninspired, unexamined, and unimportant. Howard, also, had been dutifully perfunctory—for the first nine years of his marriage. It was then that Victoria, a chronically neurotic Siamese cat, had arrived.

It had been six years ago. Howard had returned from work to find Vivian crouched over her in the kitchen, effusing endearments and warmth. Howard had watched silently, feeling a trickle of jealousy. Already a milk-bowl and terry-cloth bed had been installed. He coughed.

"Hello, dear," Vivian cast over

one shoulder. "This is Victoria. Victoria, that's Howard." Victoria scowled cross-eyed at Howard with a rigid reserve and aloofly resumed licking a flexed paw.

As Vivian burbled out her tale of discovery and instant attraction, and as Victoria unblinkingly stared Howard down, he heard a slow drip of rage go splash in his blood.

All his life he'd wanted a dog. But Mother had waved a hanky of allergy at the very thought of one. From her, at twenty-eight, he had gone directly to Vivian—who simply would not allow it in her house. "But," he broke in, "I—I don't really like cats, you know. And I don't think this one likes me. It's just—weren't we thinking about a dog?" he added, lamely.

Vivian rose, maternally patient. "Howard. Honey-bun. You *know* a dog is out of the question. They're too mussy, sweety. They knock over things and completely disturb the furniture. But cats . . . Well, cats are so *nice,*" she finished, kneeling to assist Victoria's studious toilettry.

Howard *wanted* a dog, damn it! And if he couldn't have one, he decidedly wouldn't allow a cat. So he argued, with an uncomfortable conviction of struggle and failure. It reminded him of the silverware which he detested and still would not use. $215 for a gaudy ensemble he had never wanted. He brought this up, but Vivian didn't see how it applied to a free kitty. The beady dun-and-black cat had come to stay.

Howard retreated from the field to the sound of Victoria lapping up half-and-half, and defiantly sulked. He also fell into a dangerous introspection. For the first time in nine years, the dyspeptic bubble clinging to the side of his water-glass life phlegmatically floated up to break into consciousness.

Vivian, at thirty-three, had all the charm of the Virgin Queen, Howard decided. She was costly in all corners, proper as a pair of scissors, and as much fun as a kitchen chair. She had probably married him because . . . well, because she . . . Well, why had *he* married *her?*

Because people get married, that's all. You meet a girl, your friends couple you up, she won't sleep with you (or she will), the word "love" plunks into your vocabulary, marriage naturally insinuates the air and, blooey!, nine years are gone and you're married, that's all.

You come home one evening and some dun sneaky cat is hissing at you—while your chosen mate approvingly pets it. Then you know you've married a lemon, a curved ice-cube, a pair of mirrored contact lenses—and all in one.

You know the kind.

Howard sulked, but not being the stuff of which Gauguins are made, his discomfiture gradually vaporized and disappeared. Its residue formed the impetus of his hobby.

Occultism had always intrigued him; such rebel vaguaries and illogics charmed his secret fancy. The possibility of mystiques seemed to bolster his hope and guarantee a vague escape from something. So, seeking to sweeten his bitter pill and to divert his peevery, he had come across a biography of Alistair Crowley. Deliciously exhilarated by its perverted wealth of vileness and villany, he'd searched out the "Beast's" book: *Magick in Theory and Practice.*

From this titillation he'd passed to further books—at first only flipping to the more lurid passages, but gradually slowing to absorb everything. Deeper books had followed, more profound and costly books. He'd shortly discovered a Hollywood bookstore which obliquely handled what he came to recognize as the True Writings. The How-to-do-it scriptures.

Unswervingly, if sporadically, he'd equipped his garage with paraphanalia garnered and haggled for from tiny stores with tinier signs and tiniest proprietors. Vivian had warmly contested the locked door and secretive doings —it was blatant anti-Togetherness—but Howard had remained curiously firm. So sensing a strange strength in her mate, she'd allowed him free play—as long as he was quiet and neat about it. She put his quirk from her mind and never again referred to it. Neither did Howard.

Alone and magnificent in his medievally decorated sanctuary, Howard was soon intermittently lighting candles compounded of unmentionable materials, swinging pieces of bat, chalking off non-Euclidean geometries on the concrete, and muttering mispronunciations of old French and ancient Latin.

He shunned the few invitations of friendship and membership offered by people he met at his supply houses and book-stalls. Not only did he consider them unbalanced fanatics, but he had to think of his position and community standing. Besides, the implications everywhere manifest in his researches unnerved him and he would rather keep it all relatively innocuous. After all, it was just a hobby.

As yet he had done nothing which he could truly label as pure Magick. All the stenches and flashes in the garage had produced neither soured milk nor succubus. But, although he vaguely looked forward to the latter, Howard was happy with but a purple flash or a particularly stirring set of incantations. Success was unnecessary; the mere involve-

ment in this esoteric and powerful Art carried its own reward. In this, as in all other fields, he was a wispy participant. That is, until later.

The sweet thrill of his exotic secret would swell his chest in midst of adversity, raising him colossally from cipher to sorcerer. The succulent knowledge that no one had the slightest notion of his bizarre machinations and heretical apparatus, shored up his pride and integrity whenever they were set atremble.

So it happened that on a normal Tuesday evening he was fully receptive to the event which would change his life.

The living-room was aflicker with the usual chiaroscuro of evening television. Vivian and Victoria were sedately positioned at the other end of the couch from Howard, and the only sounds which intruded on those from the tv were low coughs and discreet digestive rumbles. A film classic was showing—which meant a movie which had flopped and become forgotten. This one was a turgid fantasy involving gothic scientists, gauzy heroines, and malignant werewolves.

The station-break had just roared in, dumping its bucket of commercials, and Howard was tolerantly viewing patently impossible people demonstrate a frenzy of wares—wares guaranteed (uncommitally) to bestow sexuality, happiness, and significance upon their purchasers. Wares, Howard abruptly perceived, which were somehow dangerous in a way subtle and personal.

The thought rolled on, unpursued, and struck Howard's placidity asunder in a great shock of loneliness. It hollowed out his heart and turned him towards Vivian with a puzzled plea in his eyes.

As if in answer, Victoria raised her sleek head and neurotically stared at him—or as near to him as her crossed eyes would permit. She stretched guardedly, then settled back into Vivian's lap with an elaborate propriety. *This area,* she seemed to say, *is reserved for only me.*

Vivian absently stroked her close fur, watching the commercials with the same intensity as she watched the film—with the same intensity, he suddenly saw, as he read the news and listened to the world's affairs, just as if his opinions and desires were actually worth something in the shaping of the world around him.

It was a frozen time; a tormented step up the terrible ladder of realization. Still staring at the grey flickering images of his wife and her cat, he preceived of himself as digested, existing in a traveling coffin, bourne along by a multitude of trivia with passive

lackluster. The startling concept banged in his head, stark and frightful. He was a manipulated consumer, a toothless wheel, a bread-winning robot, a plastic counter on an unknown gameboard.

You know the kind.

And then the film returned.

He had been following it with bland interest; but now, in the dim silence of the darkened room, churned by his odd unrest, Howard felt an imperative excitation —as though he were being nudged, directed towards something supremely important that wavered just beyond his perception. He fidgeted and drummed his fingers against his thigh, concentrating intently on the screen.

The villagers were tracking down the werewolf, brandishing torches and screaming for blood; one citizen was foaming at the mouth and dragging a chilling length of iron chain. Howard winced and leaned forward as a slow fade revealed the werewolf scrambling through the forest, with hours of moonlight yet between him and safety. His hoarse breathing mingled with snare-drums and tympani. This could not *possibly* be a *real* werewolf, Howard mused. Then shuddered.

Of *course* it couldn't be. Naturally. This was an actor, with stickum hair on his face and hands. This was a fictional teleplay. But the knowledge had not come from any such rationale or logical comprehension. It had sounded in the basic fibers of his being, from the very cells of his blood.

And then, simple as a sunset, Howard knew.

There could be no mistake. Both his index fingers were as long as his middle fingers; the vestigal points of his ears were pronounced; his canine teeth were narrower and longer than average. Also, there was the matter of the silverware—his repugnance towards it went far beyond economics . . . He had *always* loathed silver! And Victoria—she really did dislike him more than reason could account for.

No mistake about it, he passionately concluded in the dark. He was werewolf material—or, certainly, were-creature material of some sort.

He had learned much of lycanthropy, the metamorphosis of humans into animals, as a natural result of his researches. He was long familiar with the classic symptoms and many of the histories. Werewolves were predominant, but there were also were-bats, -dogs, -bears, -tigers—he had learned something about all of these. In fact, he realized, he had always been particularly drawn to such cases.

Yes, it all fit together. His general proclivity for witchcraft, his physiology, his occasional sense

of superiority and persecution—as if, in another life, he had been hunted and hounded for his special abilities.

For the first time in his mediated life, Howard felt individuality and, with it, a sweet inner glow of satisfaction and assurance. Now he knew what he was—what the meaning of his life was. The meaning which society had blurred over and buried under. A society toward which he could now articulate his hatred.

He relaxed back into the couch and turned to chuckle at Vivian. She didn't notice, but it didn't matter.

Knowing and doing are two different functions. Howard was content just knowing his wereness. In this he remained the same Howard Jacobs he had been for forty-three years. Perhaps he leaned a bit more towards purchases useful to were-creature formulae but, effectively, he merely gloried in reveries . . .

Swaying home one evening in the pool car, he slyly considered the five other men sandwiched in with him. They had all known him for years and, with the grey familiarity, had come accustomed obliviousness. But did they really know him? Lost amid them, spurting along the congested Freeway, Howard dreamily dished up his were-shape. He wasn't certain it would be a werewolf, but he always thought of it that way.

His skin would pop out in coarse fur, his tail would flip out like a switch-blade, his chest would barrel forth, his clothes would fly off and he would stand revealed, crouched on all fours. They would be absolutely silent for a long moment and only the gurgle of his breathing would be heard. Then panic! The shrieks of terror and headlong flights would stall traffic for miles!

Howard giggled, then turned it into a cough as one of the men glanced side-ways at him . . .

Bustling towards the cafeteria for lunch, he would sight a particularly sexy girl striding towards him. He would imagine his spine tipping over, his muzzle lengthening, his very self metamorphosizing into a gigantic shag of pure werewolf. Imagine the shock in the girl's eyes; her total notice of his erect and grizzled shape; the substantial heave of her solid breasts; the passionate torpor traveling through her firm thighs and loins as she dizzily spun to the sidewalk! He would howl victoriously, then crouch over her, Crowley incarnate . . .

Obviated behind his desk, forgotten in corporate expenditures, he would glance up, knowingly chuckle, and switch, quick as a ginger snap. With a beastial growl, he'd leap atop his desk to tear the ledgers board from board. Wouldn't old Randolph have a fit! Well, let him!

The chubby manager would run screaming from his office, his face pink and bloated with rage, his arms flailing. "Jacobs! Stop it I say, stop this nonsense, man, before I—"

And Howard, fangs honed, would shred the fat fool's neck before he could fall . . .

Stoically munching at the quick-thaw dinner of Vivian, he would narrow his eyes across the catsup and cunningly study her bent head with its soufflé of untouchable blond hair. Silently, effortlessly, he would shimmer into the snarling beast of terror and bound onto the table—send her precious flatware spinning, spatter the pap on the walls, and irrepairably gouge the formica finish of the table.

She would raise her head, her mouth half-open. Her eyes would drink in the slavering creature aboard her plate . . . Her jaw would drop slack and, for once, wordless. That patronizing dominance in her eyes would crumble to sick supplication. Then, deliberately, he would spring! . . .

And Victoria. Victoria was a victim kept in special reserve. For Victoria there would be front-teeth nips and side-meat slashes. Less than even a nutrient of blood and flesh, the cross-eyed hisser would be leisurely worried like a rag doll. Howard hoped, in Victoria's case, the spindly dun sneak would belatedly die of shock . . .

Such was the stuff of Howard's dreams; the meat and drink of his starved soul and the solace of his passive life. Whenever frustration or adverse conditions threatened to topple him, he would drum up a violet reverie and speedily dissolve the powers around him. His reactions, though invisible, lethally parried against the world. You know the kind.

Such were his thoughts as he lay by his wife's side, sleepless in the height of night, two months after his discovery of his wereness.

He turned to gaze at Vivian's curved and nyloned back. In a glow quiet, his werewolf's dreams passed away. He became a man again, lying at the side of his woman. And his heart grew large in his chest.

Generally speaking, Vivian preferred weekends. She had obliquely informed him many years ago that it worked out much better that way. Weekdays were always so demanding.

This was Wednesday, but Howard couldn't wait. His were-creature's blood had progressively pumped an insistant passion into him which he no longer could stifle. He could no longer brush away the driving thunder in his veins or defer the erotic pitch singing along his nerves. He *would* not.

He snuggled close and fondly kissed her ear. She did not move.

He nibbled at it, becoming further excited by the act, and began to widely stroke her flanks. Vivian twitched, mumbled, coughed, and settled the blankets more tightly around her.

Howard paused in the moonlight of the window, momentarily uncertain; then bit his lip and encircled her with an arm, softly caressing her breast. She was his wife and he hungered for her, deeply and preternaturally. Her body stiffened; she was awake.

With his arm still around her, he awkwardly tried to pull her towards him, but her elbow banged his hip. He tried again. Her body was set solid. Damn it, she was his wife!

He again bit his lip and lowered his hand, searching boldly for the mystery of her lap.

"Howard!" Her shocked voice cut dully into the dark and his hand froze on her navel.

He tried to form words, then, "I—I love you, sweety." Which was not now untrue, in the promise of the musk.

"Dear," she answered. "Honey-bun. And I love you . . . G'-night."

"But-but I, I *love* you."

Vivian turned onto her back, paused, then sat up, looking down at him for a long moment with a look he could only feel as remonstrative. "What is *wrong* with you, Howard? You've been acting so strange for a number of weeks, you know. If you can't sleep, there's some Alka-Seltzer in the cabinet." She slipped tightly down into the blankets once more. "There's a good boy," she mumbled.

"But, damn it! *You're my wife!*" The words were torn from him in a sudden sob of futility. He *had* to evoke her erotic response, a response he now sensed he had never known.

Vivian again sat up. And suddenly she was no longer desireable. She was thirty-nine, her breasts sagged dryly and her hair was inviolately netted, but that wasn't it. It was the tight line whiting her lips, the indignant glare of her eyes, the forced patience in the cant of her head. "Howard . . . Honey-bun . . . You know, this *is* a week night. I mean, surely all that can wait until . . . I mean . . ." Her voice, bent on placating, only twisted him.

He clutched her close. All passion was lost, but a grim intention jerked his muscles. He was caught in an eddy of purpose he could not forfeit and his movements were mechanical, if aggressive. He brutally kissed her and her body went tense, then limp. She did not so much respond as allow. When he took his lips from hers, lost with the urgent heat of his hands, she sighed. "All right, Howard. All *right!* But could you please brush your teeth first?"

Howard fell back in the bed. It felt like someone had pulled a cork from the back of his head. "Forget it," he managed to say from between clenched teeth.

Apparently she did. For in what must have been just a half-hour, he heard her soprano snore from the far side of the bed.

Howard tried to think of something to do, some way to shake her passion until it came bubbling in a sauce from her very eyes. Some lever or key to conjure a spontaneous directness of communication and merge. But there was nothing to do, he realized; all buttons had atrophied. She had been formed not only by the innuendo in a thousand ads and the methods of an entire culture, but by his own routine timidity and lack of purpose.

If it had been fifteen years ago —maybe even ten—if he had ever hit her, or taken her on a couch or the floor, or in the afternoon. But he hadn't. And there was nothing to do for her, or with her.

But *to* her?

Like a terribly blooming jungle flower, his gagging hatred for Vivian and the world blossomed in him, swelled him with its acrid bile. Silhouetted against the full moon hanging in the pale night, Howard stood by the bed and listened to his heart, then set out for the garage.

Howard had let his were-creature potential laze in mere reverie ever since he'd first discovered it. True, he had aimed his researches more towards lycanthropy, but it was only an undirected dabbling. He had amassed a large amount of were-creature formulae and their ingredients, but they were unorganized and untested. It had never occurred to Howard to attempt an actual metamorphosis; it had been a consolation, not a career.

Also, although he felt himself to be a werewolf, such creatures were primarily sourced in middle Europe. Since his ancestry was in Southern Russia, where were-bears were traditionally reported, Howard was somewhat confused as to which class of formulae to begin with whenever he did toy with the notion of experimentation. But now, cloaked in the mystic darkness of his garage-laboratory, surrounded by potions and implements centuries old and religiously forbidden, he filled with an electric bravery.

The time for games was over.

He knew enough of the Dark Art to realize most of the components in his collection of ingredients were useless. A further portion were only to stimulate sympathetic magic—and he knew, in his present peak of rage and courage, his strength of emotion would cinch the change and his enchanted chromosomes would assure his true form.

He moved surely in the darkness, uncorking bottles and compounding odiferous powders. The work went quickly. He utilized all the formulae, figuring the mandatory compounds would be incorporated and the needless ones would prove harmless. It was haphazard, but Howard didn't mind. Just so it worked—just so he could strike back with more than dreams and impotence.

Before he was quite prepared to be prepared, he was. All the garage was strewn with broken vials and hastily arranged amulets and, by a table, Howard steadied himself. With a fading shiver of fear, he forced his hand to light the freshly hardened candles and the newly compounded incenses. Brave as a maniac, he gulped down a beaker of vile liquid and raised his arms to the moon and chanted the words which had plunged Dark Age peasants into paralysis.

The fumes filled his lungs and began to dab his brain with black putrescence. He stumbled to the door, left it ajar, and reeled back to the center of the room, snarling moistly and forcing his stomach to keep down the potions.

He had been flattened and gutted too long. He had allowed his form to turn to damp clay and be shaped by a million unknown fingers, poking and gouging him. Now there would be a magnificent end to it. The time for revenge had come.

After Vivian—the frigid bitch—he would raid the whole damn city, ripping out the throats of the emasculated men who had enforced their impotency on him all these years. He would drink deeply of the womens' blood, savoring the ultimate conquest of their bodies. The streets would tilt and shimmer with fright and flight. They would not catch him, though. He had been among them long enough to be wise of their methods and ways. He would strike hard, avenging himself of his forfeit life, and vanish into helpless Howard Jacobs at dawn. They didn't even believe in lycanthropy, and they didn't even notice his presence. He would be safe.

His pelvic pan tipped, the jarring pain of his skeleton reshifting in his flesh to accommodate his new and lethal form rasped his nerves. He shook his head in dizzy lust and tried to focus through the pungent vapors. He raised a hand to his eyes. *It was furred!* Grey, taloned, shrinking to a paw!

Muscles he'd never had began to flex in dynamic genesis and he felt the royal surge of a tail. His body buckled but, still painful, he crouched to the floor, snarling under the moonlight shining dimly over the table above him.

His flesh smarted and tortured, violently kneaded, reshaping to fit the bones branching out inside

it. His mind keeled and he knew it was that of an animal. His gullet ached with a deep hunger for a new taste. His heart contracted and accelerated. Yes, it had worked!

His control of his movements was awkward, but he was too impatient to wait. With increasing agility, he loped through the open door and aimed for the bedroom and the bloody death of Vivian. His new sight perceived only fuzzy shapes, massive and looming in strange perspective, all in grey tones. But his sharpened sense of smell more than made up for his blurred vision, and his new form responded with incredible reaction time.

He was almost through the living-room before he smelled Victoria. The cat smell rankled his nose. From a rage of vengeance, he suddenly swerved, skidded on the carpet, and made for that smell. His breath formed liquid on his snout. First he would kill the cat.

Victoria snapped from the floor and spat, arced in terror. With a rumble, she stiff-stepped backwards and grappled to the top of the couch. Her bristled shape shone brightly in the moonglow, her hisses came fast and panicky.

Howard gained the couch in an awkward leap and stood panting on the cushions, salivating with the tang of success. This initial act of havoc would set his new life in motion, ascend him to his triumphant glory. His hind legs tensed.

And then Victoria leaped at him.

Howard froze and time slowed. He stared into her depthless eyes as they floated closer and wider, eternally. Reflected in them was his new were-shape; the magically gained distillation of his inner animal self. Not even Victoria's grinning mouth and wet teeth held as much terror as that reflected shape. He was . . . was a . . . a . . .

His tiny heart fluttered with final frustration and the close grey fur of his little body trembled; his wispy whiskers twitched, his thin tail lashed helplessly. He could not change from what he was.

For the few and agonizing minutes it would take for Victoria to kill him—and Howard prayed they would be few—he would be his were-creature.

You know the kind.

LETTERS

Thank God you put the Kindly Doctor's name back on the cover! I converted one of my girl-friends to Asimov literature . . . at the moment she's laid low with a disorder of the neck and is reading him more fiercely than ever. Let me raise a voice for Science Fantasy. It is practically gone. And what is there to take its place? Oh, good stories all right! Very smoothly done, with talent verily dripping from the edges. Perfect Science Fiction and fantastic Fantasy, but no Science Fantasy. Too bad!—Fritz Jeter, Norwalk, Cal.

Gee, a pain in the neck and Isaac Asimov! Poor girl! As for Science Fantasy, we hope it is not yet dead . . . but see below.—AD

It has seemed to me that in recent years the term "Science Fantasy" has been subject to a lot of abuse. When Wells invented the term, he meant us to understand that he was indulging in a free fantasia *from known facts,* which he tried very hard to get right. In present usage, "Science Fantasy" stands as a warning that the author reserves the right to get the facts all wrong. Why, then, use the word "science" at all? The usage is an affront to the word; the stuff is *fantasy,* period.—James Blish

You send me love, I send you love. I want to encourage your whole general policy: writing with love. That is, expressing what is so rare in these times: reality. A universal truth—the reconciliation of the opposites begets something entirely different, or, love makes the world go round. Love.—Ross Wright, Berkeley, Cal.

Thank you. Love.—AD

Have the editorial be only about Science *Fiction* and Fantasy—none of this scientific and/or political mish-mash. Heck, you can find jazz like that in *any* 5¢ newspaper—; and *I* sure as the devil don't want to pay 40¢ for it. Yours is an *escape* mag, *remember?* That's why People With Imagination buy it.—Alan Simonds, Alexandria, Va.

Are you sure you read the same magazine you write to?—AD

I have mixed feelings about Zangwill's story [SATAN MEKATRIG (Feb. 1963)]. I liked it for reasons not altogether resulting from the writing alone. For one thing it was a type and style of writing which I'd not experienced before. It gave a picture of a time and mode of living I'm not familiar with, a different view of an age-old story idea . . . I'm not sure I would care for the style of writing as a regular thing . . . But as a some-time thing it was fine . . . Another thing The Magazine has always done, is force new experiences on its readers, as well as new ideas. Congratulations.—Rick Sneary, South Gate, Calif.

Lately I and my friends have been somewhat disappointed with F&SF. Mr. Davidson leaves something to be desired as an editor.

Therefore, I am declining your kind offer to renew my subscription to your magazine.—E. Gary Gygax, Chicago, Ill.

They love me in Chicago.—AD

I had been meaning to write and say how much I do enjoy your editorship. I hope it will last a long, long time, and that F&SF will continue to fill the gap left by so many other magazines.—Mrs. John L. Lorenz, Manchester, Mass.

Your amusing and most entertaining March editorial had a built-in attention-diverter. I found myself halted in full scan when I hit that line about ". . . we watched as our wife gave birth to . . . etc." In fact, I read that part 3 or 4 times. Admitted, I'm not altogether in about what goes on in delivery rooms, being a happy bachelor. (Even though I almost married two nurses—not at the same time—on two different occasions) but the mental picture your expression drew was a real swinging scene. I understand that the editorial "we" implies (at least) that the editorial thoughts expressed are those of the publication in general. I may never be able to forget the image of Joseph W. Ferman, Isaac Asimov, Avram Davidson, Edward L. Ferman, and a bunch of other people whose names aren't even on the masthead standing outside the plate glass and gazing awefully at "their" newborn son . . .—Fred Burgess, Franklinville, N.C.

We, Avram Davidson, are the Onlie Begetter. Those others are just Friends of the Family.—AD

This is a chancy, fearful, neurotic world we live in—why so many downbeat stories? Stories with heroes who come to horrid, inexorable ends; end of the world or end of humanity stories. These things are depressing. It was all very well for Science Fiction to cry doom when doom wasn't so conveniently at hand, but now it seems all too much like writing stories about the first man in orbit. The reality is too close. How about a little Science Fiction indicating a way out? There must be ways out, and politicians (a few, anyway) may read the magazine.—R. D. Coleman, China Lake, Calif.

I feel you are publishing too many stories which are heavy with "style" but weakly plotted. "Style is the frosting on the cake"—one such display in an issue is fun, but when the majority are such, it's overwhelming.— G. S. Hamilton, Jr. Seaside, Cal.

We had already come to the decision to buy no more Doomsday stories, and to try to print more "plotty" stories. The "non-story," though, is part of The Magazine's flavor, and won't be completely abolished.—AD

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